Putting the Pieces Together

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Academic ASL: It Looks Like English, But It Isn't

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Abstract

Sign language interpretation is a primary accommodation provided to deaf students in postsecondary settings. In order to best accommodate the linguistic needs of deaf students in the classroom, an understanding of how American Sign Language (ASL) is used in this setting is needed. The authors have noted there is neither a consistent nor a clear understanding of what ASL used in an academic setting looks like. Interpreters often assume students are using signed form of English when this is not the case. This paper reports on preliminary research, both anecdotal and original, undertaken by the authors to begin to differentiate Academic ASL and signed forms of English used in the classroom.

Introduction

Our linguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge of American Sign Language (ASL) has grown considerably since the earliest studies of the language (Stokoe, 1965; Lucas 1989; Cokely and Baker, 1999). Nonetheless, much remains to be explored. As instructors of American Sign Language (ASL) and interpreting (ASL/English), as well as working interpreters, the authors have noted that such a gap exists in discussing visual language usage in academic settings, particularly post-secondary settings. We frequently hear from interpreting colleagues, "That deaf instructor (or student) signs English," when what we are seeing is, in our opinion, ASL and not a signed form of English. This led us to begin talking about and exploring what we have come to refer to as Academic ASL. This paper will report our current understanding of the characteristics of Academic ASL based on anecdotal evidence, review of the literature, and preliminary original research. It will also provide an explanation of why this register of ASL is often considered to be a signed form of English by interpreters.

Background

Particularly in academic circles, one hears talk of Academic English. A version of formal register English (Joos, 1961), Academic English is used both inside and outside of the classroom for oral presentations, discussion and written communication to establish oneself as learned. According to Scarcella (2003), "This variety of English entails the multiple, complex features of English required for 'long-term success in public schools, completion of higher education, and employment with opportunity for professional advancement and financial rewards' (Rumberger & Scarcella, 2000, p. 1)." The literature on Academic English focuses largely on the written form and its relationship to literacy (see for example, Scarcella 2003; Elbow 1991; Bizzell 1992). This literature also provides us with an identification of linguistic and sociolinguistic features of Academic English. These include distinct stress patterns in pronunciation; the use of technical vocabulary

(also referred to as jargon) and the intentional avoidance of "popular" terms; more marked grammatical structures including conditionals, complex clauses, embedded and subordinate clauses, parallel clauses, passive constructions, double negatives, etc.; an increased number of genres; unique transition and organizational signals; and the voice of authority. (Scarcella 2003; Elbow 1991). This description of Academic English does not stray far from Joos' (1961) descriptions of formal English where "the defining features of formal style are two: (1) detachment; (2) cohesion" (p. 38) with "pronunciation [that] is explicit…grammar [that] tolerates no ellipsis and cultivates elaborateness, the semantics is fussy…complex sentences" (p. 37) and explicit organization clearly making Academic English a version of formal register English.

With the founding of Gallaudet College in 1864, the more recent post-ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990), influx of deaf students attending public colleges and universities, along with an ever increasing number of deaf individuals receiving advanced degrees and joining the faculty of colleges and universities across the country, ASL has moved into academic arenas. It follows logically, then, there should be an Academic register of ASL. A review of the literature, however, resulted in no evidence of such a register.

Preliminary Research

Anecdotal

Informal discussions with native English speakers and PEPNet 2008 conference participants, indicate a common understanding of Academic English which supports what is found in the literature. When asked to differentiate social and Academic English, native speakers identified (using lay language) linguistic and discourse features such as technical terms, more "formal" terms as opposed to slang, complete sentences, proper pronunciation, and more clearly structured content relationships. The authors were also told that Academic English required more thought and attention than social English, which the literature identifies as the cognitive need to predict, infer, question, identify assumptions and synthesize meaning in the creation of knowledge (Scarcella, 2003).

Despite the lack of research into Academic ASL, native speakers and interpreters are similarly able to distinguish Academic ASL from social ASL. The author, Berkowitz, distinguishes Academic ASL from social ASL on the basis of the same literacy function that Academic English serves. She states that, as a student, Academic ASL provides the "scaffolding" for literacy in both ASL and written English as well as comprehension of academic content and "building" of academic knowledge. Interpreters and deaf individuals with academic experience identified (again, using lay language) linguistic and discourse features for the authors such as increased fingerspelling for technical vocabulary, the requirement for more thought (cognitive processing), more clearly produced (pronounced) signs, larger use of space in general, use of space to mimic visual aids, concept expansion, and a clear structure that begins with the point. Sociolinguistic features for Academic ASL identified by interpreters and deaf individuals with academic experience included limited turn taking which is characteristic of a formal register (Joos, 1961) and speaking only from the front of the room.

Given the authors posit that academic language use is a version of formal language register, it was not surprising to find the literature on Academic English and the lay understanding of both Academic English and Academic ASL largely reflecting general language features to indicate a more formal register. This led the authors to tentatively propose that Academic ASL include the following linguistic and sociolinguistic features: use of citation forms of signs, that is proper articulation; a restricted lexicon of more "proper" signs; enlarged signing space whether for phonologic, morphologic, or syntactic purposes; and use of unmarked grammatical structure, that is

use of S-V-O structure. (Valli, Lucas and Mulrooney, 2005; Zimmer 1989). Zimmer (1989) also noted the increased use of a marked grammatical structure, the rhetorical question, in formal ASL. The authors had expected that all marked grammatical structures using small movements of the eyebrows or mouth would be reduced or eliminated from formal ASL. In addition to the general features of a formal register, an academic version of the register required a specialized vocabulary and increased cognitive demands for comprehension. Thus the authors would propose that these, too, will be seen in Academic ASL in the form of increased use of fingerspelling and initialized signs for the specification of technical terms (Kelly, 2008).

Original

Preliminary research was completed by the authors with the above conception of the features of Academic ASL in mind in an attempt to clarify our understandings and move them beyond merely anecdotal evidence and inference from the literature. The research utilized commercially available recorded samples of deaf individuals discussing academic material. One recording was taken from the University of Minnesota publication on interpreting in postsecondary settings entitled *Charting the Way: Sign-to-Voice Presentations* (2003). The authors reviewed the presentations on the DVD and identified the deaf presenter Cara Barnett, who most clearly demonstrated what they had been labeling, on instinct, Academic ASL when presenting a history of deaf education. A second recording produced by the CATIE Center at the College of St. Catherine (2002), *Mirrored Math* with Steven Fuerst presenting a geometry lesson, was also used. Finally, a lecture on the use of classifiers in ASL presented by Carol and Andy Lazorisak (Signs of Development, 2003) was reviewed. As a comparison case, Teika Pakalns whose presentation title was "Ireland: Reality or Illusion" which the authors perceived as a model of a signed form of English, was also reviewed. Also, as a means of comparison, the authors reviewed several examples of language use that they considered to be a more social use of ASL including one presented by Debbie Peterson of Ely's Wildlife (Digiterp Communications, 2004).

The research was conducted as an informal pilot test rather than as formal linguistic research. The authors reviewed each recording noting and discussing the features that lead them to consider the presentation to be one of Academic ASL or a signed form of English. They then identified key features that were used in common by the presenters using Academic ASL and not used by the presenter in a signed form of English.

Several linguistic and sociolinguistic features were found as predicted. First, the authors noted, among the presenters studied, a deliberate use of an overall discourse structure that introduced a subject, provided details and/or examples around the subject, and then provided closure by returning to the main point (sometimes referred to as a diamond structure). The social use of ASL, however, had greater variation in the structure. Beginnings may have identified a genre (telling of a story), established a time frame, or identifieda subject. Closings may or may not return to the beginning.

We also found several of the anticipated linguistic aspects of a formal register: citation (proper) formation of signs, reduced use of non-manual markers, and the use of an unmarked grammatical structure (S-V-O). The sample which the authors viewed as an English form of signing shared these linguistic characteristics of formal register ASL. In contrast, the social ASL samples used generally casual registers including reduced sign productions, heavy use of non-manual markers particularly adjectival and adverbial, and both marked (O-S-V, sometimes referred to as topic-comment; relative clauses) and unmarked grammatical structures.

The use of space found in the examples of Academic ASL was different than anticipated. The authors anticipated that space would be enlarged as the literature suggested. However, this was not

the case. Space appeared to be no larger or smaller for the academic samples than the social samples. Perhaps a larger use of space was not found because the samples were videotaped in a studio and not in front of an audience. Likewise, the use of space to mimic visual aids was not noted since no visual aids were utilized in the samples. Nonetheless, Academic ASL seemed to use space in what might be considered a more unmarked morphological fashion by re-labeling it more frequently for reference than social ASL uses where, once labeled, the space is assumed to be known for referential purposes. Space was not used in this way in the sample of a signed form of English. In fact, space was used for linguistic function in a very limited fashion in the signed form of English.

The samples also revealed, as anticipated, fingerspelling and initialized signs were used more frequently in Academic ASL than in social ASL, for the specification of technical terms. In the Academic ASL samples, fingerspelling was primarily utilized in discourse structures designed to support literacy; that is, in accompaniment of a sign being tagged for technical use, along with an explanation of the meaning of the term, along with examples of the meaning of the term, or in conjunction with classifiers that clarify the meaning of the term being presented (Schlepper, 2000). The signed form of English also utilized fingerspelling for literacy purposes. However, classifiers were not used for meaning clarification of the fingerspelling in the signed form of English. In the social ASL samples, fingerspelling was used primarily to label proper nouns and far less frequently to tag specific meanings on multiple meaning signs.

A feature not anticipated from the literature review and anecdotal evidence was the use of pausing. In analysis of the presentations, pausing was noticed to be elongated and more deliberately used to mark transitions and utterance boundaries in Academic ASL (Roy, 1989). A second feature not anticipated was the more moderate overall pacing of the utterances in Academic ASL.

Discussion

Our findings demonstrate that there is justification in considering the existence of an Academic ASL register. Academic ASL can be described with the linguistic and sociolinguistic features identified above. In fact, the features of Academic ASL are quite similar to those of Academic English though structurally appropriate to the visual language. For example, where Academic English uses more marked structures, Academic ASL, because of its visual nature, uses fewer marked structures.

Our findings also seem to imply that the overwhelming reason why Academic ASL is perceived as a signed form of English by interpreters may be the predominant use of unmarked grammatical structures. Academic ASL is a version of formal register ASL and is most often utilized in front of large audiences, therefore, grammatical structures common in social ASL such as rhetorical questions and O-S-V constructions that are marked as unique by small movements of the eyebrows can not be used effectively. Likewise, mouth morphemes for the marking of adjectives and adverbs can not be used. Rather, grammatical information is conveyed by word order alone, S-V-O word order, along with the addition of lexical units for description. The majority of sign language interpreters have learned ASL as a second language. The popular curricula that are available for teaching ASL are based on an informal or, at best, consultative register (Smith, Lentz, and Mikos 1988; Zinza 2006). These curricula emphasize the O-S-V grammatical structure are more common in social registers. As a result, sign language presented in S-V-O order, the predominant word order of English grammar, becomes assumptive labeled as a signed form of “English.”

A secondary reason that Academic ASL may be frequently perceived as a signed form of English is the use of initialized signs. It has been long held that ASL did not initialize signs, signed forms of English did. However, upon closer examination, there are multiple accepted signs in the ASL

lexicon that would be considered initialized (eg. family, group, team – all based on a sign with semantics of multiple individuals with a common bond). Again, recent understanding of how ASL expands its lexicon allows for initialization of a common semantic base (Kelly 2008). This is a productive means for ASL to introduce technical vocabulary. Given social forms of ASL have less need for technical vocabulary and these are the registers most familiar to most interpreters, it is not surprising the Academic ASL's inclusion of initialized signs is seen as signed English.

Future Research

While this preliminary research seems quite promising, additional research is called for as this study is limited. First, and foremost among the limitations, is the sample size and make up. Samples for future research must be taken in a variety of academic settings (K-12 through postsecondary) rather than in a studio. This will not only increase the validity of the findings but will also resolve the questions that remain on the use of space (for example, size of space and mimicry of visual aids).

The present study is also limited by the depth of inquiry and comparison samples. Future research must be done more systematically and rigorously than this pilot. Future research must also employ formal ASL in non-academic settings as a comparison to determine if this is really a unique version of the formal register or if it is nothing more than the formal register.

Conclusion

Pursuing additional research on this topic will be highly beneficial. A clear and consistent understanding of Academic ASL, will allow for improved ASL instruction and interpreter training. In turn, more effective accommodation of deaf students in postsecondary settings will be achieved.

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