Signs of the arctic: Typological aspects of Inuit Sign Language

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Summary

In this thesis, the native sign language used by deaf Inuit people is described. Inuit Sign Language (abbreviated to IUR) is used by less than 40 people as their sole means of communication, and is therefore highly endangered. Apart from the description of IUR as such, an additional goal is to contribute to the field of sign language typology. Structures described for IUR are therefore compared to those found in other sign languages.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the field of sign language typology. Firstly, it introduces the two sociocultural types identified: urban and rural sign languages. Originally, researchers noted great similarities among urban sign languages. Later, when rural sign languages were described, it turned out to be the case that those showed interesting differences with respect to the urban sign languages. The rural SLs share a number of sociolinguistic characteristics, such as a relatively high percentage of deafness among the community members and a high proportion of hearing second language signers.

A second topic related to sign language typology is its relation to spoken language typology. Cross-linguistic studies are only possible since more sign languages were adequately described. Typological classifications that were established for spoken languages earlier, turn out to be applicable to sign languages too, but some are in need of adjustment. Determining basic word order in sign languages is possible, but rather complicated due to sign language syntax being simultaneous, iconic, and often pragmatically organised. Still, for many sign languages a basic word order has been determined and indeed, these match the patterns described for spoken languages.

Another property on which spoken languages are commonly classified is their morphological type, based on the degrees of synthesis and fusion. For sign languages, however, distinguishing morphemes is considerably more complex because of their simultaneous organisation, and therefore determining their morphological type appears equally complicated. In an earlier study (Schuit 2007), I suggested adding an index of simultaneity, which is not only applicable to sign language, but also to spoken languages that employ tonal changes, for instance.

Also introduced in chapter 1 (section 1.2) are the Inuit of Nunavut. Traditionally, the Inuit were hunter-gatherers who travelled across the Arctic. Nowadays, they are settled in communities and most of them have a paid job. Their language is Inuktitut or one of its many dialects. Many Inuit also speak English, and some speak French. Deaf Inuit use either IUR or American Sign Language (ASL) in communication, which they acquired both at school. They are surrounded by a network of family and friends, who use IUR or ASL with the deaf person. Little or no social stigma is associated with deafness in the Inuit communities, and deaf Inuit participate in general daily life.

Data for this thesis was gathered during four fieldwork trips in 2009-2012. I visited the communities of Rankin Inlet, Baker Lake, and Taloyoak, where I interviewed four deaf and three hearing IUR signers. Most video recordings include spontaneous conversations about Inuit culture and daily life, but a number of elicitation tasks were conducted as well. These are described in the methodology section (1.3).

Chapter 2 introduces three different aspects of IUR: phonological, morphological and syntactic. Phonologically, I study the different handshapes found in IUR as well as the use
of locations and non-manual phonemes. The set of handshapes of IUR is comparable in size to those of rural sign languages, while the use of locations parallels with urban sign languages. With respect to non-manuals in IUR, it was determined that IUR falls between the two groups. Furthermore, in this chapter I propose a typological classification that categorises languages on the basis of their amount of phonetic handshapes, grouped per 20.

Morphologically, nominal pluralisation in IUR is described and compared to the findings of Pfau and Steinbach (2005) for German Sign Language (DGS). The strategies found for DGS, i.e. reduplication and zero marking, have been found in IUR as well, but the DGS hierarchy has to be rearranged to be applicable for IUR. Furthermore, IUR has a pluralisation strategy that has not been identified in DGS, namely the addition of the non-dominant hand to one-handed signs. Since research regarding nominal pluralisation is scarce, it is difficult to say based on the current studies whether IUR patterns with urban or rural sign languages.

The syntactic aspect described is negation. IUR has two negative signs solely used for negation, NEG-1 and NEG-2, and two other signs that may also be used in other contexts. WAIT-NEG differs from WAIT in that it takes negative non-manual marking, as is possible for PALMS-UP. The negative non-manual marking consists of a headshake and a facial frown, which are mostly used in combination, but may be used independent from each other, too. Since a manual negator is mandatory to negate sentences, IUR is said to be a manual dominant negation language.

In chapter 3, semantic fields are introduced. IUR is compared to (i) universals that have been determined based on spoken language research; (ii) the spoken language of the Inuit, Inuktitut, to see whether the surrounding language and culture have an influence on IUR with respect to the semantic fields; and (iii) other sign languages.

The first semantic field is that of kinship. In IUR, three kinship terms have been identified: ELDER, SIBLING, and SPOUSE. This is a significantly smaller set than that of Inuktitut and than those of other sign languages. However, for many sign languages, person terms are considered kinship terms as well (e.g. the sign MAN being used for FATHER). In analysing IUR, it was found that the person signs MALE and FEMALE may be used to indicate kin, but may also be used to indicate several different relatives. Therefore, they are not analysed as kinship terms. IUR has only the sign ELDER, to refer to PARENT. This poses a challenge to Greenberg (1966), who claimed that all languages discriminate the gender of both parents. ELDER may be combined with MALE or FEMALE, but it remains unclear whether compounds should be included in the set of kinship terms. If the latter is the case, then IUR is not an exception to Greenberg’s universal claim.

The second semantic field is that of colour signs. It is highly interesting that IUR has two colour terms, but in contrast to Berlin and Kay’s (1969) hierarchy these are not BLACK and WHITE, but BLACK and RED. In fact, IUR has no sign for WHITE, nor for other colour terms. These colours can only be referred to by pointing to an object in the area that is of the intended colour.

The third field discussed is time. Universally, metaphors are used to talk about time. Very often, spatial terminology is used in temporal expressions. In English for instance, ‘the future lies ahead and the past behind’. This conception can be found in many languages across the world, also in sign languages where spatial mapping is used very
literally: metaphorical time-lines are used along which signs move. On one time-line for instance, signs referring to the future move toward the space in front of the signer, while signs related to the past move backward. The Inuit, however, perceive time as a circular event, while in Europe it is seen as being linear. Nonetheless, expressions exist in Inuktitut, in which the future lies in front and the past lies behind the speaker. Furthermore, Inuktitut has an expression in which the past lies away from the speaker, in any direction. This last phenomenon is found in IUR, too, as two signs meaning ‘long ago’ are used, moving in opposite directions. Additionally, IUR makes use of a time-line that is located in front of the signer. Signs move to the left referring to the past, and to the right referring to the future.

The last semantic field revolves around numbers. IUR uses two number variants, depending on the finger selected for ONE. One can either select the index finger or the little finger to sign ONE. This latter variant is used in enumeration, while the former is not.

Chapter 4 deals with verb agreement and classifiers. Verb agreement in sign languages is expressed in signing space, when verbs move from and to the locations associated with the arguments. This has been established in many urban sign languages, but many rural sign languages do not show this type of agreement. IUR is a language that allows verb agreement only on a subset of verbs. The same subset of non-agreeing verbs has been found in other sign languages, too. They are traditionally called plain verbs. With respect to agreeing verbs, they may agree with either subject/object arguments (agreeing verbs) or with locations (locative verbs). IUR parallels with Australian Sign Language (Auslan) with respect to (i) the proportion of verbs with respect to other parts-of-speech in the corpus data; (ii) the proportion of verbs that may take agreement; and (iii) the percentage of verbs actually showing agreement marking in the corpus data. Interestingly, IUR verbs may agree with abstract locations referring to the subject or object argument, but also with absolute locations in the environment.

Classifiers have been identified in IUR, too. These are handshapes that represent a noun class on a verbal predicate. Direct objects are represented by means of so-called handling classifiers. In IUR I identified five different forms, referring each to a different group of referents. Interestingly, one of these forms has three allomorphs, a phenomenon not previously discussed for other sign language classifiers. In IUR, it appears to be rather common, as I found an allomorphic entity classifier too. Entity classifiers represent the subject of a verb. For this classifier type, I identified eight categories.

In chapter 5, different external influences on IUR are discussed. The large geographical area in which IUR is used has led to considerable lexical variation among the different communities. This is particularly attributable to the limited amount of language contact. The Arctic climate apparently has not influenced the phonology of IUR, as the number of handshapes of IUR is similar to that of other rural sign languages used in warmer climates. Language use, on the other hand, is affected by the cold, as conversations outdoors tend to be very short.

The handshapes in IUR generally have a rather lax articulation, which is probably due to a lack of formal education. This fact might also explain the rather small sets of colour and kinship described above. Furthermore, IUR is highly context-dependent, making use of absolute pointing and often leaving arguments of verbs unspecified. The large
proportion of hearing signers has probably had some influence on the lax articulation of handshapes as well. The influence of hearing signers could also account for the high amount of borrowing from surrounding languages. Loan translations from English and Inuktitut are found, as well as mouthings from both of these languages. ASL has been the source of some lexical borrowings, which are sometimes adapted to fit IUR phonology. Of course, manual as well as non-manual gestures used in Inuit culture are also attested in IUR.

In the final chapter, the typologically unusual features of IUR are summarised. They include (i) the absence of separate lexical signs for FATHER and MOTHER, and a sign for WHITE; (ii) a morphological plural strategy – adding the non-dominant hand – that has not been described for other languages before; (iii) allowing verb agreement with abstract and absolute locations.

Moreover, the typological aspects of IUR are cross-linguistically compared to determine whether IUR parallels more with urban or with rural sign languages. It turns out that with respect to pluralisation and negation, the established patterns do not overlap with either of these sociolinguistic types. For pluralisation, much more research is needed to establish which strategies exist in the sign languages of the world. With respect to negation, Zeshan (2004a) distinguished manual dominant and non-manual dominant negation systems, and IUR is of the first type. Other languages of this type are both urban (e.g. IPSL and TİD) and rural sign languages (e.g. Kata Kolok and YSL); the sociolinguistic type thus does not overlap with the negation type.

Semantically, the small sets of colour and kinship term in IUR pattern with those of rural sign languages. Grammatically, however, IUR patterns more with urban sign languages with respect to verb agreement and entity classifiers. Since IUR shares some grammatical properties with YSL, I suggest adding a third sociolinguistic type: rural non-village sign languages. Whether this is a relevant category will only become clear when more sign languages of this type are studied and described.

Furthermore, I try to account for the typological properties of IUR. The small sets of colour and kinship terms can be explained by the context-dependency of IUR, and by the lack of formal education. The fact that IUR allows for verb agreement with abstract and absolute locations may also be grounded in the sociolinguistic situation in which IUR is used. For other sign languages with a high proportion of hearing L2 signers, this has been the explanation for the lack of verb agreement in the sign language. The number of second language signers in IUR is quite high, but per community it is not. This means that in an Inuit community, a deaf person is less frequently in contact with hearing L2 signers than for instance deaf people in Desa Kolok, where the sign language does not allow for verb agreement. Possibly, the number of L2 signers has not restricted the use of verb agreement in IUR. Still, the language contact situation with ASL may also be an underlying reason. Since there are only a few IUR signers in contact with ASL signers, there is a lack of evidence here and this should be investigated further.

Finally, this chapter provides some suggestions for further research. I urge other linguists to study IUR in more depth. Furthermore, I suggest that other researchers provide more quantitative data in order to allow for better cross-linguistic studies.