

ABOUT THIS STUDY

I am not questioning the importance of the fundamental discovery that signed languages have sublexical structures and are in other ways like spoken languages. I am suggesting that there are other properties of signed languages that are equally important and interesting but quite unlike those of spoken languages. These differences are deserving of increasing attention from the scientific community. In fact, the linguistics of signed languages is moving in this direction as it begins to examine the use of space by signers (...) and other issues concerning the iconic and metaphoric bases of sign creation. (D. Armstrong)

This study deals with classifiers, which are a group of signs in Venezuelan Sign Language **LSV** (Spanish abbreviation for *Lengua de Señas Venezolana*). Classifiers have also been observed and described in sign languages from many other countries (cf. Schembri 2000). The formal parts of these signs (i.e. their handshapes, movements, locations, etc.) iconically correspond to the meanings they convey, which allows signers to elaborate visually transparent representations of the spatial activity of entities and the physical aspect of objects. This transparency is evident even to people who are not familiar with sign languages, which means that classifiers cannot easily be described in the usual way of traditional linguistic categories. In this sense, classifiers are apparently a semiotic phenomenon without a counterpart in spoken languages.

The description of classifiers has been challenging sign linguistics since its inception, and scholars are not yet in agreement as to how to describe them. There are two different aspects in the description of classifiers that have proved particularly interesting: the first is how to arrange classifiers into fixed and well-defined categories; the second concerns the discussion about their semiotic nature. The first aspect has been extensively discussed, but there is no agreement among scholars with regard to many of the details. The main reason for the lack of agreement is because of the problems posed by the semiotic nature of classifiers, and relatively few studies have addressed these problems.

Although early studies (DeMatteo 1977, Mandel 1977, Klima & Bellugi 1979) have stirred up some discussion about the semiotic nature of classifiers, the mainstream of sign linguistics seems to have reached a general agreement (especially since the works of Supalla 1978, 1982) to consider classifiers as purely linguistic signs, produced and understood by means of strictly grammatical principles. This position has been defended despite the evident obstacles encountered in the course of analysis of the data, but a small group of scholars has more recently brought the point up for discussion (Ebbinghaus & Heßmann 1991, Macken et al. 1993, Liddell & Metzger 1998, Cogill 1999), by proposing that classifiers reveal interesting aspects of sign languages that are not shared by spoken languages. The present study concentrates on this aspect.

The study has been divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 offers general information to readers about Venezuela and its sign language. Chapter 2 presents details of methodological aspects of the work, in particular the transcription systems used. In Chapter 3, a general presentation of LSV classifiers in four groups is made and commented on, along with definitions based on their formal and semantic characteristics. The criteria justifying

this approach are borrowed from various scholars, and are in line with most of the descriptions of classifiers proposed for other sign languages. Chapter 4 summarises the current theoretical discussion on the semiotic nature of signed classifiers. Chapters 5 and 6 analyse LSV data under the assumption that signs incorporate gestures into their structures so that iconic representations of the world are made possible. As can be seen throughout these last two chapters, this characteristic of classifiers is also shared by many other LSV signs. Finally, in Chapter 7, general conclusions from the study will be offered.

The data discussed here are presented by means of a transcription system whose interpretation may at first be difficult for readers who are unfamiliar with it. To ease comprehension, many signs are also illustrated, and the relevant aspects of the corresponding transcriptions are commented on in the text.