

The nineteenth-century roots of present-day Polish Sign Language (PJM) verbs

The aim of this paper is to discuss the mechanisms underlying diachronic modifications of high-frequency lexemes in Polish Sign Language (*polski język migowy*, hereafter PJM). Our research is based on two types of data: a corpus of present-day PJM and the earliest known linguistic description of the lexicon of PJM, a dictionary by Hollak & Jagodziński (1879, hereafter H&J). We attempt to analyze how the articulation of PJM verbs has changed since 1879.

H&J was published by the Institute for the Deaf-Mute in Warsaw. On more than 500 pages, the two hearing priests described over ten thousand signs. Although they are not accompanied by illustrations, the entries are quite detailed and usually give a clear picture of the articulation of the signs they refer to. From today's perspective, the work seems surprisingly advanced and scientifically mature, as it clearly distinguishes PJM from spoken Polish. The dictionary is an invaluable source of data on the historical development of PJM. However, it has not yet been analyzed from the perspective of theoretical linguistics.

Our second source of data for the purposes of the present study was a corpus of PJM composed of utterances produced by over 100 deaf signers. We focused on the 200 most frequent PJM verbs attested in that corpus. We compared their standard articulation to descriptions found in H&J and classified them into three categories:

1. present-day signs whose articulation is the same as what is described in H&J;
2. present-day signs whose articulation is different from the articulation of their semantic equivalents noted in H&J;
3. present-day signs that do not have semantic equivalents in H&J.

Our research showed that nearly 90% of the 200 analyzed present-day PJM verbs can be found in H&J, but only 24.5% have not changed since 1879. Although H&J's descriptions of sign articulation were often imprecise, we can clearly observe diachronic lexicalization processes that have taken place during that period. We notice that PJM verbs have evolved from more complex and semi-pantomimed forms into simpler articulations. For example, H&J describes the sign *to name* in the following way: "one makes the sign of the cross with the thumb on the forehead", while its present-day equivalent has been reduced to a vertical movement of the thumb on the forehead. In this paper we will discuss many examples of such reduction mechanisms (involving simplification and morpho-phonological attrition). We conclude that the PJM data we analyzed provides strong support for Frishberg's (1975) generalization that the iconic basis of linguistic form is prone to gradual diachronic change in the direction of arbitrariness, conventionalization and morpho-phonological reduction. Iconically motivated signs of high frequency tend to get simplified (reduced to distinctive features) by lexicalization processes, such as the loss of redundant body or facial movement. The same trend (from more iconic to more arbitrary) was noted by Tomaszewski (2006), who analyzed the linguistic behavior of Polish homesigners and observed reduction processes similar to those we discuss on the basis of the H&J data.

References:

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