

THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER ON THE DISCOURSE MARKERS IN PAKISTANI SIGN LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to shed light on the common discourse markers in Sign Language, particularly Pakistani Sign Language. Pakistani Sign Language is overlooked and emerges as a non-standardized. These gestures/ discourse markers will be studied in comparison to American Sign Language (ASL). The main features will be analysed that call for a detailed analysis based on the use, the universality and application. This research aims to study if there is any influence of gender on these discourse markers. The Pakistan Sign Language Corpus will be collected and analysed with the assistance of Sign Language Interpreters. Furthermore, to see for any consistent language specific functions that these languages may share will also be accounted and noted.

Keywords: Sign Language, Discourse markers, gender, American Sign Language, Pakistani Sign Language

INTRODUCTION

Speaking from a linguistic point of view if view sign language is one of the least researched areas. Many of the subcategories still remains highly unexplored rather in today's day and age require the due attention they have not been given. Sign languages around the world have largely remained understudied. A recent development can be the study of the phonology and phonetics, and the syntax of the language. This is done so that parallels between the spoken and signed modalities can be identified. One area that has been neglected largely is that of discourse.

A major misconception regarding the signed languages is that there is a universal sign language. It is perceived that signed languages share more features hence they are comparatively much more similar than spoken modalities. This however is not true. Each place has its own sign language regardless how standardized or non-standardized it is. These languages develop with reflection of the cultural values embedded within them, perhaps some easily interpretable meaning behind these, or can even be as simple as signed out in terms of alphabetical signs.

This paper aims to organize the patterns of how there is a relative influence of gender upon the development of discourse markers in Pakistani Sign Language. Furthermore, a general comparison will be done with a developed and greatly standardized language that is American Sign Language. These discourse markers will be studied in terms of their development, use and perception.

Pakistani Sign Language mainly remains under the influence of the Special Education Department. In terms of Pakistani Sign Language those considered an expert are firstly quite rare to come by and secondly have a vocabulary of approximately 1500 gestures. Those who are considered to have some command and moderately fluent the vocabulary is measured to be about 500 words. The notable ability of being able to interact with different age groups also comes into play is one that highly differentiates one from the other.

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The Pakistani Sign Language lacks a set syllabus and format. The language is something that has developed with very less attention given to it and can be observed to be tarnished by unregistered variations that occur along the way. One sign for example would be interpreted in multiple ways in each region. These can be called the sign's regional dialect. These variations also derive influence from lack of availability of resources, in forms of educational discourse and also the appropriate guidance and administration.

Recently, a project was conducted in Punjab, Pakistan under the name 'Learning Standardized Sign Language'. This project entailed collecting around 35 teachers from all around Punjab and teaching them in the same environment a set vocabulary which they had to go back and then impart in their own districts. This aimed to establish a more standardized learning of sign language. However, once the process was over examiners went all around Punjab and conducted tests to gauge the command that these chosen one's had acquired over standardized patterns and the language in general that had been taught to them. Tests were then conducted and the results showed a large variation. There were signs that had not really been taught but were signed by the participants. This was mainly understood to be under the influence of dialect and how the participants had very limited access to facilities. The signs which these participants had picked up on could possibly be improvised or perhaps from a different sign language.

Research Questions

This study aims to find answers to some rather pertinent questions. The following are some questions drawn to streamline the purpose of this research article and the findings procured:

1. What are some major discourse marker in Pakistani Sign Language and what is their role?
2. Where does PSL derive most of its influence from?
3. What is the role of gendered signs in Pakistani Sign Language and is there any connection when it comes down to use of discourse markers?

METHODOLOGY

The data examined and studied in this investigation comes from the reference videos available online as well those specially made by institutions. This is specifically done due to the lack of absence of a standardized corpus of the vocabulary. Interviews are also to be conducted to analyse the use of discourse markers in Pakistani Sign Language.

Many of the signs for the respective discourse markers are borrowed signs which demand in depth analysis. These signs can be further observed with technique through a signed conversation. This scripted conversation will be given to the participants so they can sign out the dialogue. This allows the sign language interpreter to visually analyse the use, meaning and structure.

The participant sample for this study is developed in a manner that both males and females are taken into account. This is highly important since the effect being studied is that of gender. Equal representation is required and so is equal participation in order to rule out any possibility of biases or errors. These control factors are taken into account through all of the research.

The secondary form of data collection will be through content analysis based on the study of the books and material available. Sign Language interpreters will be interviewed to understand this content analysis will be studied, under the strict vigilance of the field work analysts who can guide through the research and analysis process, making corrections along the way if need be. The different as well consistent discourse markers will be notes, specifically under the influence of gender.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Through the years dating back to the early 20th century a general concept that Sign Languages derives perspective and structure from the spoken modalities and are highly influenced by that has remained. This can be seen prominently even in the works of quite known linguists like Leonard Bloomfield. Sign languages have been believed to be connected with historical aspects. It is difficult to put a finger on any one feature in particular that might be the root where the sign language derived influence from. This influence can be derived from historical factors including colonisation, any past rule, control, or even something as migration. Zeshan (2006) For many known sign languages, there is more or less detailed anecdotal evidence of historical links with other sign languages. These links may have to do

with colonial history, migration of populations, or, in more recent times, the establishment of deaf education with the help of another country.

This further elaborates how sign languages are not quite so different from spoken languages. The linguistic patterns have been analysed in some sign language and it can be observed how the signs develop and progress according to its surroundings. Sign languages also develop in minority settings, mostly urban settings. These do not abide by any standardised conventions but rather is more of what has been passed down from generation to generation of these deaf users. Especially when talking of languages like those that develop in Pakistani rural areas occurs without aid of any common resources. There is barely any access to proper schooling or any further help.

Zeshan (2006) The first sign languages that were documented in detail from the 1970s onwards are used by communities of deaf people in urban settings. These are minority languages in which most of the users are deaf and there is constant language contact with the surrounding spoken/written language of the majority culture of hearing people. This situation is well described and occurs in urban areas in all regions of the world. These signs and gestures allow them to communicate amongst themselves however if these languages are threatened by endangerment there are hardly any measures that can be taken to prevent this. The languages are not standardised, or even documented which makes their eradication a very common threat.

Another aspect faced by Village-based or rural based sign languages is where there are several generations being immersed into the same culture. This often results in the sign language emerging as the main language and there is no aspect of minority attached to it. These languages hardly face any 'linguistic oppression' as (Branson et al., 1999) states, village-based sign languages arise because deaf individuals have been born into the village community over several generations, and therefore a sign language has evolved that is restricted to the particular village or group of villages. These sign languages are typically used by the whole village population no matter whether deaf or hearing, and in this sense, they are not minority languages, nor do they face any linguistic oppression. They have developed in isolation from other sign languages and are not used in any educational or official context. Deaf people are fully integrated into village life and may not be considered to be 'disabled' in any sense.

Like all spoken languages the signed languages are also ever evolving and ever developing. However, they largely differ in some respects. There is a great deal of similarities that can be drawn amongst spoken languages and signed languages but in many ways signed languages still stand apart. As Kegl et al. 1999 says, 'Despite similarities with respect to language endangerment, the life cycle of sign languages also differs from that of spoken languages in that new sign languages continuously emerge throughout the world, as most famously documented in Nicaragua. 'In places where the deaf community is very large and the indigenous sign language has had time to develop on its own, it is relatively immune to foreign influences, as is the case in China and in the Indian subcontinent.'

When researching aspects of Pakistani Sign Languages, it becomes clear how not a lot of work has been done in this domain. Zeshan (1996). So far, the linguistic structure of PSL has not been investigated at all. The only material available consists of two dictionaries, one with signs from Karachi (ABSA, 1987), the other one published in Islamabad (NISE 1991) with signs from several parts of the country. The latter was compiled during a national congress on sign language at the National Institute of Special Education (NISE), which was attended by deaf people from different regions of Pakistan. Zeshan (1996) also points out that 'nothing has been published about the history of Pakistan Sign Language and the history of deaf education'.

The signs that are commonly glossed as Hey and Well in literature often appear in American Sign Language (ASL) conversations. The sign Hey is generally understood to function as an attention-getter in order to open a conversation (Baker-Shenk & Cokely, 1980), and well is commonly used when hesitating, as when one is unsure about what one is saying or when hedging a response. (Hoza, 2007) These are major aspects that exist in the realm of sign language and this shows the extent to which they have been examined. There is a barrier when Sign Languages are put under scrutiny because there is no actual pattern to follow. For the longest times Sign Languages have been studied under the markers set by spoken languages and linguists have not even tried to delve deeper than that however, these details are much more evident now.

Sign Language though not really studied in detail and in depth does have a few aspects more studied than others. This involves the syntactic features in the signed modality itself and also what these represent. Linguists have pointed out some discrepancies that exist in the signed modalities. Another

recent proposal tackles a descriptive problem perhaps unusual to signed languages, the visible spatial dimension that signs exploit (Lillo-Martin & Klima, 1986). Pronouns and agreement affixes in ASL reference different points in space: third-person pronouns, for example, involve "pointing" in conceivably any direction around the signer's body. Lillo-Martin & Klima have proposed a modification which attempts to overcome this apparently unusual feature of the ASL.

Recent work within several theoretical framework of syntax as well as phonology (e.g. Relational Grammar, Padden, 1983; Government and Binding, Lillo-Martin in press c, Shepard-Kegl, 1985; Auto segmental Phonology, Johnson and Liddell, 1985, and Sandler, 1986; Lexical Morphology, Padden and Perlmutter, 1984) have argued that indeed, ASL is such a language.

The article Sign Language: The Language misconstrued in Ethiopia delves deep into the many unsettled and lesser researched areas. "Sign language is a visual gestural language which involves the use of the hands, eyes, face, mouth, head and body. Furthermore, a manual alphabet (finger spelling), may be also used along with Sign Language" (WFD, 1993:6) Sign Languages have for the longest time been misconstrued and they have been studied under the perimeters of the spoken modalities. There are some linguists who have started to realise this matter with the utmost urgency that it requires. Identifying and studying the boundaries and bases of sign languages is thoroughly focused upon. "Furthermore, Baynton, Gannon, & Bergey (2007) defined this sign language as those are natural, highly complex natural languages with full expressive capacity, with their own grammar, lexicon, humor and associated performance forms."

Through in-depth analysis it can be identified that the Sign Language serves the purpose of communication just as any spoken modality. It is also important to note the history attached with the perception of when it comes to Sign Languages. Sign Languages have for the longest time been perceived as inferior and unimportant and even unworthy of being called a proper language. As Alemayehu Teklemariam (2019) says, "Although the form of the language and communication differs, the content can be the same."

FINDINGS

It can be seen that 'Well' and 'Hey' exist as common discourse markers in English and so influenced by that they are prominently present in American Sign Language. The presence of discourse markers in Pakistan Sign Language cannot really be figured out as such so even if linguists try to look for the Urdu counterparts of the above mentioned discourse markers they are at loss of what can truly be identified as a discourse marker in Urdu. However, a carefully curated list of discourse markers has been made under the vigilance of some Sign Language interpreters. The items in this list have been added both in Urdu as well as their translated counterparts in English.

English	Urdu
Sometimes	کبھی کبھی
Never	کبھی نہیں
Nothing	کچھ نہیں
To someone	کسی کو
In my opinion	میرے خیال میں
Thank God that	اللہ کا شکر ہے کہ
It seems that	لگتا ہے کہ
It is that	ایسا ہے کہ
The thing is that	بات یہ ہے کہ
For example	مثال کے طور پر
It is that	یوں ہے کہ

Pakistani Sign Language derives most of the influence from Urdu when it comes to a spoken modality and vocabulary. Pakistani Sign Language as a signed modality drives a great deal of influence from the Indo-Pak Sign Language which is commonly used in the subcontinent area. According to some expert sign language experts it is also a rather important source from where the Pakistani Sign Language derives most of its vocabulary form and cultural impacts can also be taken into account. Other than this according to some expert linguists and Sign Language interpreters the American Sign Language (ASL) also has a great deal of impact on PSL.

The main question that this study intends to investigate is that whether there is any influence of gender on discourse markers in Pakistan. According to detailed interviews with Sign Language interpreters it can be deduced that there is no direct connection between these two variables. Though gender is an essential part of communication, and the education that is imparted to deaf signers it is not something that comes into action while one is signing. The use of pronouns or any other sign that might hint a gendered connotation is avoided.



Fig 1.

Figure 1 shows a common gendered sign. This is one of the very few gendered signs. This sign in particular refers to the 'female sex'.



Fig 2

Figure 2 is one of the other commonly used gendered sign. This one in particular refers to the male sex.

This finding was further investigated and testified through the sample chosen. A dialogue was conducted in depth with the sample of two people under the vigilance of Sign Language interpreters.

The dialogues were posed to them which involved discourse markers. The dialogues were analysed and it was observed that is no difference in the signs used by either of the signers. The dialogue was communicated in the same manner without any discrepancy caused due to the use of gendered signs. This proved what had already been discussed during the course of the in depth interview with the Sign Language interpreter. There is no influence on the signs that are used.



Fig 3

Figure 3 is a sign for a very common used discourse marker 'For Example'.

It is also important to establish that Pakistani Sign Language is a non-standardized language. There is no set syllabus or help that is ordained and this is one of the major reasons why the signs throughout the map have such inconsistency amongst themselves. This is described as an expert Sign Language Interpreter with the help of an analogy that if one was to cover the distance of some kilometres say 40 or 50 kilometres, one would observe a significant change in the accent and style even among spoken discourse. This is what we categorize as dialect across the spoken modalities. This also occurs in the signed modalities as the signs can be observed getting significantly changed and innovation made. A lot of this derives influence from the lack of standardization in Pakistani Signed Language particularly. If this was to be related to ASL it can be observed that it is highly standardized and little to no discrepancies are found.

The gap in Pakistani Sign Language is immense and it is extremely common for new signs to be introduced. These are often done amongst families. It is extremely common in such settings for families to invent their own signs for communication. These signs become part of the signer's vocabulary. Furthermore, it is common practice for signers to learn new signs in an academic setting. It is very common for teachers to come up with signs which once again adds to the vocabulary of the children and allows them to interact more fluently. Due to the lack of a standardized syllabus this is how vocabulary, communication and fluency is managed.

All that being said it is also important to establish that steps have been taken in order to work towards standardizing the language. Privately efforts made include the Deaf Reach program. This mainly focuses on the attempts to standardize language and setting a vocabulary of 5000 words. Apart from this attempts in the public sector involve those made by the National Institution of Special Education (NISE). They worked toward introducing a syllabus of 3 books. These books have not been published as of now but extensive work is being done to introduce them, hence introducing a standardized syllabus for all. However, on a government level it can be stated that no strategic efforts have been done to introduce a program with such guidelines when it comes to the syllabus.

Sign Language has its own sentence structure which differs from other languages. This is not only a case with the Pakistani Sign Language but also a lot of others sign language. The syntax of signed modalities highly varies from the spoken languages.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that there is no influence of gender on the discourse markers in Pakistani Sign Language. This has been proven thoroughly via the various ways to collect data. Sign language interpreters see no connection between gender and discourse markers namely. The research did however bring out some rather interesting pieces of information regarding the Pakistani Sign Language in general. Many of the major impacts on Pakistani Sign Language from a linguistic point of view have roots in the non-standardized method of the entire language.

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