

Yucatec Maya multimodal interaction as a proto Yucatec Maya Sign Language

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This paper aims at showing, through qualitative examples, that Yucatec Maya communication is systematical (with numerous formal non-verbal strategies in everyday interactions) and semantically rich, through the use of many iconic and quotable gestures and of character perspective and, that all these strategies come to complement oral communication. Because of this extensive and systematic use of the non-verbal channel, if confronted to a situation in which they can use speech, Yucatec Maya speakers have generally no trouble communicating. This is why, we argue, it has been so easy for hearing and their deaf kin “to invent” signed languages and also the reason why these newly created sign languages look so similar to one another although spread in different villages in the Yucatec peninsula.

Recently many emerging sign languages have been studied and put to light in the research field (Meir et al. 2010, Zeshan & de Vos. 2012). However, and although this is a tremendous development, the fact remains that there are numerous of emerging sign languages are still unidentified. In the Yucatec peninsula one village (Chicán) is particularly known and has been described as “the” Yucatec Maya Sign Language village or sometimes “Chicán Sign Language” (de Vos & Pfau, 2015; Escobedo Delgado, 2012; Johnson, 1991; Shuman, 1980; Shuman & Cherry-Shuman, 1981). However, and despite the fact that many of these authors were aware of the existence of other sign languages in the same region, almost nobody seriously tackled the issue of comparison. Such position is obviously problematic and the aim of this talk is to discuss this issue considering that multimodal Yucatec Maya communication is a proto-Yucatec Maya Sign Language, which allows fruitful and productive comparison between multimodal communication and sign language but also for comparing the different sign languages used in the peninsula.

This talk will be structured as follow: First, we will consider examples of YM conversations in which gesture are indispensable complement of speech in several ways. Second, we will consider several paths of recruitment and lexicalization of gestures into signs: how quotable gestures get transformed into lexicon, holophrastic gestures into grammatical signs though a process of dismantization; how transfers of iconicity and semi-conventionalized gestures give rise to new signs, similar in structure but different in form; how manual classifiers and SASS are already present in gesture and get integrated in YMSL; how character perspective is already present in YM; and finally we will consider a few transfer of cultural concepts and linguistic calques from YM to YMSL.

A key conclusion of this talk is to point out the importance of taking into account the cultural context and the role of bilingual bimodal signers in the emergence process of new sign languages.

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