

The study of sign languages and gesture at Evolang conferences

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1. Introduction

What would a naïve attendee at Evolang glean about sign languages and gesture solely based on Evolang presentations? The presence of these topics at Evolang is complex because their clear theoretical and methodological importance (Brentari & Coppola, 2012; Sandler, 2013; Benítez-Burraco, 2015) cannot be divorced from the fact that sign language creators are deaf/hard-of-hearing people, who are dehumanised, deprived of language, and excluded from the academy (Woodcock, Rohan, & Campbell, 2007; Lane, 2017). These facts influence their study, and motivate evaluation of their framing in language evolution. This study explores two aspects of sign and gesture related topics at Evolang: (i) the diversity of sign languages and study methods to identify how language evolution understands manual communication, and (ii) the arguments that sign language and gesture are invoked in, to evaluate the latter's juxtaposition with broader themes in language evolution.

2. Data & Coding

The data set was compiled by filtering abstracts from Evolang 8, 9, 11 and 13, and JCoLE (2022) for the keywords “sign language” and “gesture” occurring in the title. These abstracts were screened manually to find those that substantively dealt with these topics. Our results are based on a subset of the full data set (N=34). The coding categories (Table 1) were developed based on the content of the data set, and implemented by the authors.

3. Findings & Discussion

Items 1-3 below summarise three preliminary results, with codes arranged in descending order of frequency (frequency shown in brackets).

1. Study types: EXPERIMENT¹ (11) > CORPUS WORK (6), NON-HUMAN PRI-

¹participants are asked to do a task that is not elicitation of a language of which they are a user e.g. silent gesture, artificial language learning, director-matcher, iterated learning.

MATE PARADIGM (6), THEORY (6) > ELICITATION (3) > META-ANALYSIS (2)

2. Sign languages: NICARAGUAN SL (6) > HOMESIGN (4) > KATA KOLOK (1), EMERGING (1), BRITISH SL (1)
3. Themes: CHANGE OVER TIME (11) > CHILD LANGUAGE (7) > GESTURAL ORIGIN (6), LANGUAGE IN CONTEXT (6), NON-HUMAN PRIMATES (6) > EMERGING LANGUAGES (5), ICONICITY (5) > NEURAL UNDERPINNINGS (4) > X CONDITIONING STRUCTURE² (3) > BEING HUMAN (2)

The results suggest that understanding of sign languages in language evolution is based on just 3 named sign languages, with studies of Nicaraguan SL prevailing. Data about manual human communication are primarily non-naturalistic apart from corpus work³. Thematically, the greatest focus is on change over time⁴, primarily examined through age-related comparison, or across experimental transmission chains. Child language as a window onto evolution is a distant second, and tends to be represented by homesign.

Table 1. Coding category definitions

Category	Description
THEME	Frames in language evolution that sign languages and/or gesture are invoked in e.g. gesture is often linked to gestural theories of language evolution
DOMAIN	communicative resources investigated e.g. word order
STUDY TYPE	major method employed e.g. meta-analysis
SIGN LANGUAGE	named sign language or sign language type e.g. Nicaraguan SL, homesign

4. Conclusion

Hammarström (2016) argues for linguistic diversity in language evolution studies. We show that over 12 years, our naïve attendee might have a limited idea of structural and societal diversity in *natural* sign language use, and an idea that the study of manual communication is about grading phenomena as more or less linguistic (Kusters & Sahasrabudhe, 2018; Kusters & Hou, 2020; Kusters, Green, Moriarty, & Snoddon, 2020). This suggests that Evolang should make more active efforts at increasing the diversity of research on manual communication presented at the conference. A step toward doing this that can also identify submission bias is to track the properties of abstracts and assess differences over time.

²X = modality, society e.g. community size, semiotic resources.

³work from any set of human language data (collected for the study or previously).

⁴We include topics such as transmission, structural reduction, developmental clines, general language change, conventionalisation, emergent systems in the category of change over time.

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