IRISH SIGN LANGUAGE

LORRAINE LEESON AND JOHN I. SAEED

Irish Sign Language

A Cognitive Linguistic Account

LORRAINE LEESON AND JOHN I. SAEED

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Preface

This book seeks to provide a description of Irish Sign Language (ISL) based on how the language is used by Deaf ISL users from across Ireland. Irish Sign Language is a visual-gestural language used by some 6,500 Deaf people across the island of Ireland and an estimated 65,000 hearing signers. ISL is quite distinct in its structure and history from its near neighbour, British Sign Language (BSL). The description of ISL is still in its infancy but the authors have had the advantage of drawing on one of the largest multi-modal corpora of a signed language in the world, the Signs of Ireland corpus, described in Chapter 1. Using this corpus we offer a description of the phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax and discourse that is grounded in a cognitive linguistic account, the first of its kind for Irish Sign Language. This approach promises new insights into the role within ISL of gesture, spatial models, iconicity, metaphor and metonymy. The book's accompanying DVD presents examples used in the discussion in a realistic dynamic form.

We have attempted, as far as space will allow, to set this description against the social and historical context of the language. We trace aspects of the history of the language, outlining some of the influences that other signed and spoken languages have had, and tell the story of how ISL has influenced other signed languages including Australian Sign Language and South African Sign Language. The volume also highlights the link between educational policy and language outcomes for ISL users in historical and contemporary settings.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Introducing Irish Sign Language

Irish Sign Language (ISL) is the language used by an estimated 5,000 Deaf people in the Republic of Ireland and some 1,500 signers in Northern Ireland. It is neither Irish (Gaeilge) on the hands nor English in manual form. ISL is a natural human language that has evolved over time and is distinct also from the signed languages of other countries that share English as a spoken language, such as Britain, where British Sign Language (BSL) is used, and the United States of America, where American Sign Language (ASL) is used. Irish Sign Language has no formal standing in law in the Republic of Ireland although it has been mentioned in the Education Act 1998. In contrast, Irish Sign Language along with British Sign Language is recognised by the British Government under the auspices of the Good Friday Agreement.[1] As we shall see in Chapter 3, the history of modern Irish Sign Language can be traced back to the early nineteenth century. While we know that some variety of signed language was used before that in Ireland, there is little documentation available to us to support any meaningful recreation of what that language looked like. However, with the establishment of the first schools for the deaf in the early 1800s, communities of Deaf signers formed and documentation began to grow, upon which we can draw in tracing the development of ISL and the influences on it. As we shall see, these influences include BSL, French Sign Language (Langue des Signes Française, LSF), spoken English, French, and cued speech and gesture. While the late-twentieth-century Irish Deaf community made efforts to resist influences from BSL, what we find is that it has in reality been a main source of influence on ISL for at least 200 years.

The link between these varied influences is educational policy: both BSL and LSF were linguistic instruments in the establishment in Ireland of the first Protestant and Catholic schools for the deaf, respectively. These languages, though not recognised as having full linguistic status in the nineteenth century, were modified by educationalists to become carriers for English via a system called signed English. With the suppression of signed language in the twentieth century, a system of teaching through speech called

oralism was implemented, which, as we shall see in Chapter 3, had devastating consequences for many. Another result of this was the introduction of English mouth patterns, or mouthings, into ISL. For some students, mostly girls in St Mary's School for Deaf Girls, in Cabra, Dublin, a system called cued speech was introduced and remnants of that system have permeated ISL and have become one element of women's signing.

The fact that ISL was suppressed during the strong oralist period in the mid twentieth century and the fact that more than 90 per cent of Irish deaf children are born to parents who are not deaf has meant that the transmission pathways to acquiring ISL became more complex. In the absence of Deaf adult caregivers who were themselves ISL users, children draw on gesture to bootstrap their language development, sometimes supported by spoken language. Despite this atypical environment for language acquisition and the concurrent lack of institutional status associated with its use, ISL has survived and thrived. It has also been a language of influence in other countries where Irish missionaries and educators travelled alongside the British Empire's civil service. Irish missionaries travelled to British colonies to provide education, medical care and chaplaincy services for the military and civil servants who administered the colonies, as well as embarking on missionary endeavours. As a result, Irish religious orders and some lay teachers engaged in deaf education travelled to Australia and South Africa bringing with them Irish Sign Language, with discernible influences still evident in some varieties of Australian and South African Sign Languages.

1.2 The Signs of Ireland corpus

This book aims to provide a linguistic snapshot of Irish Sign Language as used at the turn of the twenty-first century in the Republic of Ireland. We do this by building on linguistic analysis of the language over the past two decades by a relatively small number of people, and we emphasise that we are still in the early days of understanding the detail of many parts of this linguistic system, particularly at the level of syntax and discourse structure. At the same time, this study of ISL is boosted by the availability of a digital multi-modal corpus of Irish Sign Language called the Signs of Ireland (SOI) corpus. The SOI corpus is part of the Languages of Ireland programme at the School of Linguistic, Speech and Communication Sciences, Trinity College Dublin (TCD). It comprises video data from Deaf users of ISL from across the Republic of Ireland in digital form, and has been annotated using ELAN, a software program developed by the Max Planck Institute, Nijmegen. The corpus is housed at the Centre for Deaf Studies, TCD.

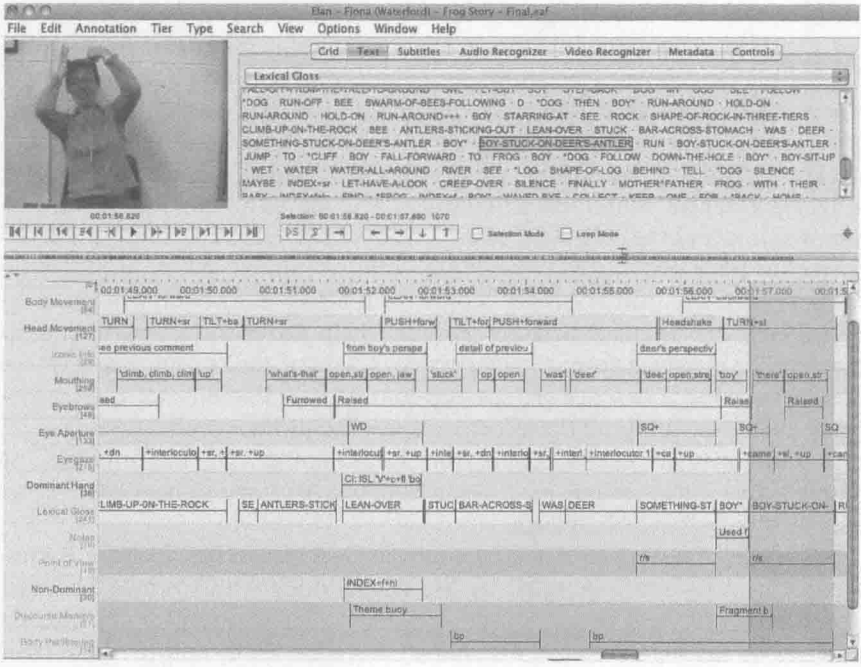
The Signs of Ireland corpus consists of data from forty signers aged between 18 and 65 years, at time of filming, from five locations across the Republic of Ireland: Dublin, Wexford, Waterford, Cork and Galway. It

includes male and female signers, all of whom had been educated in schools for the deaf in Dublin, St Mary's School for Deaf Girls and St Joseph's School for Deaf Boys. This allows for comparison between male and female sign variants, insofar as they were captured in the data, as well as gendered generational issues in areas such as mouthing, fingerspelling and lexical choice. In building the corpus, we deliberately decided to include no signed language teachers, other than a first signer who served as a pilot data set. The aim was to avoid the collection of data from signers who had firm notions of correct or pure ISL. Instead, the corpus aims to capture ISL in its authentic form as used by ordinary Deaf people from across the country in order to reveal how the language is really used and help provide students with data that are far removed from the classroom. Users of the corpus can access a range of signing styles, age groups and content type that has not been previously available. While all the informants use ISL as their preferred language, only a minority are native signers from Deaf families. The majority are not native signers, but several have Deaf siblings. All forty signers use ISL as their first or preferred language.

All of the data were collected by a female Deaf researcher, Deirdre Byrne-Dunne, in 2004 and annotated by Ms Byrne along with Cormac Leonard and Alison MacDuff between 2005 and 2007. This allowed for consistency in terms of data elicitation. It also meant that, due to the nature of the Irish Deaf Community, Ms Byrne was known to all of the participants. In the data, this shows up in terms of interaction on-screen between informants and data collector, allowing for some interesting and natural interaction. In addition to SOI data, some images in this book come from SIGNALL II project data. SIGNALL II was a Leonardo da Vinci (European Commission Lifelong Learning) Project which created a large body of digital data in five signed languages including ISL between 2008 and 2010.[2]

Since signed languages are articulated in three-dimensional space, using not only the hands and arms but also the head, shoulders, torso, eyes, eyebrows, nose, mouth and chin to express meaning, analysts are faced with highly complex, multi-linear and potentially dependent tiers that need to be coded and time-aligned. The data are viewable across a multiplicity of tiers in the ELAN system.[3] These tiers are searchable, allowing for the sophisticated collection of data, which better supports analysis of discourse in signed languages and the analysis of the frequency of occurrence of specific features both within single texts and across larger bodies of data. An example of a screen shot from the SOI corpus in ELAN can be seen in Figure 1.1. Figure 1.2 shows the results of a search for the lexical sign DEAF in the SOI corpus.

As with spoken languages, discussion about what is linguistic and what is extra-linguistic in the grammars of various signed languages continues (Engberg-Pedersen 1993; Liddell 2003; Schembri 2003). Further, the influence of gesture on signed languages has begun to be explored (Armstrong et al. 1995; Armstrong and Wilcox 2007; Vermeerbergen and Demey 2007;



(Fiona (36) Frog Story (Waterford))

Figure 1.1 Screen shot of SOI example in ELAN (Fiona (36) Frog Story (Waterford))

Wilcox 2004b). While these remain theoretical notions at a certain level, decisions regarding their role and function as linguistic or extra-linguistic constituents play an important role when determining what will be included or excluded in an annotated corpus. Such decisions also determine how items are notated, particularly in the absence of a written form for the language being described. In turn, these decisions will determine how user-friendly and how useful the final corpus will be.

1.3 A cognitive perspective on Irish Sign Language

This book is aimed at a broad audience: teachers and learners of ISL, linguists, interpreters, parents, Deaf and hearing signers of ISL, and readers interested in signed languages in general. With this in mind, we attempt to offer a comprehensive presentation of discussion on ISL, though we emphasise that for some parts of the analysis of this language we are still at an early stage. This is particularly true for the analysis of syntactic and discourse structures. Throughout this book our discussion is underpinned by a theor-

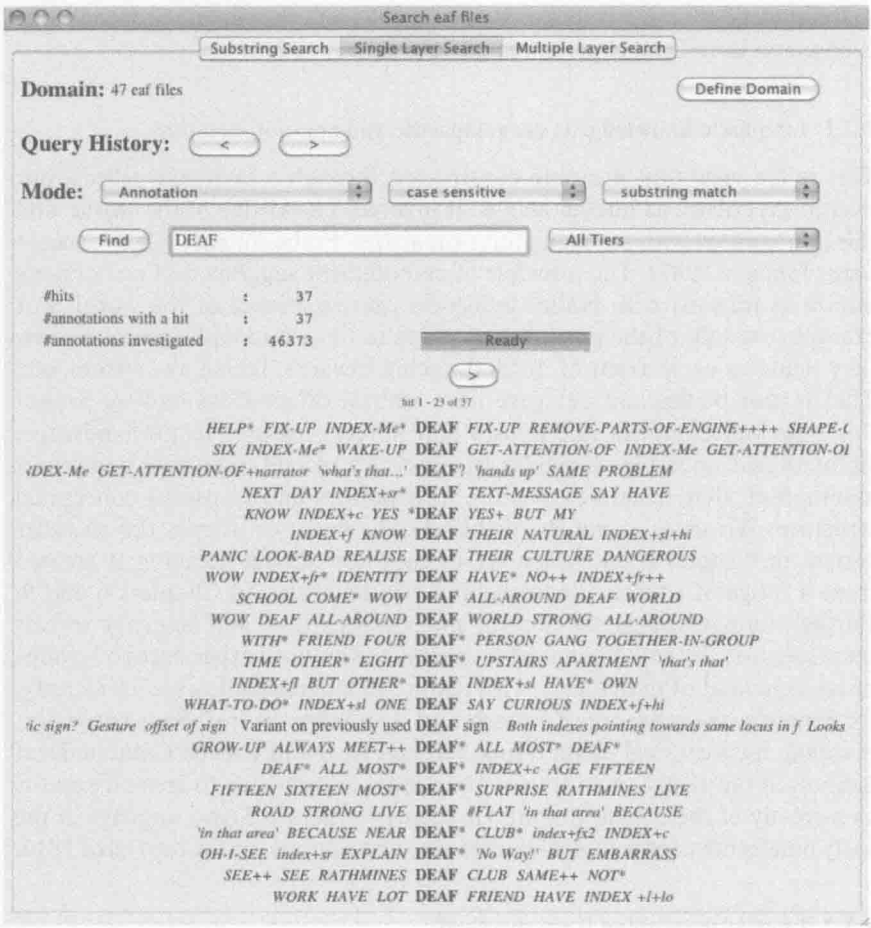


Figure 1.2 Results of search for the lexical sign DEAF across forty-seven narratives in the SOI corpus

etical perspective on language known as cognitive linguistics. This approach has several principles which we believe allow for an elegant description of many of the features found in signed languages. These principles allow for discussion of topics such as iconicity, gesture, metaphor, metonymy, the construction of lexical meaning, the use of mental models of space for semantic relations, and the partitioning of signing space and the signer's body to represent multiple referents simultaneously. We raise specific aspects of this approach throughout the book and bring these to a summary discussion in Chapter 9. For now, we can identify some key notions that will underpin our analysis by condensing them into four claims: that linguistic knowledge is encyclopaedic and non-autonomous; that linguistic meaning is perspectival;

that linguistic meaning is dynamic and flexible; and that linguistic knowledge is based on usage and experience.

1.3.1 Linguistic knowledge is encyclopaedic and non-autonomous

This is the view that meaning constructed through a language reflects our overall experience as human beings. It involves knowledge of the world, and this is integrated with other cognitive capacities. Embodiment is a key concept here (Johnson 1987). The principle of embodiment suggests that our organic nature as humans with bodies influences our experience of the world. For example, we talk of the positions of things in the world with respect to how they relate to us: in front of, behind, facing towards, facing away from, etc. That is, our bodies and our gaze have natural orientations and we project this onto other entities like houses and natural features in the landscape. Embodiment underpins language because of a second important cognitivist assumption: that semantic structure incorporates and transmits conceptual structure. We show examples of this in ISL when we discuss the classifier system in Chapter 5 and when we discuss how lexical meaning is created from a range of sources, linguistic and non-linguistic, in Chapters 6 and 9. Further, human beings are cultural and social entities, and language reveals these identities by embodying the historical and cultural experiences of groups of speakers and of individuals. This feature of language allows us to identify, for example, the influence of French Sign Language on Irish Sign Language, mapping the historical cultural link between Irish and French Catholic Deaf Schools in the 1840s, or to trace certain lexical items back to Ireland's status as a colony of the British Empire via the use of British Sign Language in the early nineteenth century, perhaps from the first schools for the deaf circa 1816.

1.3.2 Linguistic meaning is perspectival

In this view meaning is not an objective reflection of the outside world; instead, meaning is a way of shaping the world (Geeraerts 2006). Linguistic meaning embodies a perspective on the world. For example, we can present information about an event in a number of ways. We can say that 'the tree is in front of the house' or that 'the house is behind the tree'. The crux of the matter lies both in the speaker's or signer's position vis-à-vis the house and the tree and the chosen perspective. As we shall see, ISL has a number of ways to encode for perspective, including the use of the non-dominant hand in simultaneous constructions. Another, which is common to other signed languages, is the movement of the signer's body to another position in signing space to present another referent's view 'through their eyes', so to speak. This strategy has been given a number of labels, including shifted reference and surrogacy constructed action; we discuss its use in discourse in Chapter 8. Perspective is one aspect of the subjectivity of language by which the signers'

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