1 GENERAL BACKGROUND

1.1 Sign linguistics

Until the beginning of the 1960's linguists paid virtually no attention to the visual-gestural languages of Deaf people. Sign languages were considered by structural theories of language as non-linguistic phenomena (Stokoe 1960, Stokoe et al. 1965).

Structural linguistics gave the use of voice and hearing the status of an inherent characteristic of language, and consequently, focused especially on the phonological level of analysis (Sapir 1921, Bloomfield 1933, Jakobson & Halle 1956, Hockett 1974, Saussure 1989). Most structural scholars also established differences between the digital nature of phonological systems of spoken languages, and the analogous (i.e. non-digital) nature of the other signals accompanying speech, such as prosody (especially frequency and volume), body movements, facial expressions and manual gestures. Although it was recognised that this group of signals transmitted important information, they were considered as paralinguistic, a kind of parallel, non-essential and context-motivated support of speech (McNeill 1992).

In that context, the sign languages of the Deaf were not considered natural languages. Even though they seemed to follow rules, as any other semiotic code, they apparently lacked duality of patterning (Stokoe 1960, Klima & Bellugi 1979). Therefore, scholars claimed that sign languages could not be considered as linguistic phenomena, but as belonging to another kind of semiotic code.

During the second half of the 20th century, the new computational technology attempted to create intelligent machines. This implied an increasing interest in the syntax of languages and in the way the brain processes linguistic information. Within this context, the sciences of language focused on syntax and psycholinguistics rather than on phonology. This change of scope created an adequate theoretical environment to consider the sign languages of the Deaf as an alternative form through which human language could be manifested (Klima & Bellugi 1979, Supalla 1982, Behares 1997).

In 1960 William Stokoe, a researcher at Gallaudet College in the United States, proposed a method that made it possible to transcribe the internal structure of the American Sign Language (ASL) signs. The method showed signs as being morphological units composed of three simultaneous formal features without meaning: the handshape, the place occupied by the hand and the activity of the hand.[1] Stokoe offered a discrete inventory of handshapes, spatial locations and movements, which he considered constituted the list of phonological[2] features of ASL.

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1 Bébian, a French researcher who lived in the 18th century, developed a notation system for French Sign Language. His system, however, did not receive the attention of later scholars (Fischer 1995).
2 Stokoe did not use the term phonology; he considered it inadequate for describing a visual language. Instead, he proposed the word *cherology* from the Greek work for hand, *cheros* (Stokoe 1960). However, scholars agree to use the traditional aural-based linguistic terminology in the description of sign languages. See Liddell & Johnson (1989) for details.

Stokoe's transcription system was basically a writing system. By reducing the enormous amount of perceived visual signals to a list of distinctive units, his system opened the way to discovering underlying structures.[3] ASL (just as any other sign language) appears to have a level of minimal units without meaning, i.e. it can be considered a doubly articulated code.

Subsequently, many other scholars from the US as well as from European universities adopted Stokoe's ideas and continued the analysis with a variety of data. The studies claimed that sign languages had the same basic internal organisation as that described for spoken languages. The differences observed between the two were explained as a consequence of the different ways in which they are manifested (Battison 1978, Klima & Bellugi 1979, Boyes-Braem 1995).

During the 1980's, new research groups began further work on sign language linguistics in other parts of the world, and as a result research diversified enormously with data that were being described at every level of analysis.[4] Other fields that received broad attention were the psycholinguistics of sign languages (in particular the acquisition by Deaf children and information-processing in visual-gestural languages), the sociolinguistics of the Deaf communities and sign language transcription. The bibliography of sign linguistics, more than 40 years after Stokoe's early work, contains thousands of references, in more than 20 languages and deals with almost 100 sign languages from all over the world (see http://www.sign-lang.uni-hamburg.de/BibWeb/).

1.2 An anthropological conception of deafness

It can be claimed that during the last two centuries deafness has been mainly conceived as a sickness, and Deaf people themselves as being sick (cf. Lane et al. 1996). The social and pedagogical discourses on deafness have created a negative conception that also stigmatises sign languages as pathological phenomena (Sánchez 1990, Behares 1997, Johnson 1997). However, research in this field initiated by Stokoe offers strong arguments against such conceptions: the human capability of language simply overcomes the lack of the hearing sense and manifests itself through a different but equally powerful channel, vision.

If sign languages can be considered natural languages, Deaf people who use sign languages can also be seen as a special "speech", and/or cultural minority (Johnson et al. 1989, Sacks 1990, Johnson 1994). This idea was the beginning of a new conception of deafness, an anthropological one, which promotes deep changes in the relationships between Deaf and hearing people all over the world (WFD 1993, Skliar 2000).

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3 Some authors consider the development of writing systems as a necessary first step to the metalinguistic thought in spoken languages. In that sense, the linguistics of spoken languages could be also seen as a consequence of the creation of an efficient writing system (cf. Behares 1997, Haarmann 1998, Armstrong 1999).

4 A detailed account of the relevant works in all of these fields is offered by Boyes-Braem (1995).

1.3 Iconicity and recent tendencies of change in sign linguistics

A considerable effort has been made by sign linguists to prove that sign languages are natural languages (cf. Klima & Bellugi 1979, Boyes-Braem 1995, Lane et al. 1996). With this aim in mind, many research projects have focused on the structural similarities between spoken and sign languages (cf. Armstrong 1999, Stokoe & Marschark 1999). These works constitute a research effort whose goals are at the same time scientific and ideological: constructing a discourse about deafness as an anthropological phenomenon. This has direct implications for the struggle for Deaf peoples' human rights (WFD 1993, Johnson 1997, Jokkinen 1999, Skliar 2000).

The influence of sign linguistics research on the life of the Deaf community has had, paradoxically, a negative impact on the linguistic field itself: some topics have been avoided, or their importance minimised, because their discussion would lead to a serious revision of what has been assumed about the linguistic nature of sign languages. That is particularly true about the *iconicity* question, a topic that bears special implications for the analysis of classifiers, the signs I will be discussing in this study.

1.3.1 Iconicity

Iconicity means resemblance between a meaning and the physical signals used to codify and communicate that meaning. Scholars have used this concept broadly since the classical Peircean classification (Noeth 2000), which recognises three basic categories of semiotic signals: symbols, deictics and icons. In *symbols*, the relationship between form and meaning is arbitrary. LSV signs as AFRICA (Figure 5 in Chapter 2) and VACATIONS (Figure 6 in Chapter 2) are examples of symbols. In *deictic***s**, there is an indirect relationship between form and meaning, because the form of the sign functions as an instruction to search for the meaning in the environment. LSV pronouns (Figure 57 in Chapter 5), for instance, are deictics. And finally, *icons* are signs whose forms resemble what they signify.

In spoken languages most words are classified as symbols, because their forms apparently[5] lack a motivated relationship to their meanings. Only a small percentage of the words are indexes or icons (Pulleyblank 1986). The mainstream of linguistic theories holds arbitrariness to be an essential property of language (cf. Sapir 1921, Gensini 1995). In sign languages, however, iconicity is somehow present in most of the lexical entries (Taub 2001). This difference has led many scholars to minimise the importance of iconicity in sign languages (Armstrong 1999, Liddell 2000a, Taub 2001). The idea underlying that attitude is clear: if sign languages are natural languages, they should have the same essential characteristics that spoken languages have, i.e., they cannot be mostly iconic.

An old philosophical problem underlies the discussion about iconicity and arbitrariness, notably: how does language represent reality? And correspondingly, how is reality represented by language? (Simone 1995:153). According to the Aristotelian tradition (cf. Radman 1997), there is a universal intellectual substance common to every person, but that substance is not reflected in the forms of the words, which vary arbitrarily from language to language: there is a reciprocal indifference between form and meaning (Gensini 1995:4-5). Although formal linguistics (Sapir 1921, Saussure 1989) does not subscribe to

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5   The reason why I am using this adverb will become apparent some paragraphs below.

the Aristotelian position about a pre-formed thought, it conceives of languages as arbitrary systems. Both faces of the linguistic sign (signifier and significant) shape their own limits on the sound and conceptual substances. Such limits are not rational, but historically and socially defined (Saussure 1989, Gensini 1995).

Duality of patterning, an essential characteristic of language (Martinet 1980; see also Section 4.1.1 of this book), has been linked to arbitrariness (Pulleyblank 1986): the morphological level is built on the phonological system, whose units are organised without restrictions imposed by the semantic level (Hockett 1978:275). Until recently (cf. Givón 1984, Haiman 1985), this theoretical principle has prevented any attempt to give iconicity an appropriate linguistic interpretation (Macken et al. 1993). An entire linguistic tradition has held that any semiotic phenomenon considered iconic must necessarily be non-linguistic (Deuchar 1990:170).

1.3.2 First approaches to iconicity and sign languages

During the first two decades of sign linguistics (from the beginning of the 1960's until the middle of the 1980's), scholars assumed at least three theoretical positions with respect to iconicity in sign languages:

Iconicity provides evidence that spoken and sign languages have a different semiotic nature. The first theoretical position states that the formalist theories of language cannot account for iconicity (DeMatteo 1977, Mandel 1977). The main argument used by the scholars suscribing to this idea is that sign languages have a different semiotic nature as compared to spoken languages: sign systems have visual deep structures, and the production and comprehension of iconicity depend on analogies to the reality being represented (DeMatteo 1977; cf. also Ebbinghaus & Heßmann 1991).

Iconicity is important in both spoken and sign languages, but to different degrees and in different ways. There is plenty of psycholinguistic evidence proving that sign and spoken languages are processed by the same cognitive mechanism. That also proves that both kinds of systems have similar structures. Current theories cannot explain the role played by iconicity in both kinds of languages, but this is precisely a failure of the theories, which would have to be modified to account for it (Armstrong 1986, 1988, 1999, Armstrong et al. 1995).

The iconicity of signs is not as important as believed. Some authors think that iconicity does not have structural implications for sign languages. The apparently pervasive presence of iconicity in sign languages is a mere consequence of their visual nature: a spoken language does not exploit iconicity to create new lexical units, simply because few entities in the world offer, to our perception, a sound dimension. Our visual system, on the contrary, can perceive a visual dimension to all the physical entities in the environment, a fact that sign languages richly exploit, but only as a resource to coin new signs (cf. Supalla 1978, Taub 2001). This is discussed in many articles. There are at least five main arguments for defending the idea of iconicity as a minor characteristic of sign languages (Deuchar 1990):

a) **Only a certain part of the lexicon of a sign language is iconic.** Woll (1984) locates the percentage at around 40%.

b) **Iconicity diminishes and tends to disappear after the prolonged use of a sign** (Hoemann 1975, Klima & Bellugi 1979, Morford et al. 1995).

c) **Iconicity is of no psychological importance.** This refers, on the one hand, to some research on language acquisition by deaf children: the iconicity of a sign, it is claimed, does not facilitate its acquisition (Kantor 1980, Newport & Meier 1987, Morford et al. 1995); on the other hand, tests of cognitive processing of signs by hearing non-signers conclude that even iconic signs are processed by means of formal parameters (like handshape or movement) without any apparent utilisation of the existing form-meaning relationship (Klima & Bellugi 1979, Deuchar 1990).

d) **Iconicity is not a binary concept:** The presence of iconicity does not exclude the presence of arbitrariness or vice versa (Mandel 1977, Deuchar 1990, Blanke 1998).

e) **The form of iconic signs is not predetermined:** There are different "degrees" and kinds of iconicity (see, for instance, Mandel 1977, Deuchar 1990, Morford et al. 1995, Sutton-Spence & Woll 1999).

1.3.3 Recent perspectives on the iconicity question

Recently, an increasing number of scholars (Cogill 1999, Liddell 2000a, Taub 2001) have called into question the concept of iconicity of the mainstream of sign linguistics. They claim that iconicity should be incorporated as a component of the grammars of sign languages, as this incorporation could explain the production and comprehension of many sign phenomena until now not well understood.

These surveys are based on an extensive research program initiated in the 1980's (cf. Haiman 1985) arguing that iconicity is present not only on the lexical level, as has been generally assumed, but at every level of analysis. Iconicity can no longer be regarded as a simple relationship of resemblance between the form and the meaning of a linguistic sign, but rather as a complex mechanism using the phonetic resources to build analogical images of the perceived world (Taub 2001:20). The philosophy of language has provided important arguments in favour of this point. One is the classification, also developed by Peirce, of two kinds of iconic signification: *images*, which are signs showing a formal resemblance to their referents; and *diagrams*, sets of signs whose mutual interrelations reflect the interrelations among their referents. The Saussurean conception of iconicity is restricted to images: in effect, this kind of iconic signs does not play important roles in spoken languages. Diagrams, however, can explain many morphological, syntactical and discourse phenomena, which are deeply influenced by the perceived reality (Simone 1995:58, Taub 2001:36). Following this classification, many universal linguistic structures have been interpreted as iconic. Some examples of this are:

a) The correspondence between the quantity of meaningful units contained in a word and the number of syllables of such a word: the larger the volume of information, the larger the number of syllables (Givón 1984:49, Pietrosemoli 1991:36).

b) The tendency shown by morphemes of number to be incorporated into the nominal roots. This is another universal iconic characteristic, also related to the morphological level, that spoken languages share. This tendency is an iconic

phenomenon that is perceptually motivated: morphemes of number codify variations in the number of entities we observe, and the entities we observe are typologically codified as names. Putting together these two kinds of information is considered iconic (Givón 1984:39-40). In this sense, iconicity is pervasively present in the words of spoken languages.

c) Research on metaphors has revealed the importance of these iconically based linguistic structures for the cognitive processing of language (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, Brennan 1990). Similar examples, belonging to other levels of analysis, can be found in the works of Haiman (1985), Simone (1995) and Taub (2001).

1.3.4 Sign classifiers and iconicity

The study of sign classifiers implies a strong confrontation with the iconicity question. These signs adapt their forms to make analogue-like representations of the actions and forms of entities, and because of that, classifiers can adopt an enormous variety of forms. The most plausible explanation for the ability of signers to understand each classifier occurrence seems to be that iconicity plays a determining role in the use of these signs (Schick 1990a, Johnston & Schembri 1999, Liddell 2000a). As will be argued in Chapters 5 and 6 of this book, iconicity plays a fundamental role in the production and comprehension of many LSV signs. Classifiers are just part of that general phenomenon.

This fact is closely related to the reported high levels of mutual intelligibility between users of different sign languages (Taub 2001). Every sign language has developed its own vocabulary, and the abundant lexical differences among these languages make it necessary to produce dictionaries (cf. Boyes-Braem 1995). Nevertheless, Deaf signers from all over the world claim to be able to communicate with each other despite the barrier imposed by lexical differences (Taub 2001). The use of classifiers might partially explain this claimed transparency of meaning.

Recent studies on classifiers try to describe these signs with the help of new theoretical tools and show a new direction in sign linguistics: the study of the specific characteristics of sign languages, i.e. the study of what makes these systems different from spoken languages. Sign linguistics has already proved that sign languages are natural languages, in the same way as spoken languages are. Now the priority seems to be on research on the

1.4 Venezuela

1.4.1 General information about the country

Venezuela is located in South America. It borders Colombia to the west and southwest, Brazil to the south and southeast, Guyana to the east, and the Caribbean Sea to the north. The country covers an area of 912,050 km^2. According to the figures of the last census (conducted in 2001), Venezuela has a population of approximately 26,000,000 inhabitants.[6]

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6 These figures are published on the website of the Instituto Nacional de Estadística, República Bolivariana de Venezuela, http://www.ine.gov.ve/ine/indexinepoblacion/distribucion.asp (last visit made in July 2004).

Figure 1

1.4.2 Languages in Venezuela

When the Spanish conquerors arrived in the territory during the last two years of the 15th century, Venezuela was the home to more than 100 native cultures. The European conquest led to the extinction of more than 70 of these cultures. Now there are only around 30 Native American tribes in the country (Granados 1998). The modern Venezuelan is ethnically and culturally a mixture of the different ethnic groups (Spanish, Sub-Saharan African and Native American) that were brought together under Spanish colonial rule during three centuries. Since the end of the 19th century, this mixed population received new immigrants from Europe (mainly Spanish, Italian and Portuguese), the Middle East and China.

The country is overwhelmingly monolingual Spanish-speaking (Spanish is the official language). However, a small percentage of the country's inhabitants are bilingual (Spanish and one other language) or monolingual users of languages other than Spanish. Around 315,000 people speak Native American languages as mother tongues (Granados 1998); and a few thousand immigrants speak their native languages (see Alvarez et al. 1992). Italian, Arabic, Portuguese and Cantonese are among the foreign languages more widely spoken.

Until now, there have been no studies on the role of LSV in the linguistic make-up of the country. Probably, it is safe to assume that this sign language is also one of the most important minority languages used in Venezuela.

1.5 The Venezuelan Deaf community

1.5.1 The concept of Deafness as used in this book

Deafness, as understood in this study, is not defined only by the clinical criterion of an either partial or total loss of the sense of hearing. A Deaf person (written with a capital "D") is someone who also uses a sign language as his/her main communication means (cf. Padden 1988, WFD 1993, Schmaling 2000).

In Venezuela, the sole circumstance of the loss of hearing does not play a determining role for a person to become a member of the Deaf community. This community is specifically defined as a linguistic community, using LSV. That includes many hearing people as well: those who are fluent in LSV and are integrated into the life of the community (Pietrosemoli 1991, Domínguez 1996).

1.5.2 Deaf people in Venezuela

There is no precise information about the number of Deaf people in Venezuela. Going by the international standards, about 20 in every 10,000 children (0.2%) suffer from severe or moderate hearing loss in both ears (cf. Schmaling 2000). This percentage of the population cannot acquire a spoken language naturally. Using these figures, the Deaf population in Venezuela could be estimated at around 50,000 people, among a total population of some 26,000,000.

However, this figure does not tally with other available data. In 1997, the chairwoman of Fevensor (the Venezuelan National Federation of the Deaf) calculated the number to be around 9,000 people; this figure being the number of people affiliated to local associations (personal communication with Fevensor's chairwoman, C. Morán de Poleo, in Caracas, November 1997). Many Venezuelan Deaf people (especially the young Deaf) are not affiliated to the associations even though they regularly attend the activities organised by local associations. Therefore, the figure could be higher. Four years later, in 2001, Fevensor calculated the number of the Deaf population in Venezuela at between 300,000 and 600,000. Fevensor claims that the international data quoted above (20 children per each 10,000 births) are for developed countries and cannot be applied to countries like Venezuela, because the distribution of the Deaf population is not the same in developed and developing countries: 80% of Deaf people live in developing countries as compared to only 20% in developed countries. Fevensor bases its arguments on studies provided by the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD; personal communication with executives of Fevensor in Caracas, March 2001). Interestingly, Schmaling (2000:11-12), reports numbers for the Deaf population in Nigeria similar to those calculated by Fevensor for Venezuela. Schmaling also makes reference to information provided by the WFD (cf. WFD 1993).

According to information from the Ministry of Education, 2,827 children attended the 50 public schools for the Deaf in the country in 1996 (Bravo & Hermoso 1996). If we follow the statistics about Venezuelan educational standards, children attending basic schools constitute around 20% of the general population (Bravo & Hermoso 1996). This means that deaf children could theoretically constitute at least 20% of the general Deaf population of the country. If that were correct, the total Deaf population could be estimated at about 15,000 people.

It becomes evident that an accurate census for the Venezuelan Deaf population is urgently needed.

The Venezuelan Deaf community is organised into regional associations, many of which have a religious orientation. The first Venezuelan association of the Deaf (*Asociación de Sordomudos de Caracas*) was founded in Caracas, the capital city, in 1950. In the following years other associations were founded in the country's main cities.

A unique characteristic of Deaf communities is that their members usually do not acquire the sign language from their families or their immediate social environments. As many surveys report, approximately 95% of deaf children have hearing parents[7] (cf. Neidle et al. 2000, Schmaling 2000), which means they have to acquire sign language from Deaf people outside the family. In Venezuela, the educational setting (schools and some baby-nursery programmes) is supposed to provide the environment for sign language acquisition (Anzola 1996, Oviedo 1996b, Morales 2001b).

1.6 Venezuelan Sign Language: LSV

The spread of Venezuelan Deaf people means that there are some lexical differences between the sign language varieties used in the main cities of the country. However, LSV users declare that there are no significant comprehension problems deriving from lexical differences. Because of this, it is accepted, in principle, that there is a general sign language throughout the country. No studies have corroborated such a claim so far, but LSV researchers assume it as a fact (Pietrosemoli 1991, Anzola 1996, Domínguez 1996, Oviedo 1996).

Before 1989, sign language in Venezuela was variously called: *lenguaje gestual* ("gestural language"), *lenguaje gestual venezolano* ("Venezuelan gestural language"), s*eñas venezolanas* ("Venezuelan signs"), *lengua manual* ("hand language") or *mímica* ("mimicry") (Fundaprosordo 1982, Sánchez 1987a). The name being used here, *Lengua de Señas Venezolana*, was initially adopted in 1989, in one of the first research reports made on this language (Pietrosemoli 1989a). Interestingly, the coinage is common among Hispanic American scholars for the designation of local sign languages (see Behares et al. 1988, Massone 1993, Fridman 1996, Mejía 1996).

The Venezuelan hearing community, especially in academic discourse, has broadly adopted the name LSV; since 1999, Fevensor has used this name in all public documents (see Fevensor 1999). The name LSV is also used in the new constitution of the country (cf. Garay 2000). However, the Deaf community itself rarely uses this name. They designate their own language with a sign (Figure 71A in Chapter 5) that is normally glossed as SIGN, TO-SIGN or TO-MAKE-SIGNS.[8]

LSV has been officially recognised and given the status of the language of the Deaf community. The new constitution dedicates two articles to the Deaf community and their language: Article 81 states that Deaf people have the right to use LSV, and article 101

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7   This is the percentage quoted for the U.S. but the situation seems to be similar in Venezuela, if we follow the few studies made on this subject (cf. Anzola 1996).

8   Some young people who attend or have attended schools for the Deaf use the fingerspelling L-S-V for naming their sign language.

states that they have the right to access to information (through incorporated subtitles or simultaneous translation of TV programs, for instance). The inclusion of both articles in the constitutional text was reached after a long campaign by Fevensor, which included public demonstrations and months of continuous lobbying in the national congress (Morán de Poleo 2000).

1.6.1 Schools for the Deaf in Venezuela and the origins of LSV

There are no historical documents on the origin of LSV. Older Deaf people from Caracas, who founded the *Asociación de Sordomudos de Caracas*, provide the main source of information. They claim[9] that the beginning of the sign system that later became LSV can be traced to the *Instituto Venezolano de Ciegos y Sordomudos* ("Venezuelan Institute for the Blind and the Deaf and Dumb") that pioneered the education of Venezuelan Deaf children in 1935.[10] Some deaf children from Caracas and other cities were sent to that school. These children, between the ages of eight and ten on starting at the school, knew only a few home signs. At the school, they began to communicate with each other by means of those home signs, and created new ones.

A few years later, the school underwent administrative changes, and the Deaf children were separated from the blind children. The Deaf group was sent to a new school, the *Escuela Taller de Sordomudos* ("Workshop-School for the Deaf and Mute"). The teachers of this new institution had received professional training in Spain, and they had a limited command of Spanish Sign Language. These teachers dedicated some hours a week for teaching by means of sign language. This was considered a positive pedagogical contribution (personal communication with A.M. Morales, February 2001). Outside the classroom, the children were allowed to sign. In spite of this, the school stressed the need for speech training and literacy development in Spanish. The *Escuela Taller* offered the pupils boarding facilities, and many of them spent long periods in the school, interrupted only by visits to their families. The period involved was regarded as having had an important effect on the language development of these Deaf pupils (Sánchez 1990).

During the 1940's, the pupils in this school socialised by means of a sign language. Some Deaf immigrants from Spain arrived in Caracas and joined the group. As one of the former immigrants still remembers, the language then used by Venezuelan signers showed many differences from that which they brought over from Spain. Together, all these people founded the *Asociación de Sordomudos de Caracas* in 1950, and in the same year they convinced the government to deliver the administration of the *Escuela Taller de Sordomudos* to the Franciscan nuns, a Spanish Catholic congregation, who were specialists in Deaf education.

Some of these nuns had a good command of sign language. Their former pupils assume the nuns' signs belonged to Spanish Sign Language. Those signs were also used

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9 Unpublished video-recorded interview with the founders of the Asociación de Sordomudos de Caracas, made in Caracas in March 2001 by A. Oviedo, H. Rumbos and C. Jaimes. See also Sánchez (1990) and Domínguez (1996).

10 About the history of the Venezuelan schools for the Deaf see Sánchez (1990), Soto de Neumann (1993), Asuaje de Ducharne et al. (1997), and Morales (2001a), among others.

for several hours a week in the teaching of Spanish and other academic subjects. However, the attitude toward signing remained the same under this new school administration.

We may justifiably conclude that during the years following 1935, the permanent social interaction at the school for the Deaf in Caracas resulted in what we call LSV nowadays. This system was influenced by Spanish Sign Language, but it also developed independently, and has always had its own specific characteristics. However, no studies have yet been made to confirm these claims.

New private and public schools for the Deaf in Caracas and other Venezuelan cities were founded in the late 1950's and early 1960's. In all of them, a strict oralist philosophy prohibited the pupils from using any kind of sign system, for this was believed to have a pernicious effect on the children's development of spoken Spanish (Sánchez 1986, 1987b, Asuaje de Ducharne et al. 1997, Morales 2001b). For all the pupils in these new schools, there was no longer an opportunity for early acquisition of a sign language, something that the old schools allowed. LSV was excluded from the schools and became exclusive to the adult Deaf community. Consequently, Deaf children had to wait until they were old enough to contact other Deaf people on the street to learn LSV (Sánchez 1990).

The banning of LSV in the schools was accompanied by a highly discriminating discourse about sign language. Such discourse claimed that sign languages were not real languages, but rather rudimentary communication systems, useful only to express basic and concrete thoughts. Since the social prestige of the school imposed such ideas, adult Deaf people began to adopt a negative opinion towards to their own sign language (Sánchez 1990).

In 1985, the Ministry of Education introduced changes into the pedagogical orientation of the schools for the Deaf. The traditional oralist model was to be substituted for a bilingual one, which basically conceived of LSV as the first language school. Spanish would be taught as a second language and would become the most important concern within the curriculum (Sánchez 1986, 1987b). The first step taken by the Ministry of Education was to employ Deaf adults as teaching assistants at the schools (Oviedo 1996b, Morales 2001b).

These changes transformed the Deaf community. The bilingual model of the schools gave LSV a new prestige status, and its users came to be considered natural teachers of that language. The number of LSV users multiplied, because the Deaf pupils in the schools became signers. The vocabulary of the language expanded with the introduction of many new signs required by new situations. Some associations of the Deaf began to offer LSV courses, and Fevensor appointed an LSV committee, which later published a small dictionary (Fevensor 1999), and is currently preparing a printed course in LSV. This change of attitudes in the Deaf community towards their own language also helped bring about the social movement that included the official recognition of LSV.

1.6.2 LSV research[11]

The first linguistic work on LSV was an illustrated dictionary (Fundaprosordo 1982), which shows LSV signs and "Signed Spanish" signs (non-natural signs, created to codify some Spanish grammatical words and morphemes that have no LSV equivalents). This

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11   This topic is described in detail by Oviedo, Rumbos & Pérez (in press).

dictionary was elaborated by and addressed to teachers of the Deaf, as a communicational tool for "speaking" Spanish with the hands.[12]

Two years later, in 1987, the Ministry of Education asked the *Universidad de Los Andes* in Mérida to make an initial description of LSV to be used as a support to the bilingual model introduced in the schools for the Deaf (Pietrosemoli 1987, Anzola 1996). Since 1987, reports of this research have been presented at workshops, seminars and talks addressed to teachers. The main goal of these activities was to convince the teachers of the complex nature of LSV, and provide them with the theoretical background for the bilingual model for Deaf education (cf. Pietrosemoli 1987, 1988, 1989a, Anzola de Luján 1989, Oviedo 1991, 1992a, 1992b).

Since 1989, descriptive works based on LSV data have been published. The studies covered different topics: sign order (Pietrosemoli 1989b, 1991, Oviedo 1990, 1996b), grammatical uses of the signing space (Domínguez 1996, Oviedo 1996a, 1996b, 1996c), verb classification (Domínguez 1996, 1998), handshape analysis (Oviedo 1997, 1998), functions of fingerspelling (Rojas 1997), and expression of grammatical number (Gámez 1997).

There are also a number of papers on LSV psycholinguistics. They concentrate mostly on the acquisition of LSV by Deaf children (Anzola de Luján 1990, 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1993, Anzola 1996, Rumbos 2000, 2003). The sociolinguistics of the Venezuelan Deaf community has been the subject of three studies, one of which describes a reduced version of LSV that functions as a sort of "whispering" (Pietrosemoli 1991); a second describes the pragmatic interference between LSV signs and similar gestures used by the hearing community (Pietrosemoli 1994); and a third deals with the linguistic situation of the schools for the Deaf some years after the introduction of the bilingual model (Oviedo 1996b). There are four dictionaries of LSV: two of them are general collections of signs, addressed to hearing learners of the language (Angulo 1988, Fevensor 1999); the other two are, interestingly, collections of signs belonging to the semantic domain of sexuality (Martínez 1996, Soto de Newmann 1998).

Finally, there is research on applied linguistics. The works within this field have dealt predominantly with reading processes in Deaf children (Luque 1994, Sánchez 1994, 1995, Pérez 1996, 1997, 1998, Zambrano 1998). More recently, problems of teaching LSV to hearing people have also been addressed (Covis & Rivero 1996, González & Jaimes 1999).

The information provided by all the aforementioned research shows that LSV would appear to have the same characteristics already described for other sign languages. Its linguistic typology, grammatical rules, the way in which it uses space, the extensive use of iconicity and many other aspects meet all the general principles postulated for sign languages in other countries.

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12 For a discussion of the drawbacks of such methods see Johnson et al. (1989) and Johnson (1997).