It's the little things that count... morphology in interpreting

[Pequenas coisas que contam... a morfologia na interpretação]

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ABSTRACT: It is well known that modern approaches to interpreting between two languages focus on the content (the meaning) of the source language, which may imply that the form of the message in the source language is less important. However, grammatical knowledge is the framework on which content is based – even if we do not realize this all the time. Especially when working with sign languages, where phonological and morphological markers can appear on the face, body, and hands, a profound knowledge of the grammatical aspects of the source and the target language is of the utmost importance. Not related to the grammatical/translation methods of the past, attention to morphology and training in the analysis of morpho-syntactic structures actually help student- and working-interpreters and, in the end, lighten the psychological and cognitive burden, enabling them to work faster and with fewer mistakes. In this paper, some morphological aspects of signed languages are briefly discussed, and a motivation why these elements are crucial to a proper understanding of the signed message, necessary for interpretation in another language.

KEYWORDS: Morphology; interpreter education.

RESUMO: É sabido que as abordagens modernas sobre interpretação entre duas línguas se centram no conteúdo (o significado) da língua de origem, o que poderá implicar que a forma da mensagem na língua de origem é considerada de menos importância. No entanto, o conhecimento gramatical é a base na qual o conteúdo se enquadra – mesmo que nem sempre percebamos isso. Principalmente quando se trabalha com línguas gestuais, onde marcadores fonológicos e morfológicos podem aparecer na face, no corpo e também nas mãos, é de extrema importância um conhecimento profundo dos aspetos gramaticais da língua fonte e da língua alvo. Nem sempre relacionada com os métodos gramaticais/tradutivos do passado, a atenção à morfologia e o treino na análise de estruturas morfossintáticas ajudam realmente os estudantes e os intérpretes e, no final, aliviam a carga psicológica e cognitiva, permitindo-lhes trabalhar mais rapidamente e com menos erros. Neste artigo são brevemente discutidos alguns aspetos morfológicos das línguas gestuais, assim como se apresenta uma motivação pela qual esses elementos são de importância crucial para uma verdadeira compreensão da mensagem, necessária para a interpretação noutra língua.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Morfologia; educação de intérpretes.

Introduction

Sign language interpreters traditionally were hearing children of deaf parents who were raised with a sign language at home, often also with a spoken language, and thus commonly were bimodal bilinguals (e.g., Bishop & Hicks, 2009). They usually had no training as interpreters but worked in their community and, from experience, became trusted mediators between deaf and hearing communities (e.g., Napier, 2021).

Increasingly, hearing people are studying to become sign language interpreters (SLI). Early interpreter education was often in the form of diploma courses or training by local deaf people. Hearing students had to learn sign language as well as practice translation and interpretation from spoken language into sign language and vice versa. Over time, as deaf people gained more and more access to mainstream (higher) education and to all kinds of professions, professionalization became necessary for interpreters (see e.g., Shaffer, 2013).

As the need for well-educated interpreters increased, higher education programs slowly emerged worldwide, usually in language and linguistic programs or within the field of communication (De Wit, 2020). How to behave as a sign language interpreter has been studied, as well as which linguistic tools and strategies are available to them. Unfortunately, it appears that in many programs, the role of deeper linguistic knowledge of the working languages (i.e., a spoken language and a sign language) is often less than desirable to the advantage of professional expertise (Haug, Leeson & Monikowski, 2017). Time constraints within the usually 3-year or 4-year programs force educators to make crucial choices as to what subjects gain priority. Also, it has been demonstrated that the proficiency level of sign language interpreters is sometimes uncertain at graduation; the CEFR levels are briefly discussed to provide a baseline.

In general, I would like to argue for more attention to the linguistics of working languages, emphasizing the sign language in question and supporting deeper morphological (and other linguistic) knowledge in sign language interpreter curricula.

1. What is a sign language interpreter?

The European Union of the Deaf (EUD, 2012) defines a sign language interpreter as follows: "A sign language interpreter is a professional who is fluent in two or more sign languages and interprets between a source language and a target language and mediates across cultures" (EUD, 2012).

Sign language interpreters are usually organized in professional associations, which draft an ethical code and professional behaviour standards together. In the Netherlands, the NBGT[1] (2014) wrote the following first rules for interpreting:

> The sign language interpreter:
> 1. translates the message entirely and truthfully, both in terms of content and the participants' intention. The interpreter takes into account social and cultural differences. During the assignment, the interpreter fulfils no other functions, for example, the role of adviser or counselor;
> 2. is responsible for the communication and not responsible for the consequences arising from the assignment. If the interpreter considers her **linguistic or interpreter techniques** insufficient, she must immediately tell the participants and discuss with them possible solutions. If, during the assignment, it turns out that the interpreter and participants have different social and/or ethical views, then the interpreter will not let this affect the assignment. In both cases, the interpreter will, if necessary, withdraw from the assignment;
> 3. will adapt her attitude, behaviour, and appearance in an appropriate manner within the setting/situation in which it is being interpreted;
> 4. exerts influence even by her presence on the course of the communication in the assignment but does not interfere with the content of the setting. The interpreter is, however, held to the Dutch law, which includes the civil code. (NBGT, 2014)

Grammatical knowledge is often not mentioned in the codes or standards, as it is implicitly understood that if one is a language user, one knows the rules for that language. Rule 2 above states: "If the interpreter considers her linguistic or interpreter techniques insufficient […]" Just to be clear about what we understand by 'linguistic', the different essential domains are, i.e., phonology, morphology**,** syntax, semantics, pragmatics. A deep knowledge of the specific linguistic features of these languages is necessary to be flexible enough to translate/interpret the

[1] Nederlandse Beroepsvereniging Tolken Gebarentaal [Dutch Association Sign Language Interpreters]. There is a new Professional Code from 2022 on.

message from the source language to the target language. Interpreter techniques are all the devices that an interpreter learns to use to fulfil rule #1 as described above, which, by necessity, uses linguistic techniques.

In this paper, I focus on morphology as it seems that this is an understudied area in the practical didactics of interpreter education. In the next section some (not all!) morphological aspects will be very briefly exemplified.

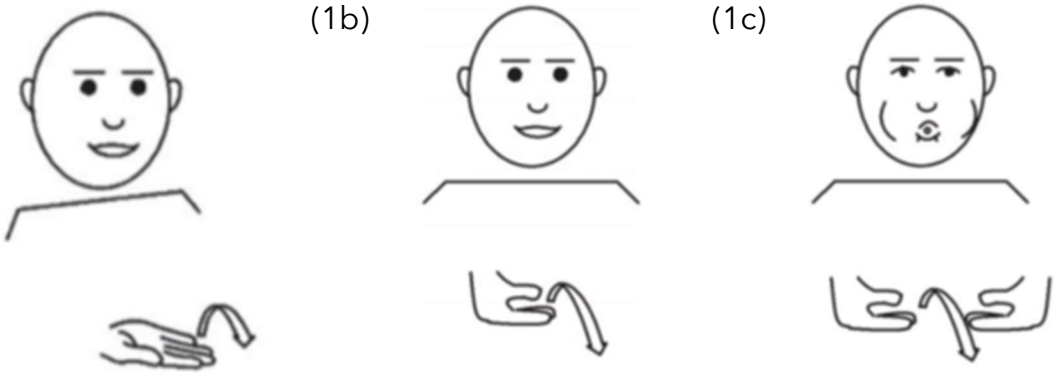
2. Morphology: a brief illustration

Traditionally, under morphology, we distinguish the following processes: word formation, compounding, derivation, inflection - tense and aspect/agreement/pluralization, incorporation, and classification (see Pfau, 2016). Below are examples from different sign languages from Baker, van den Bogaerde, Pfau and Schermer (2016) provided for illustration. Please be aware that the literature on morphology is extensive, both for spoken and signed languages and these examples do not explain the complexity of morphology.

2.1. Word formation: Simultaneous morphological processes

Japanese Sign Language

(1a) (1b) (1c)



GIVE

GIVE
(e.g. a book)

GIVE
(e.g. a big/heavy book)

(Source: Baker *et al*., 2016: 198 ©John Benjamins. Reproduced with permission)

In this example, we see in (1a) the citation form of the verb GIVE made with a flat hand moving forward from the signer to an addressee (1b). The beginning and end positions of the movement realize agreement and are considered morphemes. In (1b), one also sees a different handshape, regarded as a classifier, representing how the hand is formed when holding a book, for instance. This classifier is also a morpheme. When giving a big/heavy book, the second hand can be added, and a facial expression can be used to indicating the manner of the action (handling a heavy object). These different word formation processes result in a verb with the meaning 'give a large flat object (book) to someone with great effort' – one sign for a whole English sentence (o. c., p.198).

2.2. Compounding

A complex new sign is formed in compounds by combining two or more signs (i.e., free morphemes[2]). For instance, in Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT), the signs for FATHER (Example (2a)) and MOTHER (Example (2b)) are combined to make the sign PARENTS (Example (2c)). The movement in the signs MOTHER and FATHER is changed in the coordinated compound PARENTS. When compounded, the possible changes in signs need to be known to interpreters, especially in the case of idiosyncratic coining of compounds by native deaf signers or when a new compound emerges.

(2a) 

FATHER

(2b) 

MOTHER

(2c) 

PARENTS

(Source: NGC, 2012 ©Nederlands Gebarencentrum. Reproduced with permission)

[2] A free morpheme is the smallest identifiable component of a word/sign that carry meaning (Baker & Hengeveld, 2012)

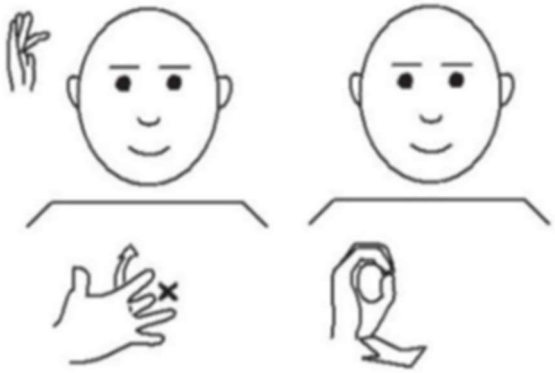
2.3. Derivation

In compounding, free morphemes are combined, and a free morpheme is combined with a bound morpheme in derivational processes.

In Example (3) we see a compound in American Sign Language (ASL), which shows the suffix ZERO to the verb FEEL, changing the verb's meaning to 'feel nothing'. Other such verbs are EAT^ZERO and TOUCH^ZERO. Not all sign languages have such suffixes, but it is a nice example of morphemic complexity.

American Sign Language

(3)



FEEL^ZERO

(Source: Baker *et al*., 2016: 204 ©John Benjamins. Reproduced with permission)

Compounding and derivation occur on the morphemic level (signs or words) and are considered sign-formation in the lexicon. By combining free morphemes, or a free morpheme with a bound morpheme, a new sign comes into existence with a different meaning from the combination of the two morphemes: FATHER + MOTHER = PARENTS and FEEL + ZERO = FEEL-NOTHING or NOT-FEEL in translation.

2.4. Inflection

The following morphemic examples are considered syntactic sign formation (Pfau, 2016: 206). Under inflection, we discuss tense, aspect, agreement, and pluralization (not further illustrated).

2.4.1. Tense

While tense in spoken languages can be expressed by different processes, depending on the language, sign language tense is most often expressed adverbially, e.g., by explicitly signing *last* week or *next* year. A few cases are known for incidental occurrences of past-tense forms in British Sign Language (BSL) and NGT, respectively WIN/WON and HAPPEN/HAPPENED, but these are lexicalized exceptional forms.

2.4.2. Aspect

Whereas tense inflection seems to occur rarely in sign languages studied so far, aspect inflection can be quite complex. Like tense, aspect is a grammatical category related to the concept of time (Pfau, 2016:208). Pfau provides three examples of the verb LOOK-AT, the citation form (Example (4a)), the habitual form (Example (4b)), and the iterative form (Example (4c)). These three forms can be translated into English as 'to look at' (4a), 'looking regularly' (4b), and 'to look repeatedly' (4c). Repetitive movements in different ways alter the meaning of the base sign. These subtle changes are difficult for non-native signers to discern and deserve extra attention in the sign language learning process and during further training as interpreters.

American Sign Language

(4a) 

LOOK-AT
'look at'

(4b) 

LOOK-AT (HAB)
'look at habitually'

(4c) 

LOOK-AT (ITE)
'look at repeatedly'

(Source: Baker *et al*., 2016: 208 ©John Benjamins. Reproduced with permission)

2.4.3. Agreement

A match between two elements regarding specific features like person, number, and gender is considered to fall under *agreement*. As verbal agreement is quite complex in sign languages and usually extensively treated in interpreter curricula (anecdotal information), I will not focus on this aspect further but refer to previous works like Sandler and Lillo-Martin (2006), Pfau, Steinbach, and Woll (2012), or recent work like Pfau and Steinbach (2023).

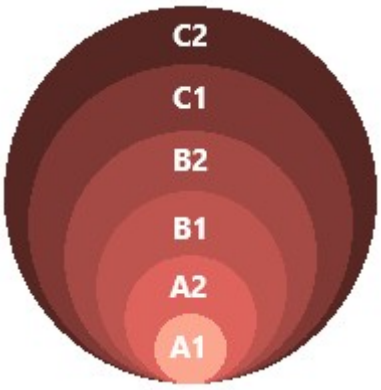
Two morphemic processes, pluralization and incorporation/classification, are also found in sign languages. Still, these will not be further discussed here, even though they include essential issues for interpreter education. I refer to other works for the basics and intricacies of incorporation and classification, particularly, Baker *et al*. (2016) and Emmorey (2003).

3. What's all this got-to-do with interpreting?

In 2001, the Council of Europe published the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR for spoken language learners), followed in 2020 by its Companion Volume, including descriptors for signed languages. These two publications provide descriptors for different levels of language learning and can be used to estimate the language

proficiency of an individual second language (L2) learner. As mentioned above (see section 1), most sign language interpreters nowadays are not native signers, and they have to learn the sign language of their preference before they can train as interpreters. The CEFR provides an excellent framework for assessing the language proficiency of the interpreter-to-be, who should function on the C2 level of the CEFR (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 - The six language levels of the CEFR: A1 beginner, A2 Elementary, B1 Intermediate, B2 Upper intermediate, C1 Advanced/Expert, C2 Proficient/Master



(Source: CEFR)

Table 1 displays some global scales for four levels (B1-C2) with descriptors for understanding and producing a foreign language at that level:

TABLE 1 - B2 level and C1 level – global scales

PROFICIENT USER	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.

INDEPENDENT USER	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

(Source: CEFR 2020 online, CoE 2020: B1, B2, C1 and C2 global descriptors)

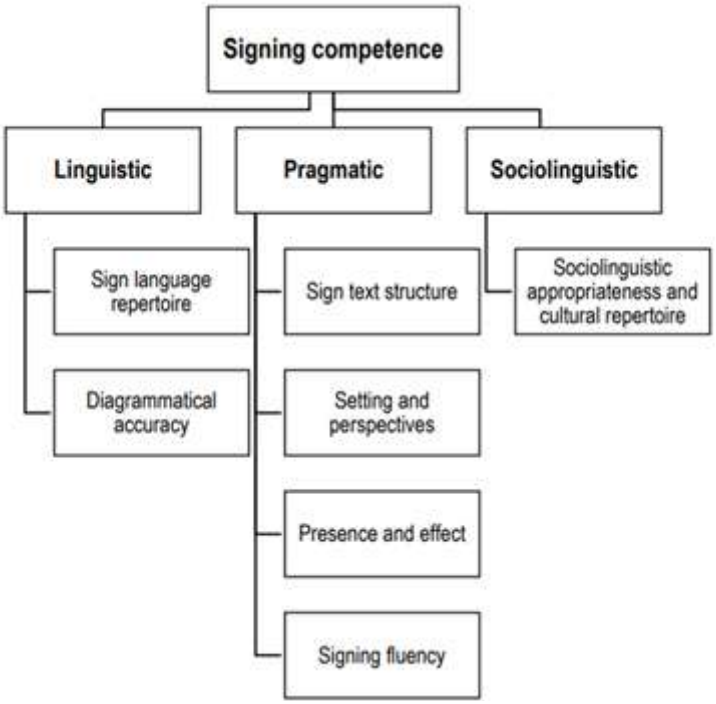
For ease of comparison:

- B1: Can understand the main point of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc.
- B2: Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in her/his field of specialization.
- C1: Can understand a wide range of demanding longer texts and recognize implicit meanings.
- C2: Can easily understand virtually everything heard *(or seen, added by BvdB)* or read.

From these descriptors, it becomes clear that signing competencies involve more than just linguistic skills. The CoE Companion Volume (p. 145) overview (Figure 2) shows which domains can be distinguished[3].

[3] Let us not discuss the use of Diagrammatical; I actually don't feel comfortable with this term, but it was decided to use it by minority of votes.

FIGURE 2 - Signing competence



(Source: CoE Companion Volume, 2020: 145)

4. Language levels of interpreters

Over the years, de Wit made an inventory of European interpreter education programs, assessing different information, e.g., length of programs, to compare diploma degrees. She found that most BA graduates of European sign language programs have a B2 level upon leaving their program (De Wit, 2023). Not all curricula adhered to or followed the CEFR levels, and each had its assessment methods, making objective and abstract comparisons of the proficiency levels of starting interpreters challenging. For instance, some diploma courses did not indicate objective level upon graduation, only indicating 'having followed x course(s)' or 'had so many hours of sign language instruction'. There is no evidence-based information on how many language contact hours are needed for each CEFR sign language level, although some estimations exist for L2 spoken language acquisition (see Table 2).

TABLE 2 - Approximate hours of language contact[4] necessary to attain desired L2 level (spoken language)

To achieve level	Slow	Fast	Accumulative (slow/fast)
A1	95	480	95-480
A2	95	290	190-770
B1	190	616	380-1386
B2	380	1109	760-2495
C1	760	1196	1520-4491

(Source: Benigno *et al*., 2017: 9 - Table 1, *Pearson's estimate of number of hours per increasing proficiency*)

Other studies, e.g., the PRO-Sign project 1 of the European Center for Modern Languages, demonstrated that there was too little knowledge of CEFR levels in interpreters in general but also in the educators/teachers in the programs (Leeson, Haug, Rathmann, Sheneman & van den Bogaerde, 2018).

For spoken language interpreters, the international requirements dictate a C1 or C2 (or above) level (native speaker level) for conference interpreting or working for the EU for example[5], and a minimum of B2 for community interpreting in some countries, but C1 in others (e.g., Switzerland, see Chatterjee, 2017). Realizing that most sign language interpreters graduate at B1 (!) and B2/C1 levels and only some achieve, by working experience and further studies, the required C1 and C2 levels, it is paramount that we address the linguistic, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic aspects in all curricula. I also maintain that it is a huge challenge for L2 students of sign languages to acquire both sign language and interpreting skills in three or four years of programs currently running in Europe.

Let me mention one more thing that is very important. Many beginning interpreters start work in education, as it is generally thought that working for children is easier than for adults. This, however, is not the case; rather, the opposite is true: it is harder to interpret for or work with deaf children than with deaf adults. Children face different challenges than adults:

[4] Language contact with native speakers and during lessons.
[5] See e.g. https://europa.eu/interpretation/doc/language_profiles.pdf

- They acquire sign language often under difficult circumstances; if they have deaf parents, usually only 10% of the deaf children, they may have regular first language (L1) acquisition. However, acquiring a spoken language is complex, and not all children achieve native proficiency. If they have hearing parents who do not sign, they will not acquire sign language, and it is doubtful how well they have the chance to acquire the spoken language (Humphries *et al*., 2012).

- While their L1 (sign language) and L2 (spoken language) are emerging, the phonology and morpho-syntaxis of their output are different from adult language and often highly idiosyncratic – which is very hard to translate/interpret without knowing the details of the child's life (see, e.g., Baker, van den Bogaerde & Woll, 2008).

- Many sign languages have complex verbal systems and use of space – and the cognitive restrictions of the developing child make interpreting for them a huge task.

The above conditions make knowledge of sign language acquisition processes a *prerequisite* for solid and interpretation of child language (especially in education).

Final thoughts

In educating sign language interpreters, we must deal with the variety and variation in signing by deaf and hearing people, besides offering them cultural, linguistic, and professional knowledge. Due to less generational transfer of sign languages to deaf children and rapid language change (global signing, social media), interpreters must be agile and flexible in understanding and production of their spoken and signed languages. A deep knowledge of grammatical structures (including morphology) combined with experience in communicating with native signers is a prerequisite to becoming a good interpreter. This warrants a critical approach to the current interpreter education programs in Europe, where interpreters often enter without sufficient knowledge of the sign language in question. They are expected to acquire the required C1 language levels for the

languages they work in in three or four years and gain the professionalism required for interpreters. So, the little things that count in linguistics provide them with the appropriate linguistic tools to form the basis for their profession.

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