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Personal experience narratives in three West African sign languages: the influence of time-depth, community size and social interaction

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PART IV

CONCLUSION

Chapter 8 – Discussion and conclusion

8.1 Discussion

In this last chapter, I discuss the results of the four studies as a whole. The present thesis focuses on three West African sign languages of different ages used by deaf communities of distinct sizes and with diverse patterns of social interaction. Adamorobe Sign Language (AdaSL) would be a very old sign language; Langue des Signes de Bouakako (LaSiBo) would be around 50 years; and Língua Gestual Guineense (LGG) about 20. AdaSL is used by 33 deaf people in the village of Adamorobe, in Ghana; LaSiBo by six deaf people, related by family ties, in the village of Bouakako in Ivory Coast; and LGG by about 500 deaf people brought together in a school setting in the city of Bissau, Guinea-Bissau. At an early point in the research, it was decided that female and male LGG signers would be evaluated as distinct groups, due to their different socialisation practices (see §1.2.4) and initial impressions about differences in their storytelling. Thus, comparisons were made across three languages, but four different groups.

This project grew out of observations made during fieldwork in West Africa to discover within the context of Nyst's project how signers produce size and shape in the two village languages. In the process of collecting stories, I became curious about the differences in storytelling I observed between various language communities. I wanted to understand exactly how the stories differed and what factors might account for those differences.

Research questions and hypotheses. The comparison of personal experience narratives about animal attacks in the three sign languages, in particular of their structure and use of enhancing devices, seeks to elucidate the main question: **To what extent do community size, language age and frequency of social interactions impact the structure and narrative devices in storytelling?** To do so, 45 personal experience narratives told by deaf signers were analysed in four different studies. My overall prediction is that more interaction with other signers in general would result in more elaborated stories and richer linguistic devices – whether over a longer time depth, as in AdaSL, or due to a high density of deaf signers and frequent interactions, as in LGG.

Study 1 analyses the structure of the narratives, following the model of Labov & Waletzky (1967). This study is ground-breaking in at least a couple of ways. It is the largest one for sign languages that use the L&W methodology of prompting personal

stories about a dangerous situation to elicit vivid and compelling language use. It is also the first study on the structure of narratives in emerging and micro-community sign languages. Still, other analyses have focused on non-life-threatening personal experience narratives. Existing studies in American Sign Language, Romanian Sign Language, Brazilian Sign Language and Australian Sign Language have also shown fully ordered structural components. However, the story's climax was not very developed in those studies because the narratives were not as emotional as they are in the case of animal attacks. In general, the three sign languages in this thesis showed that narratives follow a universal structure with a beginning, middle and end, which is evidenced by time-aligned pyramid shapes. In addition, signers start a story by addressing the audience in their role as a narrator in the first component (orientation) and then enter the second component (complication) as characters, finally returning, in the end, to the narrator role in the last component (coda). This is also another feature of the universality of stories.

The first research question concerns how the signers of the three sign languages structure their narratives. Here, the prediction that interactions might be a crucial factor in narrative development is supported by the finding that LaSiBo signers and female LGG signers produce simpler structures than AdaSL and male LGG signers. The second research question regards the use of dramatic effects in the climax. Again, I found that LaSiBo and most female LGG signers did not seek to make their climaxes compelling, as AdaSL and male LGG signers do.

In what concerns the internal structure, AdaSL and male LGG signers present balanced components according to Labov & Waletzky's model, including Freytag's climax. In fact, AdaSL narratives exhibit longer climaxes than LGG, the most emotional part of the narrative. This is likely due to a longer time depth of AdaSL, enabling current signers to have gained experience in perfecting storytelling through older deaf role models in social interactions, while LGG is still in its first generation.

Studies 2, 3 and 4 look at enhancing devices in the narratives, as part of Labov's (1972) evaluation component occurring mainly throughout the middle structural components. These devices refer to the moments where storytellers give dramatic force to the narratives whether by embodying characters, through constructed actions, dialogues, and role shifts, or by interrupting the narrative to add crucial information to the audience. This component aims at capturing the audience's attention. The findings concerning such devices were able to be analysed crosslinguistically since they have been studied in other sign languages as well.

Study 2 focuses on signing perspectives in the three sign languages: real scale, reduced scale, simultaneous perspectives and multiple perspectives. This has been

studied in AdaSL (Nyst 2007; Edward 2021) but not yet in LaSiBo and LGG. The research question for this study is about which perspectives the signers use during their personal experience narratives. The hypothesis that signers prefer using the real scale, as the most basic of the four signing perspectives is confirmed here as well. However, besides LaSiBo as expected, AdaSL and female LGG signers do not produce the reduced scale perspective either. In fact, narratives produced by LGG male signers are the only ones presenting the other three perspectives in some significant way.

Nyst suggests that a whole entity classifier system should not be considered a universal feature of sign languages because it seems to be lacking in AdaSL (2007, 197), despite a very active social interaction between signers. Although model-sized classifiers would be expected to not occur at an early stage of development of emerging sign languages, their absence could hardly be justified in the old AdaSL (ibid.). Also, it contrasts with Kata Kolok used by a community of a similar size for several generations which does present the reduced scale perspective with model-sized classifiers (de Vos 2012). And is not in short supply.

Edward (2021, 345-347) states having found model-sized classifiers in AdaSL, especially to depict motion events seen from a distance. She suggests that the emergence of such a grammatical structure may be a consequence of language contact with GSL, though the younger signers in her data did not use them. Moreover, she acknowledges that the type of stimuli – short videos showing human actions in zoom out from the Pear Story – may have influenced the production of those entity classifiers in reduced scale. However, of the 17 AdaSL narratives analysed in this thesis, no instances of signing on a reduced scale were found (again, not even in young deaf bilinguals). I recall here that narratives were elicited only with a question, without any material, which likely results in more naturalistic data. Hence, I confirm Nyst's suggestion that such an absence is a characteristic of AdaSL. The underdevelopment of model-sized classifiers would also be expected in young sign languages such as LaSiBo and LGG. However, unlike the female signers, male LGG signers do use them. Thus, the distinction between genders in LGG does not seem to be determined by language age or community size, since signers are all using the same language, but rather with a different frequency of socialisation.

Study 3 looks at constructed dialogues and role shifts in the three sign languages, which is the first such analysis in each language. The research question concerns to what extent do signers of the three sign languages produce role shifts and constructed dialogues to enhance their narratives. The hypothesis is that LaSiBo signers may not use these narrative devices, which is indeed what was found. Instead, only one signer

in LaSiBo made a character change involving herself and a horned animal. No other shifts were found and no dialogues or monologues were produced by the signers. Also, female LGG signers used very little of these two narrative devices, confirming the effect of socialisation on the development of narrative devices.

Both AdaSL and male LGG signers use role shifting within constructed dialogues frequently. While both of those groups of signers change their eye gazes in role shifting, as occurs in other sign languages (e.g., Padden 1986), I found that the AdaSL signers do not usually turn their heads or move their bodies when shifting between characters, while the male LGG do. Of course, body changes in LGG signers were certainly motivated by the habitual location of the snakes, on the trees, implicating a top-down communication. Such a distinction between the two groups, which otherwise tend to pattern together, is hardly justifiable whether by the circumstances narrated or as a particular characteristic of AdaSL. Anyway, this would certainly be worth more research.

Study 4 analyses the depictions of animals in the stories, specifically expressions of their size and shape that can be represented in many different ways on the hands and body. This linguistic feature has already been analysed in AdaSL and LaSiBo, but not yet in LGG. The research question is about how signers depict the animals in their narratives. The hypothesis is that emerging sign languages may take time to incorporate such descriptions into their narratives to make stories more compelling. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that LaSiBo signers hardly add depictions of animals during the story; sometimes they do not even name them, but just point to a location. Similarly, only half of LGG signers, both men and women, describe the size and shape of the snakes during their narratives. Still, those who did not do so, depicted the animals after the story had been told making use of different size and shape categories. In contrast, most AdaSL signers describe the size and shape of the animals during the stories, mainly in the climax, as a dramatic effect. This suggests that the enhancement of the antagonist to convey emotional intensity takes time to emerge among a community of signers, regardless of the frequency of interactions.

Unlike the two other sign languages, LaSiBo's depictions use a wider signing space and resort to pointing within the immediate environment. These kinds of descriptions are also found in gestures by hearing people (Tano & Nyst 2018). Tano (2016) states that deaf people in Bouakako prefer hearing interlocutors, which may account for this pattern. Contrasting with both village sign languages, there were very few occurrences of body-based size and shape depictions in LGG. However, body-based depictions have been observed in depictions produced by LGG-signing deaf children, who nearly all live in hearing families. Although such data are not described in depth in this thesis, this preliminary work suggests that deaf signers who socialise more often with the

hearing than with the deaf, are more likely to use more gesture-like depictions, including both the children in Bissau and in the small community of signers in Bouakako. This needs to be explored further in the future.

Finally, mouth movements combined with signs of size and shape seldom occurred in LaSiBo, except for the very iconic puffed cheeks to express a big size. In contrast, both LGG and AdaSL exhibit various mouth movements combined with size and shape signs. In this way,

Gender differences. A surprising finding in this thesis concerns the striking difference between male and female LGG signers. Even though I have been following LGG development since its beginning, I only realised that there were differences between deaf men and women in these analyses, especially in the three first studies. Based on the participants' questionnaire and clarifications given by the deaf assistants in Bissau, few women socialise daily with groups of deaf people. This difference confirms the importance of social interaction. Thus, male LGG signers present more similarities to AdaSL signers, while narratives by female LGG signers show more correspondence to LaSiBo narratives. This is especially clear in Studies 1 and 3.

The few deaf women who did match the narrative skills of male signers are those who participate more frequently in social interactions with deaf peers. More ethnographic research on deaf socialisation patterns would be needed to understand what enables certain deaf women to interact more than others in Bissau. In addition, considering that LGG is used by a macro community, the sample collected for this study is certainly not representative enough. Thus, more deaf people from Bissau should be included to reconfirm the hypotheses. All in all, such a gender difference confirms the frequency of social interaction as the most crucial factor in developing storytelling skills.

Social interaction. Since deaf people in Bouakako are very few and they do not constitute a tight group, their signed interactions can hardly be active. Of course, they interact with each other but it is not clear to what extent, as their preferred interlocutors are hearing people. In addition, one of them, the older deaf person in the village, spends most of his time alone. Hence, it is not that they do not interact, but that they do not socialise as much as, for instance, deaf people in Adamorobe, because they have fewer interaction partners and the language has only existed in their lifetime. In sum, the frequency of social interactions seems to be a determining factor in developing storytelling skills. Gender differences in LGG signers are decisive in confirming social interaction as the most crucial factor. Both deaf men and women in Bissau belong to the same macro-community using the emerging LGG. In this case,

the distinct patterns of social interactions between men and women may provide the necessary evidence to justify the differences between narrative structures and devices. Undeniably, community size and language age are fundamental to developing language features and, consequently, storytelling abilities. Proof of this is the sign language used by the micro-community of Adamorobe for several generations.

As a consequence, AdaSL narratives present all the structural components, they have intense climaxes and enhancing devices. In contrast, LaSiBo and most female LGG signers produce very short middle components (complication and climax). In terms of narrative devices, role shifts occurred very little and constructed dialogues only did so in narratives by the few female LGG signers who attend deaf socialisations daily. Again, even though AdaSL and LGG have different time depths and community sizes, they have a daily frequency of social interaction in common.

Language contact. Also, in Adamorobe, deaf people have a lot of exposure to Ghanaian Sign Language (GSL), whether in the Sunday mass, at religious and professional courses attended mostly by the older deaf men. Younger deaf signers spent most of their youth in the boarding school, where GSL was the daily means of communication. Hence, it is safe to say that they are fully bilingual in GSL and AdaSL. Apart from the younger generation (in both genders) and older deaf men who had full access to GSL environments, the older women accessed it only partially through the Sunday mass and eventual visits from outsiders communicating with them in GSL (see Chapter 1 for more details). I recall here that most of the deaf participants in Adamorobe were women (both young and old), reflecting a similar proportion of the total of the deaf group. Due to such a background of language contact, I was conscious that GSL may have influenced this study, has Edward (2021, 347) suggested to have occurred in her own study. However, I found no differences between the narratives told by men and women, or even by younger schooled deaf people throughout the four studies. I noticed that the older deaf women occasionally used a few GSL signs, such as FATHER, MOTHER, MORE and BAD. These signs are not borrowed, because there are semantically equivalent – and totally distinct in form – signs in AdaSL. Also, one of the girls was excluded from the study because she told her narrative almost entirely in GSL (see Chapter 2 for more details). This girl schooled in GSL uses it to communicate with the younger group on a daily basis and rarely interacts with the deaf elders.

All those who participated in the study said that AdaSL was the language they used the most except for that girl who identified herself more with GSL. Having AdaSL as their strongest language implies regular interactions with the various deaf people in the village over time. Having had greater exposure to GSL may have given deaf youngsters and older deaf men the ability to separate the two languages according to

the corresponding contexts of use. In contrast, older deaf women accessed GSL in contexts where AdaSL was also present. This probably made it harder for them to clearly distinguish where and when it would be suitable to use GSL. Such an interference in older people, especially women, but not in the younger ones who are fully bilingual, was also observed by Edward (2021, 346). In the end, proficiency in GSL did not seem to interfere with narratives told in AdaSL by native signers.

Other factors. I am aware of the possibility of other factors influencing the results, even if I cannot give conclusive evidence on them in this study. For one, to better understand social interaction in Bouakako, more research would be needed to establish the extent to which LaSiBo signers socialise with each other. When Tano (2016) was on fieldwork, deaf people would go to the house where he was staying at the end of the day. Since I was not staying in the village, but in Hiré (the nearest town), hearing people would surround me every time I was in Bouakako. So, if I was visiting the house of a deaf person, they would follow me. In their eyes, I was an outsider with evident 'exotic' features (being white, deaf, female 'in charge', speaking a different language, with white hair). Having outsiders researching the sign language used by deaf people was definitely a disruptive factor in the daily routine of village life. This made it harder to understand exactly what are the communicative practices of the deaf people in Bouakako. The fact that I spent less time in Bouakako than in Adamorobe or Bissau was also not helpful in turning my presence a little less visible.

I am also aware that some AdaSL and LGG signers have had access to other sign languages such as GSL and LGP, respectively, and that this may have influenced the structure of their sign languages. It is possible that such an influence may have played some role in it, even if indirectly, which deserves to be looked into further. An analysis with LGP personal experience narratives is planned in the near future.

Methodological biases. The methodological process was identical in all three sign languages. However, the fact that I was an outsider may have influenced some of the signers' behaviour, especially the ones in Bouakako. My relationship with the deaf people in each of the research sites was built differently, as all relationships are. In Bissau, I have known most of the deaf signers for many years. In Adamorobe, I was preceded by Nyst and Kusters, white female researchers like me which eased my integration with the deaf people. In Bouakako, on the other hand, I was preceded by Tano, a local male researcher with whom they were very familiar. Yet, the LaSiBo data in all the studies show no differences between the six narratives collected by me and the additional six narratives collected later by Tano. Therefore, it does not appear that a bias against me as the interlocutor was significant.

8.2 Contributions of the thesis

I believe that this thesis demonstrates the importance of social interaction between deaf people to the development of storytelling skills. It has also shown that, regardless of community size, socialisation habits are fundamental to that development. The fact that deaf women in Bissau do not get to socialise as much as men jeopardising their language skills must bring awareness to promoting women's social participation. Such cultural differences between genders, leading men to interact more independently have been observed elsewhere, such as in Mali (Nyst et al. 2012, 254; Nyst 2015a, 134, 137), Senegal (Jirou, 2008, 151), Benin (Mildner 2021, 68) and Nigeria (Schmaling 2000, 15; Orie 2013, 245).

Looking more widely at the implications of deaf socialisation patterns, this thesis questions the educational policies towards mainstreaming deaf children. Such directives result in increasingly smaller groups of deaf students, without proper access to sign language models. To add to this, less and less social interaction between deaf people happens outside schools, at least in Europe. To what extent are sign languages in the global north being affected by this decrease in the socialisation habits of deaf people?

8.3 Future directions

The study of personal experience narratives involving dangerous situations is still little explored in sign languages. However, I believe that this thesis can open up new possibilities. By including other sign languages of both macro and micro deaf communities with different time depths, the hypotheses may or may not be supported. Also, by analysing the construction of narratives within interaction exchanges, the role of the audience could be better understood.

While working on the narratives in the three West African sign languages, I collected some preliminary data on narratives about animal attacks in an old macro-community sign language, my own Língua Gestual Portuguesa (LGP). Adding LGP as a school-based sign language used by a macro deaf community for 200 years could have contributed to the crosslinguistic analysis of this thesis. I even came to collect narratives of encounters with dangerous animals told by Portuguese deaf people during the pandemic. However, since I could not collect the narratives face-to-face due to the COVID restrictions, the method of filming ended up being different and, unfortunately, I had to leave them out of the study. I had asked the Portuguese signers to send me videos of their personal experiences with dangerous animals. The fact that they filmed themselves alone was a determining factor in how they modified the

telling of their experiences; for example, staring at the camera throughout almost all of the narrative meant that the use of constructed dialogue with shifting of eye gaze was not used to enrich the narrative.

Finally, during my last months of writing the thesis, my partner Mariana Martins went back to Bissau and filmed stories of animal attacks being told by one deaf signer to one or two deaf interlocutors. At that point, it was no longer possible to add this data to the thesis. Still, just by watching these videos, it became evident that storytellers adapt their accounts to their audience's feedback and that the story told gives rise to new stories in the audience in a continuous exchange of personal experiences. I later had the opportunity to also ask deaf Portuguese people to tell their stories within a group, which they did in a very similar way by building the stories based on the interlocutors' reactions and inspiring the telling of new stories by the addressees. This is definitely an exciting topic to dig into since language develops in everyday communicative practices and socialisation feeds on stories that are shared by one another.