Introduction

Presentation

A Grammar of Italian Sign Language (LIS) is a comprehensive presentation of the grammatical properties of LIS. It has been conceived as a tool for students, teachers, interpreters, the Deaf community, researchers, linguists and whoever is interested in the study of LIS.

It is one output of the Horizon 2020 SIGN-HUB project and it follows the *SignGram Blueprint*, the first comprehensive guide to sign language grammar description. The *SignGram Blueprint* (link `https://www.degruyter.com/view/product/467598`), is a Manual guiding language specialists and linguists writing reference grammars of sign languages. It is the output of the *SignGram* COST Action "Unraveling the grammars of European sign languages: pathways to full citizenship of deaf signers and to the protection of their linguistics heritage", Action IS1006 (2011-2015), it has been implemented on the SIGN-HUB platform and is available in open access.

Within the SIGN-HUB project, several grammars have been created for other sign languages (Catalan SL, Dutch SL, French SL, German SL, Spanish SL, Turkish SL) in addition to this one, and the goal is that further sign languages will join the repository with new grammar descriptions.

A Grammar of Italian Sign Language is composed of a Table of Contents and six Parts: Part 1 is devoted to introducing the social and historical background in which the language has developed, and the remaining five Parts cover the main properties of Phonology, Lexicon, Morphology, Syntax and Pragmatics.

Thanks to the electronic format of the grammar, text and videos are highly interconnected, therefore this is not a traditional book, but a hybrid product which is designed to fit its content, namely, the description of a visual language. After the introduction, the reader will find a list of abbreviations and conventions used for glossing the examples, including the ones that are linked to a video.

In what follows, we first explain the motivation that led us to write a digital grammar of LIS, we then provide information on the methodological choices guiding the writing as well as indications on how the grammar is composed and how it can be used. We conclude the introduction by presenting SIGN-HUB, the wider project that enabled the realisation of the LIS grammar, together with other six sign language grammars.

Goals and coverage

Despite the great advances in sign language research registered in the last decades in Italy (and abroad), a comprehensive description of the grammar of LIS is still lacking.

The lack of a complete descriptive grammar has negative effects on different domains of the life and education of the Deaf community. A direct drawback is the lack of tools that enable sign language teachers to provide rich and detailed information on LIS to deaf students, to students learning LIS as a second language, but also to professionals training to become interpreters. This lack also affects researchers investigating LIS and its typological relations to other spoken and sign languages. Moreover, a detailed description of the LIS grammar will favour the development of diagnostic tests able to assess language impairment and language pathologies, which in turn can help therapists who need to assess language competence.

This grammar incorporates the results of previous research and adds new research on some topics, however, it is by no means a complete description of LIS. Some sections are void of content, either because there is not enough research or because the specific topic does not apply to the LIS grammar. In general, *A Grammar of LIS* contains sections and topics that have received more attention and others that need to be further investigated and for which only an initial description is available. Moreover, not all examples are linked to a video. *A Grammar of LIS* has, however, many visuals: 1,541 video examples and 712 still images.

Far from being a final product, this grammar aims at encouraging other researchers and language professionals to take up the challenge of enriching it in a collective effort, thus contributing to advances in the personal, social and political sphere of the Deaf (and hearing) community.

Access to the *Grammar* requires a general knowledge about grammar and grammatical terminology, but basic concepts are explained in a glossary and in the text as well. The *Grammar* intends to be accessible to a general reader, in particular through the extensive use of visual examples (videos and pictures), which the digital format of the grammar allows.

In this sense, as a digital and on-line product, *A Grammar of LIS* radically differs from other, more traditional grammars since it provides hundreds of visual examples.

Methodological choices

The grammar has been written by a team of senior and junior researchers (six hearing and one deaf, five women and two men) at Ca' Foscari University of Venice and at the University of Milan-Bicocca with the essential contribution of seven Deaf consultants participating to the discussion of the data and the making of the visual examples. The writing has been accomplished over 4 years, thanks to the SIGN-HUB project.

The authors have a background in formal linguistics. While the theory has guided the description of the linguistic phenomena contained in the grammar, the language employed to describe them is not technical, as the intended users of this grammar are not (only) professionals working in the field of linguistics. However, as we mentioned, we assume familiarity with basic notions and grammatical concepts specific to sign languages.

Although the grammar has many authors, we made an effort to adopt a homogenous style. Together with the authors of the sign language grammars created within the SIGN-HUB project (see below), we agreed on some guidelines. As a general rule, we tried to write concrete, simple and easy to read descriptions. For example, we agreed on the use of the term 'sign' for the lexical unit of LIS, except for linear order facts and some prosodic and morphological descriptions where the expressions 'prosodic word', 'word order' and 'word internal' phenomena are employed. The term 'language channel' has been preferred to 'language modality' to avoid confusion with the grammatical term; 'spoken languages' has been preferred to 'oral languages'; while 'sign languages' has been used rather than 'signed languages'.

In writing *A Grammar of LIS*, we avoided to define linguistic terms, as they are present in the glossary at the end of the grammar, and to compare the phenomena observed in LIS with those present in other sign or spoken languages, as this is usually found in a Handbook, not in a grammar.

The structure of the Table of Contents follows the *SignGram Blueprint*, output of the Cost Action *SignGram* project, a tool for guiding language specialists writing reference grammars of sign languages. The adoption of the same structure and style for the seven sign language grammars produced within the SIGN-HUB project has the welcome outcome of allowing typological comparative studies of sign language grammars and encouraging fruitful contaminations. However, not all grammars contain the same amount of grammatical description. This is due to different reasons: (i) the numerosity of the team working on the task, (ii) the absence/presence of previous studies investigating grammatical phenomena, (iii) the impossibility to collect data for a set of properties or the lack of sufficient information to write a description of a section, (iv) some sections or subsections that had been thought to hold for some sign languages might not be relevant for all of them.

A Grammar of LIS, as all sign language grammars produced within the SIGN-HUB project, is written in English. This was a requirement of the European Union, which funded the project. While the English version of *A Grammar of LIS* allows foreign Deaf and hearing students, teachers, interpreters and researchers to access it, it may be an obstacle for Italian users. For this reason, the authors are planning to produce an Italian version of the present grammar.

How to use the grammar

Each Part of the grammar contains an introduction explaining the function of the linguistic component under investigation (e.g. Phonology) and the organisation of the Part. Each Part is composed of chapters organised in sections and subsections. Information on authorship, data and consultants is reported at the end of each chapter. At the end of the grammar, the reader can find: (i) an appendix containing the complete list of LIS handshapes and the labels we used to refer to them, (ii) a complete list of references to previous works in the literature on which the grammar is based, and (iii) a glossary of grammatical terms explaining basic concepts that are taken for granted in the text.

Typically, if there is a concept/term that is mentioned but not described in a section, an indication connects it to the section where it is explained. In other cases, the section where some properties (for example, lexical) of a phenomenon are discussed is linked to another section of the grammar where other properties (for instance, syntactical) of that phenomenon are addressed. This is also the reason why many topics are addressed and described in different parts of the grammar. Many of them have, in fact, clear relations to differ-

ent domains or can be described differently depending on what one aims at observing: its phonological (Phonology) or lexical description (Lexicon), its morphological modification (Morphology), its syntactic distribution in the sentence (Syntax), its use in the discourse and speech context (Pragmatics). Just to provide an example, negation can be observed from the point of view of the negative words employed to produce a negative sentence (Lexicon), their internal composition and modification (Morphology), or their distribution in the sentence (Syntax).

When relevant, information about the data gathered in order to produce the description is found at the end of the chapter. This is important because it might provide information about the particular variety represented in the description. Variation within the LIS community is well-known, but hardly studied, so this piece of information might help identify on which variation certain generalisations have been drawn.

We follow the decision taken in the *SignGram Blueprint* to devote an independent part to Pragmatics on an equal footing with other grammar components to promote the description and analysis of so far understudied domains of LIS grammar addressing, among other issues, discourse structure, figurative meaning, and communicative interaction. The reader may be surprised not to find a part on Semantics. However, the meaning component is not neglected in the grammar. It is discussed whenever the form that is associated to a specific semantic phenomenon is presented. For example, we discuss the meaning of subordinate clauses when we discuss their form, and not in a separate section.

The SIGN-HUB project

A Grammar of Italian Sign Language (LIS) is an output of *The SIGN-HUB project: Preserving, researching and fostering the linguistic, historical and cultural heritage of European Deaf signing communities with an integral resource* funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 (2016-2020).

The project involved ten teams from seven countries (France, Germany, Israel, Italy, The Netherlands, Spain and Turkey) and has been designed by a European research consortium to provide an innovative and inclusive resource hub for the linguistic, historical and cultural documentation of the Deaf communities' heritage and for sign language assessment in clinical intervention and school settings.

To this end, we created an open state-of-the-art digital platform with customised accessible interfaces. The project initially fed the platform with core content in the following domains, expandable in

the future to other sign languages: (i) digital grammars of seven sign languages (Catalan SL, Dutch SL, French SL, German SL, Italian SL, Spanish SL, Turkish SL), (ii) an interactive digital atlas of linguistic structures of the world's sign languages, (iii) online sign language assessment instruments and clinical intervention, and (iv) the first digital archive of life narratives by elderly signers, subtitled and partially annotated for linguistic properties.

These components, made available for the first time through a centralised platform to specialists and to the general public, should (i) help explore and value the identity and the cultural, historical, and linguistic assets of Deaf signing communities, (ii) advance linguistic knowledge on the natural languages of the Deaf, and (iii) impact on the diagnosis of language deficits within these minorities.

The digital platform also contains a 40-minute documentary movie *We were there - we are here* including short fragments from the 137 interviews conducted in the context of the project, as well as fragments from previously existing materials (collected in France and Israel). The elderly signers coming from 7 countries (France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Spain, Turkey and the Netherlands) share their experiences from the past concerning personal relationships, work, education and historical events.

An edited volume *Our lives – our stories: Life experiences of elderly Deaf signers* will soon be published by De Gruyter Mouton (expected publication date January 2021). The volume, authored by SIGN-HUB members based on information collected during the interviews and by researchers from outside the project, offers a glimpse on the life experiences of Deaf elderly signers and on the social, political, historical and educational events characterising the 20th century in different countries. For more information on the SIGN-HUB project, the reader can visit the international (www.sign-hub.eu) or national (www.sign-hub.it) website of the project.

We hope that the seven sign language grammars freely accessible to the general public will contribute to a deeper understanding and knowledge of sign languages boosting the description and analysis of more sign languages of the world. We particularly hope that *A Grammar of Italian Sign Language* will inspire a more robust linguistic awareness in the Italian Deaf community, which will support the diffusion of their language and culture on the national territory. Hopefully, this will promote a deeper consciousness towards its neglected social and political rights and will contribute to the recognition of LIS.