



ISCH COST Action IS1006 SignGram



Work plan for STSM to University of Amsterdam

Sign action number: IS 1006-271014-051446

Title of the action: Unraveling the grammars of European sign languages: pathways to full citizenship of deaf signers and to the protection of their linguistic heritage

Action short name: SignGram COST Action

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Host Institution: University of Amsterdam

Work plan

The main goal of the Short term scientific mission (STMS) to Amsterdam is the research on word order in Slovenian Sign Language (SZJ). I have already determined the basic structure of non-topicalised and non-focalised sentences in SZJ. I am proceeding with the phenomena of negation, interrogatives and aspect on the one hand – and with investigation of argument structure on the other. Both fields are the expertise of prof. Roland Pfau, who is currently teaching at the University of Amsterdam. The goals of my STMS in Amsterdam are:

- following the MA class in Advanced Sign Linguistics offered by the University of Amsterdam;
- attending the linguistic reading group organised by prof. Roland Pfau and dr. Vadim Kimmelman – and discussing topics of negation, interrogatives, aspect and



argument structure in sign languages with professors at University of Amsterdam (with prof. Roland Pfau in particular);

- studying the literature on negation, interrogatives, aspect and argument structure in sign languages – using the well supplied library at the University of Amsterdam;
- annotating filmed corpus of data, previously elicited using various methods from L1 SZJ signers (approximately 4 hours of material) – and evaluating elicitation methods;
- analyzing annotated corpus regarding negation, interrogatives, aspect and argument structure;
- presenting results and my analysis on SZJ argument structure in the Amsterdam Center for Language and Communication (ACLC) research group Sign Language Grammar and Typology;
- writing an article on SZJ argument structure and a relevant chapter of my PhD thesis.

While in Amsterdam, I will annotate the collected corpus on negation, interrogatives, aspect and argument structure in SZJ. I will evaluate the elicitation techniques used and analyze the data. I will take advantage of the university's library and benefit from discussions with students and professors alike. Besides discussing the corresponding topics and data that I elicited from the L1 SZJ signers, I will also take an active part in prof. Roland Pfau's MA class. In the second half of winter semester, he is teaching an MA class in English: Advanced Sign Linguistics (4 hours a week for 7 weeks in the second block). Furthermore, I will present my preliminary results on argument structure in SZJ in the ACLC research group and write the relevant chapter of my PhD thesis.

The results of my research during STMS to Amsterdam will contribute to the purposes of the COST in two ways:

I have tried some new techniques to elicit argument structure phenomena in sign languages. In the article, I will publish the elicitation materials, evaluate and comment on them in order to simplify and unify the argument structure data collection in sign languages. Anyone who will start researching argument structure in a sign language will thus have a reference point in how to organize his research. Besides the general Blueprint that is being developed, such guideline will importantly contribute to the comparability of the researches carried out on different sign languages as well as to the verifiability of their results.

Adding yet another description of the argument structure in previously non described sign language will possibly enrich the set of relevant phenomena and the set of their descriptions. This will enable the developers of the Blueprint to cover more and to be more precise when provide guidance on how to research argument structure in sign languages.



Motivation letter

Although sign language research has globally made much progress in the past decades, most sign languages in the world remain either entirely undocumented or poorly described – unfortunately the Slovenian Sign Language (SZJ) belongs to the latter group. It has a very limited amount of government support and a low number of signers, it is not used systematically in the educational process, and it is not documented in terms of linguistic research. As such, SZJ remains rather unknown outside the deaf community. Only sporadically, observations and documents about the development of SZJ have appeared (Bauman 2009), while academic research is mainly carried out within a sociolinguistic framework (Moderndorfer 1989, Globačnik 2007), languages in contact (Bester 1994, Globačnik 2001) and rough surface comparison between sign and spoken Slovenian (Bauman 2007, Dornik 2009) from the spoken language perspective. The majority of the work is aimed towards the standardisation and (prescriptivist) generalisation of SZJ (Kuplenik 1999, Žele 2002, Žele 2007) in order to simplify the communication for the hearing community. The available research on SZJ is based on the traditionalist analysis employed for spoken Slovenian and the same (often inappropriate) tools are used also for describing SZJ. Besides being scientifically questionable, these efforts also encourage a spoken language influence on the sign language.

When enrolling in the postgraduate Research doctorate in linguistics at University Ca' Foscari, Venice, I started learning Slovenian Sign language and at the same time investigating its formal properties as well as developing relevant tools. My PhD research on word order in SZJ under the supervision of professor Chiara Branchini is intended as a first step towards a coherent linguistic description of the SZJ grammar – by analysing the unmarked word order of constituents in SZJ within the formal framework of Generative Grammar.

In four semesters, I have investigated basic word order of SZJ and obtained some interesting preliminary conclusions. I empirically examined SZJ word order in certain environments with respect to relevant linguistic variables (Pavlič 2013). Of course, my aim is beyond the observation and description. By determining word order, I also intend to shed light on the hierarchy of different syntactic phrases and the linearization of this hierarchy in SZJ. However, together with the first results there also appeared rather specific questions that I would like to discuss with the experts in the field.

I am convinced that discussing various topics as well as working with professor Roland Pfau is the optimal way for me to understand, analyse and evaluate the data that I elicited from the L1 SZJ signers. Attending his MA class will allow me to broaden my sign language insight. The knowledge that I will obtain during the lectures will help me with my research on constituent structure in Slovenian Sign Language, particularly in the analysis of negation and argument structure – research areas that are Dr. Pfau's expertise. Besides, I am especially looking forward to his lectures because I find it very stimulating and fruitful to work in a team and discuss sign language grammar with other students as well as professors.



Given the fact that I possess the professional knowledge required (formal linguistic training) and that I also want to upgrade my experiences (with regard to sign language linguistics), I consider myself a good applicant for the COST Short term scientific mission.

Venice, 20/10/2014

Matic Pavlič