Jordanian sign language: aspects of grammar from a cross-linguistic perspective
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Summary

Jordanian Sign Language (Lughat al-Ishāra al-Urdunia, LIU) is the sign language used in Jordan. The language has several dialects. The dialect described in this dissertation is that used at a residential school for the Deaf in Salt. LIU appears to be related to other sign languages in the Middle East, but none of these have been researched extensively.

Jordan has a little over 5 million inhabitants, more than half of whom are from Palestinian descent. The official language of Jordan is Arabic, but English is used widely among educated people. The grammar and vocabulary of the written form of Arabic taught in schools, which is known as Modern Standard Arabic, is very different from the vernacular spoken in the streets.

In Arab culture, disability has been traditionally regarded as something shameful, and a punishment of God. The attitude towards disabled people has, however, improved over the last 25 years, which has made it possible for rehabilitation services to be set up. No accurate figures on the number of deaf and hard-of-hearing people in Jordan are available, but a percentage of between 0.25% and 0.3% seems realistic. This would mean that Jordan counts between 15,000 and 20,000 people with a severe to profound hearing loss. More than half of these people have a hereditary, genetic hearing impairment, caused by the high incidence of consanguineous marriages in the Arab World. Most deaf people in Jordan are involved in manual labour, as interpreter services in higher education have only recently become available. Currently, around 50% of deaf children receive primary education, but only 0.2% finishes secondary education. Still, Jordan is the leading nation in the Middle East in terms of education for the Deaf.

The lack of education of Deaf people in the past has had an influence on the way LIU has developed. Extensive use of fingerspelling, for example, is absent. There are no initialized signs or sign names in LIU. Mouthing is used by different Deaf people to different degrees, but when it is used it is derived from the vernacular and never from the written form of Arabic taught in the schools. There appears to be some influence from Arabic on the word order of LIU, but this is found mostly among more educated signers. On the other hand, common cultural gestures, of which there are many in the Arab world, have readily been integrated into LIU.

This dissertation describes selected aspects of the grammar of LIU and puts them in a wider cross-linguistic context. Its aim is to contribute to our general knowledge of sign languages in the Middle East as well as to add to our understanding about the way different grammatical structures can be expressed in different sign languages.
Because of the scarcity of research into Arab sign languages, Chapter 2 is devoted to placing LIU in its wider regional perspective, by presenting the results of a lexical comparison between different varieties of sign languages used in the Middle East. The results show that different sign language varieties are related to each other to different degrees. Based on lexical similarity scores, the sign language varieties used in Jordan and Syria may be classified as the same language, but other varieties in the region are more divergent, and should probably be considered related languages. Mutual intelligibility testing and grammatical comparisons between these varieties are needed, however, to be able to make definitive claims about the number of sign languages in the Middle East and their relation to each other.

Chapter 3 presents a brief sketch of the grammar of LIU, in order to provide a background for the description of specific aspects of grammar in later chapters. This overview includes elements from the phonology, morphology and syntax of LIU. In several areas comparisons with the structure of Arabic are made. In general, the influence of Arabic on LIU seems to be limited to word order and mouthings.

Chapter 4 deals with negation in LIU. Negation in sign languages can be expressed by negative signs produced on the hands (manually) as well as by means of head movements and facial expressions (non-manually). In most sign languages described to date negation is expressed mainly non-manually, often by means of a headshake, while manual negative signs are optional. In contrast, LIU can be classified as a manual dominant language. This implies that it has a number of manual negative signs, which are the obligatory markers of negation, whereas non-manual negative markers are optional. This pattern is uncommon cross-linguistically.

Chapter 5 describes possessive constructions in LIU. There are two main types of possessive constructions. The first type involves the sign SELF, which occurs as a possessive pronoun in attributive possessive constructions (e.g. “his book”) and also with the meaning “belong” in predicative possessive constructions (e.g. “The book belongs to John.”). The second type involves the sign EXIST, which can be translated as “have”. The use of an existential marker in possessive constructions is common in both spoken and sign languages. The signs SELF and EXIST can also be used in other contexts in LIU and can have emphatic meaning. In general, there are striking similarities between possessive constructions across different sign languages and LIU fits well into the patterns described for many other sign languages.

Chapter 6 analyzes manual simultaneity in LIU, a phenomenon which is especially common in younger LIU signers. There are several types of constructions in which the two hands form different signs simultaneously. A phonological rule restricting the movement of the two hands in
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simultaneous constructions is proposed. According to this rule manual simultaneity can only take place when at least one of the hands makes no lexically specified movement, or when the movement of the two hands is symmetrical. It is suggested that this rule may turn out to be universal for sign languages. Although all the examples presented from LIU adhere to this phonological rule, LIU appears to allow for a wider range of simultaneous constructions than other sign languages previously described.

Manual simultaneity appears to have different functions, although these are not always completely clear. Thus, simultaneity can be iconic in the sense that two things happening at the same time are represented on different hands. It can also show that two signs belong together, for example when a signer simultaneously articulates the sign for an entity on one hand while localizing that entity by means of a pointing sign on the other hand. In complex phrases, simultaneity may be used to clarify the syntactic structure, by showing which elements in the sentence belong together. Other functional explanations that have been suggested for simultaneity in other sign languages, such as foregrounded information being expressed on the dominant hand and backgrounded information on the non-dominant hand, do not seem to hold true in LIU. In general, simultaneity in LIU has many characteristics in common with other sign languages, both in form and function, but also has a few complex structures that appear unique to this language.

Chapter 7 deals with the use of signing perspective in narrative discourse. Signers can choose to tell a story from a ‘neutral’ perspective as narrator, or they can choose to become, as it were, part of a story by expressing the perspective of one or more of the characters in the story. Different sign languages appear to differ in the relative predominance of either character or narrator perspective.

LIU story-tellers differ in their use of perspective, although the more skilled story-tellers predominantly use character perspective. These signers identify with different characters in the story, frequently switching from one character to another. These switches are not normally marked by means of body-shift, as is common in many Western sign languages, but by lexically introducing the character whose perspective is taken. In addition, non-manuals play an important role in this process. The introduction of character perspective by means of lexical signs has also been described for a few other non-Western sign languages.

Spatial lay-outs, which indicate where a character in a story is localized, do not appear to be as important or consistent in LIU as in most Western sign languages. Pointing to a location in space to establish spatial relationships is relatively uncommon in LIU narratives, and when a signer chooses to explicitly localize the characters in a story, this is not always
done consistently. This inconsistency may be linked to the fact that character perspective is introduced lexically. Therefore, the identification of the character whose perspective the signer has taken on is not dependent on the spatial set-up.

Signers can also express multiple perspectives simultaneously. In the LIU narratives some extremely complex constructions have been found, in which signers express up to three different perspectives simultaneously. Such complex constructions are usually considered a hallmark of older sign languages, whereas the predominant use of character perspective has been associated with younger sign languages. In the area of perspective, then, LIU appears to have characteristics of both an older and a younger sign language.

Chapter 8 puts the results from the previous chapters in a broader perspective. In particular, it compares the characteristics of LIU with those of other sign languages, focusing on the use of space, non-manuals and the use of simultaneity. An important question that is addressed in this context is in how far the age of a sign language can be deduced from grammatical properties of the language. It appears that some of the similarities between the grammars of different, unrelated sign languages may be due to the fact that sign languages in general are relatively young languages. It is less obvious, however, whether grammatical differences between sign languages are also related to age differences, as has been suggested by some researchers. Young sign languages are expected to show less structural complexity, more iconicity, and more use of character perspective than older sign languages. Some aspects of LIU grammar, however, suggest that the idea of a continuum in the development of grammatical structures may need to be revised. On the one hand, the fact that LIU signers use a great deal of character perspective, and are not always consistent in spatial set-ups, may support the idea that LIU is a young sign language. On the other hand, signers also use complex simultaneous constructions and multiple-perspective constructions, that is, grammatical features which are expected to occur in older sign languages. Research into village sign languages similarly shows that the relationship between language age and grammatical properties is not as clear-cut as sometimes assumed. Rather, it seems that different languages follow different developmental paths. More research into non-Western sign languages, both urban and village sign languages, is needed, however, to be able to make typologically relevant claims about sign language grammar and the way it develops.