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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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Summary

This thesis is focused 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) is a multi-generational sign language currently used by 33 deaf people in the village of Adamorobe, in Ghana. Langue des Signes de Bouakako (LaSiBo) is a young sign language used by six deaf people in the village of Bouakako, in Ivory Coast. Língua Gestual Guineense (LGG) is a very young sign language used by about 500 deaf people who were initially brought together in a school setting in the city of Bissau, in Guinea-Bissau.

To better understand how the sign language's age, community size and frequency of socialisation have influenced the three sign languages, I focus on personal experience narratives. The 45 stories collected were prompted by the question "Have you ever encountered a dangerous animal like a snake?" and are the object of four different descriptive analyses. Study 1 analyse the structure of the narratives, following the model of Labov & Waletzky (1967) and Freytag's dramatic pyramid (1894). I found that all three sign languages contain a universal structure in their narratives with a beginning, middle and end. Most signers start and end in the narrator's role, and then explain the sequence of events as a character. I found that the full range of narrative components in L&W's structural model is observed in narratives by both AdaSL and male LGG signers. However, those by LaSiBo and female LGG signers present a simpler structure. Studies 2, 3 and 4 focus on specific narrative devices that make narratives more compelling, as part of Labov's (1972) "evaluation" component. These devices refer to the moments when storytellers give dramatic prominence to the narratives by embodying characters, such as using different signing perspectives (Study 2), role shifts between characters and constructed dialogues (Study 3) and diversified types of descriptions of the animal (Study 4).

In line with the findings in Study 1 on narrative structure, the studies on the narrative devices in these stories show that AdaSL and male LGG signers use devices in a way that reflects greater skill in capturing the audience's attention, while LaSiBo and female LGG signers tend to pattern similarly in their use of simpler or reduced devices. The gender differences found in LGG storytelling structures align with the observation that women do not interact as much as men; this helps to support the hypothesis that the frequency of social interactions is a particularly crucial factor in developing storytelling skills.