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# On Cross-linguistic/Cultural False Friends in Verbo-gestural Communication: Interlingual "homonyms" and "synonyms"[1]

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**Brdar, Mario & Rita, Brdar-Szabó. 2024. On cross-linguistic/cultural false friends in verbo-gestural communication: interlingual "homonyms" and "synonyms".** ***Sign Languages and Linguistics Convergence Research,*** *1*(1), 122-160. The focus of this article is an understudied phenomenon as a factor that may diminish mutual intelligibility and also make translation across sign languages (i.e., trans-signing) more difficult. While the phenomenon of translator's false friends has been widely studied in spoken and written language, it has not yet been paid due attention in teaching and learning of a foreign sign language, or in translation studies on sign languages, or simply in cross-sign-linguistic communication. We demonstrate in this article the existence of such false friends, i.e., putative interlingual synonyms that turn out to be interlingual homonyms. We also document the role of metonymy in their coming into existence.

Key words: Sign Language, False Friend, True Friend, Metonymy, Culture

## 1. Introduction

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Certain problems may arise when verbo-gestural communication takes place in a cross-linguistic and/or cross-cultural context. Sign languages have been recognized as systems in their own right, similar to some other sign languages with respect to some of its dimensions, but at the same time also different from other sign languages, and also from the language(s) spoken by hearing people within a larger linguistic community. In short, a given sign language is not identical (or at least not completely identical) to any other sign language. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that various sign languages share many articulatory traits, and of course a certain portion of their cultural background.

In addition to signing, sign language users may also often mouth the corresponding verbal elements facilitating the recognition of the meaning of what is signed for recipients. Signers move their mouth in a way that is consistent with pronouncing a particular word, but without actually uttering it, or sometimes even uttering it, simultaneously with producing hand signs. This means that two modes of communication (or modalities) can be used at the same time.

A number of signs used in particular sign languages overlap with co-speech gestures. The latter often transcend the boundaries of particular linguo-cultural communities. Some problems may also arise when verbo-gestural communication takes place in a cross-linguistic context. All this consequently raises the issue of mutual intelligibility and translatability.

In this article we concentrate on an understudied phenomenon as a factor that may diminish mutual intelligibility and also make translation (trans-signing) more difficult. While the phenomenon of translator's false friends has been widely studied in spoken and written language, it has not yet been paid due attention in teaching and learning of a foreign sign language, or in translation studies on sign languages, or simply in the study of cross-sign-linguistic communication (cf. Nilsson, 2005). Needless to say, false friends seem to be outnumbered by true friends. We demonstrate in this article the existence of such false friends, i.e., of putative interlingual synonyms that turn out to be interlingual homonyms, but also the existence of true friends. Where relevant, we document the role of metonymy in the coming into existence of false friends.

What we have said about the three modes of communication, i.e. their forming a triad of sort, has certain consequences with respect to what kind of

false (and true) friends can be expected when one studies sign languages from a cross-linguistic point of view.

There may be false and true friends emerging when the practices of two or more linguo-cultural communities are concerned. What is more, some false and true friends may be established when the inventories of two or more sign languages are compared. False and true friends can, however, also be found when the three modes of communication are paired. A co-speech gesture in one linguo-cultural community may happen to be identical with or very similar to a sign used in a particular sign language, but convey a different idea. Similarly, as pointed out by Nilsson (2005), the words of the spoken language that are mouthed simultaneously with hand signing (functioning as SL glosses) may turn out not to be ideal choices in view of an idiomatic translation of the sign language utterance into the spoken language. In short, a word X from a spoken language which is used as a gloss in a sign language, and the same word X used as an element of a spoken language may paradoxically come to function as its own false friend in certain contexts. We will not focus on such cases in present article, but rather on more prototypical cases.

This article is organized as follows. In Part 2 we give a brief overview of conceptual metonymy, highlighting its definition and various types. Part 3 introduces the notion of false friends, as well as of true friends, extending them so as to be able to apply them to verbo-gestural communication in general. The network resulting from this extension is a very complex one because it takes into account a number of mutual links between sign languages, spoken/written languages, and various types of co-speech gestures, while paying attention to their function/meaning within and across languages and cultures, as well as to the variation within sign languages (over time, i.e. diachronic development, individual variation, etc.). The sets of items under examination thus actually spread on a cline between true and false friends, comprising interlingual "synonyms and homonyms." Part 4, with its subsections, carries a discussion of various types of "friends" resulting from this extended framework that includes also relations across communication modalities. Co-gestures that are false friends across linguo-cultural communities are the topic of Part 4.1. False (and true) friends between SLs are discussed in 4.2, while false friends at the interface

between sign languages and co-speech gestures are dealt with in Part 4.3. The documentation and discussion of false friends involving SLs is by no means intended here to be exhaustive. We rather concentrate on the overview of possible types of false and true friends as a first approximation to the problem at hand, giving a rough impression of its magnitude and significance from the theoretical and the practical point of view. In Part 5, we end with a summary of my findings and prospects for future research.

## 2. Conceptual metonymy

In order to appreciate the role metonymies may play in the process of coming into existence of false friends, it is necessary to introduce it as one of most basic cognitive processes, i.e. we define it and introduce its main types. A whole volume was devoted to the problem of defining metonymy (Benczes & Ruiz de Mendoza, 2011), but after almost a decade and a half we are still where we had been before—fairly far from a consensus view. As Barcelona (2011, p.8) stresses, the fact that there is something most researchers would agree to call a "standard" cognitive-linguistic notion of conceptual metonymy that contains core elements of the cognitive view of metonymy, "it is by no means a completely uniform notion, as there is some disagreement among these authors over a number of issues."

Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p.35) describe metonymy as the use of "one entity to refer to another that is related to it." Kövecses and Radden (1998, p.39) shift the focus of attention to the level of concepts when they say that it is "a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target, within the same domain, or ICM [Idealized Cognitive Model]." Further refinements could be traced in in Panther (2005), Ruiz de Mendoza and Otal Campo (2002) and Ruiz de Mendoza & Díez Velasco (2004). Panther stresses the triadic nature of metonymy, involving the metonymic source concept, the metonymic target concept, and the metonymic vehicle as the material realization associated with the former and cuing the conceptual shift to the latter. Ruiz de Mendoza and his collaborators,

on the other hand, argue that metonymy is a process of conceptual expansion or reduction, result in two general types of metonymies, part for whole and whole for part.

Taking into account most relevant of these insights in the above mentioned literature, we define metonymy as a cognitive operation of conceptual elaboration based on the part-whole relationship that is triggered by the use of an expression (or metonymic vehicle) that is associated with a certain conceptual cluster (or metonymic source) within a given conceptual domain so that the activation of the source conceptual cluster opens up a mental space that is dynamically expanded or reduced so as to come as close as possible to fitting the conceptual frame provided by the co(n)text of use. In the course of this, the mental space thus opened and elaborated also comes very close in terms of its contents to another conceptual cluster (or metonymic target) within the same conceptual domain that may be or is typically associated with another expression (Brdar, 2017; Brdar-Szabó & Brdar, 2021; Brdar & Brdar-Szabó, 2022).

Conceptual metonymies can be simple or complex, just like conceptual metaphors. In many cases, metonymies appear in multiple tiers, i.e. stacked over each other in such a way that the metonymic target concept of one is at the same time the metonymic source concept for another metonymy at the superimposed tier. This means that we do not see that there are actually two simple natural metonymies that are telescoped into one, i.e. A for B and B for C, become A for C, with a metonymic jump in the middle, but only the final outcome, which we may call cumulative metonymy (cf. Brdar, 2019).

On the other hand, the situation in which one simple metonymy is followed by another simple metonymy over time in such a way that the item that serves as the vehicle does not actually become polysemous (at least not after a shorter or longer transitional period) because its original sense is eventually replaced by a new one is similar to the above, but yet a different phenomenon, for which the term serial metonymy was introduced by Nerlich and Clarke (2001). As Nerlich (2001, p.1623) explains, “[i]n the case of radiation a word accumulated meanings around a core, that is, becomes polysemous; in the case of concatenation a word develops a polysemous chain of meanings, where the first links in the chain might be lost or forgotten”.

In this article, we will see that in the translingual context the cross-matching of metonymies of the serial or cumulative type may often result in false friends, in addition to true friend situations. The role of metonymy in the context of the phenomenon of false pairs has not been discussed very often. To the best of our knowledge, metonymy is mentioned as a factor leading to the rise of false friends in Chamizo Domínguez and Nerlich (2002) and Broz (2008), and only cursorily in Mendiluce Cabrera and Hernández Bartolomé (2005) and Rifelj (1996). This is somewhat surprising in view of the role that metonymy and metaphor have in diachronic semantic processes, which are, together with language contact, responsible for virtually all false friend effects.

Metonymy, a single one or a series of linked metonymies, also plays an important role in motivating sign in sign languages, as noted in Wilcox (2000), Wilcox et al. (2003), Kosecki (2014a, b, 2019), Choi (2013), Rodriguez-Redondo (2018) and Mittelberg (2019).

## 3. False friends

There are countless examples of lexical items found in one language that exhibit a certain degree of similarity with lexical items belonging to some other language or languages. This similarity may be just formal, phonetic and/or orthographic, but also similarity in terms of meaning and usage. Such sets of similar lexical items or cognates may arise due to phylogenetic historical developments, or to incidents of language contacts (which over time may, but need not, become more systematic, and eventually develop into something of global internationalisms). However, they can also be results of pure formal, i.e. phonological, coincidence.

Such sets of words belonging to different languages, exhibiting a certain degree of formal similarity, but accompanied by no or only partial semantic overlap, are referred to as false friends or false cognates. False friends (first referred to as faux amis du tradecteur 'false friends of a translator' by Koessler and Derocquigny (1928)), are also called deceptive words, treacherous twins, etc. They can be seen as interlingual homonyms (Franek, 1998; Šipka, 2015; Brdar

and Brdar-Szabó, 2024). They are of course problematic not only for translators, but also for learners of a second or a foreign language in general.

A number of definitions have been put forward, along with proposals for making finer distinctions based on distinguishing several subtypes. False friends are often defined as lexical units belonging to different languages that sound same or similar, but mean utterly different things (Perl & Winter, 1972; Chalker & Weiner, 1996, pp.149), whose spoken or written form is similar, but whose meaning is different (Gottlieb, 1972), and which are often etymologically related (Emericzy, 1980). Chamizo Domínguez (2007) distinguishes chance or coincidental false friends (illustrated above), which are pairs without a common etymological ancestor, from semantic false friends which, share the same etymological origin. We propose that if we label them systematic false friends, this is more useful as it captures the fact that they are not random sets, but rather regular in partly overlapping and in exhibiting some common stages in the development. They also often attain the status of internationalisms because part of common lexical stock of a number of languages that are more or less closely related in genetic terms. Their regularity and systematicity is in part due to the fact that metonymy is in many cases involved.

The complexity of the phenomenon is reflected in the classification of false friends by Gouws, Prinsloo and De Schryver (2004, p.805), reproduced in the figure below:

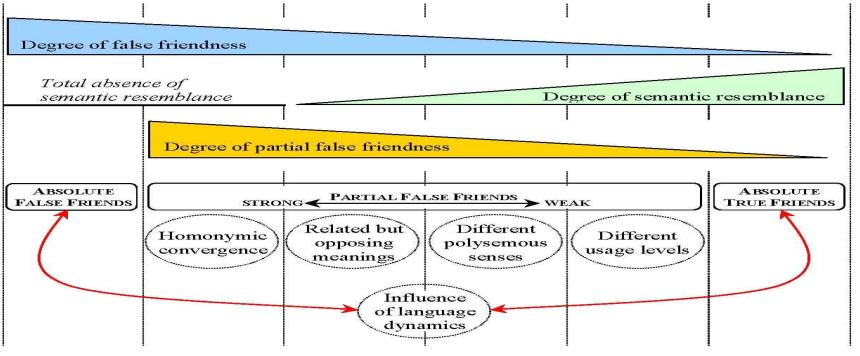



Figure 1. A semantic continuum of false friends, according to Gouws, Prinsloo and de Schryver (2004, p.805).

Typically, false friends belong to different languages, but the same sort of relationship may also obtain between lexical items used differently in particular regional varieties of the same language (e.g. British and American English), or between the standard language and a dialect. The former are referred to by Görlach (1995, p.97) as tautonyms ("the phenomenon of the same form designating different objects/concepts in different communities"), e.g., bungalow is used in Great Britain and in Australia in the sense of 'single-storey house', while in East African Englishes it is used to refer to a detached villa. Incidentally, the word was first used in Indian English in the meaning 'one-storey thatched house', usually surrounded by a veranda, from Hindu bangla 'low, thatched house,' literally meaning 'Bengalese.' Another phenomenon that Görlach (1990, p.240; 1995, p.94) discusses is heteronymy. They are "sets of words that are different in form but have identical reference for geographically distinct groups of speakers who are part of a larger speech community."

When talking about how mutually related sign languages are, it is important to keep in mind a number of parameters (Zeshan, 2006). One is their history, i.e. their genetic relatedness. Another is a sociolinguistic dimension in the sense of distinguishing between macro- and micro-communities (Schembri, 2010). Yet another dimension is their structural or morphological complexity. Finally, the degree of relatedness is also indicated by lexical overlap in lexicostatic terms. This of course correlates to a degree with genetic relatedness (there will be more overlap between historically more closely related sign languages), while potentially correlating negatively with the size of the community (smaller communities may exhibit more idiosyncratic signs, thus diminishing the overlap with genetically related varieties). It is also important to take into account the fact that sign languages tend to develop more dynamically than spoken/written languages, which generally may erode, but occasionally even increase, lexical overlap between varieties. To complicate the picture even further, we cannot completely detach sign language communities from the spoken/written language communities with(in) which they co-exist. While the lexical overlap between ASL (American Sign Language) and BSL is relatively low, roughly 30% (naturally, as they belong to two different sign language families, the French and the British or BANZ, short for British, Australian and New Zealand,

respectively), there can be no doubt that mutual co-existence with global English substrate also plays certain role in the direction they may develop. All this becomes even more important when seen from the perspective of false/true friends, while making the boundary between false friends and tautonymy less sharp.

## 4. False friends in verbo-gestural communication

Speech co-gestures as false friends across linguo-cultural communities

There appears to be some controversy over whether gestures, including speech co-gestures, are in part universal, the rest being particular to specific, larger or smaller, linguo-cultural communities. If it is true that language developed out of gestures, and if it is true that small babies use gestures, at least some speech go-gestures should be universal (and even possibly inborn). The number of such gestures, as shown by research, is unfortunately not too large. One such gesture that is a good candidate for the universal status, also shared by some other primates, is the outstretched hand, with palm up, used for begging or requesting (Kaminski et al. 2004; Maille et al 2012).

There are many other hand gestures that are understood and used in the same way in many linguo-cultural communities, but there always seems to be one or more areas to which this does not apply. In other words, what is a true gestural friend across some, even many communities, may be a false friend when these communities are compared with some others. This can be easily demonstrated, even if we take gestures believed to be widely spread. A nod of the head is a gesture commonly take to indicate yes, or agreement, acceptance or acknowledgment. It is a part of the anecdotal folklore that this gesture does not work in a couple of Balkan countries like Greece, Bulgaria, Macedonia or Albania, and even in some neighbouring parts of Serbia. Nodding one's head is said to mean no in these countries. Conversely, shaking the head means yes. The fact seems to be that the truth may be somewhere in the middle (cf. Harrison, 2014). To express no (the Greek word is όχι!) Greeks do not nod properly, i.e., move their head up and down repeatedly, but just raise their head,

which is combined with a simultaneous raise of the eyebrows and most commonly also with a slight (or complete) rolling up of the eyes. To express yes, a single nod down is used, not shaking, closing down eyes simultaneously, and often followed by a slight side tilt or a slight movement to the left or to the right. A Bulgarian folk theory connects this with centuries-long Ottoman rule: when the Ottomans conquered Bulgaria, they wanted the locals to change their religion from Christianity to Islam and if they declined, they were often killed, Bulgarians therefore agreed to swap the two signs and when they were asked if they wanted to become Muslim, they nodded while actually meaning 'no'.

The theory does not really hold water, because the same gesture is used for NO in Turkey. A plausible explanation for the yes and no gestures, as used in most of the world seems to be one offered by Charles Darwin. When hungry and searching/asking for milk, babies reflexively move their heads upwards, while moving their heads sideways, or repeatedly from side to side, i.e., shaking them, when they are full, and refusing further feeding. It appears that one particular stage in a complex scenario was metonymically cut out, i.e. made independent, and then generalized, and metaphorically applied to an unlimited number of other situations. It may be the case that many gestures are widespread because they have similar background motivation, but have changed their meaning in some areas, or were lost, due to cultural overlay at some point, suppressing them, filtering, editing, or reinforcing.

There are numerous other examples of intercultural misunderstandings due to such false-friend gestures. The so-called finger-purse, i.e., joining the fingertips at chest height and shaking them slightly means good/tasty in a Turkish-speaking community:



Figure 2. The Turkish good/tasty gesture.

However, this same gesture in Arabic cultures means ‘be patient/wait’, and if performed more vigorously it is a threat meaning ‘you are going to get it now’. Italians call this gesture the tulip hand and use it to accompany utterances conveying disbelief such as Ma cosa stai dicendo? ‘What are you talking about?’ or Dici sul serio? ‘Are you serious?’ (Poggi, 2014).

Another wide-spread gesture is the so-called fig-hand or manu fica—the thumb inserted between the index and middle finger. Its origins can be traced back to ancient Greece and Rome (Corbeill, 1997; Aracil, 2024). In many cultures it is considered to be a mildly obscene gesture used to counteract the evil eye, to insult someone, or to deny a request. It can, however, be very rude and offensive in some cultures, where it is a synonym of the middle-finger gesture, e.g., in Greece (synonymous with the moutza gesture). It may denote sex in Japanese (sekkusu) or serve as in invitation to sex (Germany and Denmark). In the Slavic countries and Central Asia, it is primarily used as a denial gesture (with or without sexual undertones). In Croatia it is used as a denial, but also to denote something worthless, and when swearing a false oath

(Fink Arsovski, Kovačević and Hrnjak, 2023). On the other hand, it is a connotatively neutral gesture in most of the anglophone world (in particular in Europe and North America) used in the got your nose game. To make it even more confusing in the cross-cultural perspective, we note that the same gesture may also have positive connotations. In Portugal, Brazil and Spain (especially Asturias and Galicia), this is considered to be a gesture of good luck or wishing someone good luck (Aracil, 2024). The same is found in Croatia, držati figu 'hold a fig', allegedly a German influence (Ivanetić and Jurin, 2003) alternating with držati palčeve 'hold thumbs', which is the direct counterpart of German Daumen halten 'hold thumb' (Corbeill, 1997).

Eyelid pull, i.e., pulling down the skin beneath the eye, is used as a warning in many Mediterranean countries (Morgan et al., 1979; Payrató, 2014), but in France, Turkey, and Germany, it is used to express disbelief or disdain. Cf. the English expression My eye (and Betty Martin!).

Finally, consider the gesture for victory, also known as the V-sign, in which the index and middle fingers are raised and parted to form a V shape, the back of the hand facing the person making the gesture. It is also extended to denote peace. The similar sign with the back of the hand facing out is used to express extreme dislike or anger. The latter version can also have more specific, obscene meaning when used in Great Britain, Ireland, Australia, Bew Zealand, and South Africa, equivalent to the middle finger.

## False (and true) friends between sign languages

It stands to reason to expect to find prototypical examples of both false and true friends in the case of cross-signing, i.e., in signed interactions between participants that do not share a sign language (Zeshan, 2015). This is even more likely when the sign languages in that the participants use belong to different genetic family or to the same genetic family, respectively. Prototypical cases of true friends belonging to two or more sign languages are not extremely difficult to find, extending even beyond the boundaries between SL families.

Let us first illustrate this by taking a look at the sign for cat in various sign languages. In American Sign Language (ASL), to sign cat, one pinches

their thumb and index finger of both hands together by the side of each cheek, while keeping the remaining fingers straight out, as one would pinch their fingers together, take them from each side of the face outward, showing the cat's whiskers. In other words, we have a part (of the animal) for the whole (animal) metonymy. This is actually the old, two hand, ASL sign for cat. As is well-known, there is a tendency in all sign languages to replace two-hand signs with one-hand signs over time.

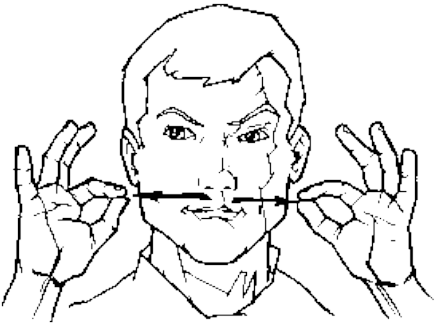


Figure 3. The old, two-hand ASL sign for cat.

The new variant uses only the dominant hand:

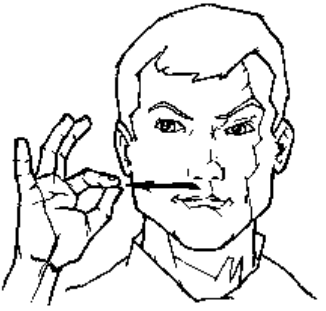


Figure 4. The single-hand ASL sign for cat.

The transition from the two-hand to the single hand sign can be seen as a metonymic reduction (the original sign becoming now part for whole). But there is a metonymic reduction even before that. Most cats have 24 whiskers, 12 on each cheek. In the old, two-hand sign 12 whiskers on one cheek are reduced to just a single one. This means that a single whisker stands for 12 whiskers. Then we get from two whiskers (one on each side) to just a single whisker on one cheek. A single whisker snow stands for all the 24 whiskers, and this is again part for whole metonymy. Finally, by virtue of the same metonymy, a single whisker stands for the whole animal. More or less the same sign is found in sign language after sign language, such as German Sign Language (Deutsche Gebärdensprache), Lithuanian Sign Language, Polish Sign Language, Icelandic Sign Language, Czech Sign Language, or Danish Sign Language. Like ASL, most of these belong to the French sign language family, and thus qualify as true friends. German Sign Language and Polish Sign Language, however, belong to the German sign language family, which means that the true friend relationship may extend beyond the borders of sign language families.

The British Sign Language (BSL) sign for cat is similar but not the same as the ASL one (Perniss et al, 2010):

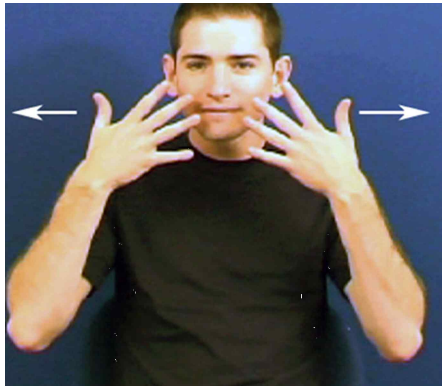


Figure 5. The BSL sign for cat (Perniss et al., 2010, p.5).

There are also two variants, a single-hand, and a two-hand sign (there is

another BLS variant that is a blend of ASL and BSL). Metonymy is at work here, too. Instead of a single whisker, BSL shows several whiskers, using 3-4 fingers (unlike real cats, who have 12 whiskers on each side arranged in 3 or 4 rows). So, 12 whiskers are metonymically reduced to 3-4 in the first step. The rest is the same as in ASL, as described above. This British Sign Language (BSL) sign for cat is more or less the same as the sign used in Indian Sign Language, or Argentinian Sign Language, although they belong to different sign language families—Indian Sign Language belongs to Indo-Pakistani family, while Argentinian Sign Language is an isolate.

However, there are a number of other signs for cat, again largely metonymically motivated, that are used in some other sign languages. In fact, there is an amazing amount of variation. Spanish Sign Language seems to be based on the cat's activity of rubbing or kneading its paws, but perhaps also on scratching (humans), which is something that cats do for a number of reasons. In either case, the underlying metonymy is characteristic behaviour for animal.



Figure 6. The rubbing cat in Spanish Sign Language.

The former is a softer variant which can also be detected in the Turkish and the Swedish sign languages. The latter is a more "aggressive" variant, seen in the signs used in the Latvian sign language, the Romanian, the Ukrainian sign language and the variety of Greek sign language used in Cyprus.



Figure 7. The scratching cat in Romanian Sign Language.
(https://www.spreadthesign.com/en.nz/search/?cls=2&last_open_id=&last_to_lang=&q=cat)

The Chilean sign language, on the other hand, one of the two versions apparently imitates how the master holds and pets a cat. This can be described as an interaction-based metonymy, activity for the entity affected by the activity.

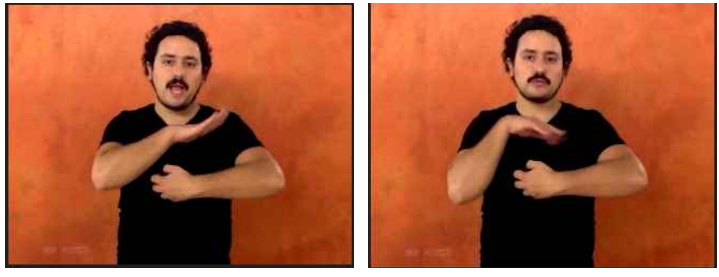


Figure 8. The petting cat in Chilean Sign Language.
(https://www.spreadthesign.com/en.us/search/)

It is interesting to note that the Greek sign language used in Cyprus and the sign used in the Greek sign language used in Greece are not the same. The former is based on rubbing, the latter belongs to the BSL full whiskers type. Further, while the Brazilian sign language is ASL-like, i.e. it is a single whisker, the Portuguese belongs to the scratching cluster.

It is also interesting that there seem to exist certain isoglosses, or perhaps

even bundles of isoglosses that coincide, separating sign languages in a way that is not necessarily in consonance with their genetic typology, i.e. some signs of a sign language or a group of sign languages may side with signs of a sign language or a group of sign languages that belong to another family, rather than with the signs of sign languages of its/their own family. This may happen even if sign languages are areally close, and even if they are believed to share lots of cultural background (e.g. sign languages in Spanish speaking countries across the world). Let us illustrate this on some concepts, such as swim and coffee in various sign languages, concentrating on Europe and Latin America.

The concept swim is signed in the majority of sign languages around the world by imitating one of the two prototypical swimming style: breaststroke or free style (front crawl). Both are apparently found in BSL, while the ASL uses only the former.



Figure 9. swim in ASL.



Figure 10. swim in BSL.

The affinities between sign languages (sharing the same sign) can sometimes

be observed over smaller areas. Italian, Romanian, Turkish and Cypriot Greek sign languages use the latter sign, i.e. employ the free-style movement.



Figure 11. swim in Cypriot Greek Sign Language.

Lithuanian sign language and Russian sign language, on the other hand, make use of a somewhat undefined style, but produce similar signs. While Mexican sign language and the Yucatecan Maya sign language side with ASL, just like Spanish sign language, as we go south there is a switch to the free style (Ecuadorian, Venezuelan, Colombian, and Argentinian sign languages). The free style sign is found in the Brazilian sign language, while the Portuguese sign language has the breaststroke sign.

Wilcox (2000, p.88) argues that the ASL sign for coffee is a complex metonymy, the action resembles grinding coffee beans by means of an old-fashioned hand-operated coffee grinder.

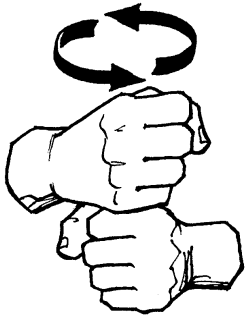


Figure 12. coffee in ASL.

The first metonymy according to Wilcox is the manner of operation for instrument, followed by instrument for substance (though it must be 'the substance produced', i.e. the coffee powder, because for coffee beans there is a compound (grinding + bean finger-spelled), at least in ASL. But because the substance produced by grinding is powder, we must assume another metonymy, substance for beverage, making it a triple metonymy.

The same sign is found in Lengua de Señas Mexicana and Lengua de Señas Ecuatoriana, but if we go further south in the Americas (e.g., Colombia, Argentina or Uruguay), we find a sign that is a Mittelbergian external metonymy (Mittelberg, 2019), a hand moves as if holding a cup of coffee and moving upwards towards the mouth, as if preparing to drink a virtual cup of coffee. The same sign is also found in BSL.



Figure 13. coffee in BSL

A variant of this sign is found in German Sign Language. There is, however, an additional element—the flat non-dominant hand is held chest high, as if it were a saucer:



Figure 14. coffee in German Sign Language.

The equivalent Cypriot Greek Sign Language sign and the Turkish Sign language sign are very similar.

As a result of the drive to break signs into components that are inherently not motivated, i.e., to phonologize them and thus minimize iconic motivation, many signs have been re-interpreted, re-described, and even physically changed. An example of this is the BSL sign for coffee, in which the hand moving as if holding a cup of coffee is now claimed to be the moving C handshape (this shape is the same as the C handshape in ASL, South African Sign Language, and New Zealand Sign Language as well as in many other sign languages, but note that different sign languages may use different handshapes with particular letters), in which the finger-spelled C is the initial for coffee. This means that a metonymy is thus lost (the imaginary coffee cup in the hand), although according to some cognitive linguists (Barcelona, 2012, p.260; Bierwiaczonek, 2013), this may be another metonymy because the initial letter stands for the whole lexeme (part of form for the whole form). However, there are sign languages that keep the metonymy but also initialize simultaneously. Austrian Sign Language, Croatian Sign Language and Hungarian Sign Language use the coffee grinding sign but both hands are apparently formed into K handshape (which differs from ASL K handshape by being rotated by 90º). This is not surprising as they all belong to the French family and are also geographically very close (note that Serbian Sign Language uses the drinking sign). Urdu Sign Language uses the grinding type sign initializing C.

What we have seen so far in this section is that there are numerous signs

that are true friends, as they are found in one sign language after another. But there are also sign languages that use differently articulated signs to express the same concept (i.e., signs that are in a heteronymic relationship).

Prototypical cases of false friends belonging to two sign languages are not extremely frequent, but nevertheless do exist. Morgan et al. (2015) define false friends as signs from different languages with the same articulation, but different meanings and no historical relation. As we see it, this situation may obtain not only in unrelated sign languages, but also in more or less closely related ones when one and the same sign is used with different meanings. What we mean by "closely related" is not only that they belong to the same genetic family, but also that they are used in communities that share the same spoken/written language, with more or less dialectal variation. It is easy to imagine a kind of situation where a sign language interpreter fluent in Peninsular Spanish may use a sign that is conventionalized in Spanish Sign Language to refer to a given concept while trans-signing into Argentinian Sign Language where a different sign is used for the same concept.

Unlike Morgan et al. (2015), we also document the role of metonymy in such false pairs. Metonymic operations may motivate how a particular sign is articulated in various ways, but in the case of signs that function as false pairs, we typically have very closely related metonymic sources linked to very different metonymic targets (e.g., activity for the entity affected/produced by the activity, where the activity is physically almost the same). In some cases, false pairs are due to the fact that there is a single metonymy in one sign language, while in its cognate in another sign languages we note two or more interlinked metonymies. It is also possible that no metonymy is present in a sign of a system, while the same image is the starting point for a metonymy in another system.

Morgan et al. (2015) report a number of false friends detected in the course of comparing Kenyan Sign Language (KSL) and ASL. These include pairs like people and clothing; friend and rest; meeting and more; sign and anyway/whatever; dead and full; suffer and take-it-easy; a-lot and enough. The similarity is more than obvious, as well as the danger for a translator who has to translate between sign languages, or between a sign language a spoken/written language (in this case English). A translator translating from KSL into ASL may

erroneously use the same sign, and actually give rest as the equivalent of the formally identical KSA sign friend, producing non-sense or confusion. A similar effect may obtain in the case of translation from a spoken/written language to a sign language, i.e. from English to KSL if the translator is trained (primarily) for ASL, rather than for KSL, or when a person familiar with KSL translates Kenyan English utterance into ASL.

While Morgan et al. (2015) describe pairs of false friends obtaining between two sign languages, we show that this phenomenon is more often than not quite systematic in the sense that it involves whole networks of concepts related through one of more visuals, i.e., sign language articulations in more than just two languages.

Returning to the sign for coffee, we observe several situations that are case in point. First of all, the BSL sign for java, not the beverage but the programming language, is the same as the ASL sign (the grinding one). Java, as the name of an island in Indonesia, is metonymically used as an eponym to refer to coffee because the island to which the plant was introduced by the Dutch in the 1600s is still a prominent producer of coffee. The term first arose as a single-origin label, but generalized in the course of time. The programming language, devised in the 1990s, was first called Oak, after an oak that could be seen from the office of Jack Gosling, one the programme's authors, to be renamed Green, and finally Java, after the coffee from Java (a stylized coffee cup is in its logo). This means that the sign based on coffee grinding is a potential false friend, at least as far ASL and BSL are concerned, and potentially beyond these two systems. It is possible thus for a native signer of ASL to misunderstand this sign when used by a signer of BSL, in particular when the context is not rich enough, and even then, the end result might be surprise and utter confusion.

We have seen above that the German, the Cypriot Greek and the Turkish sign languages use the cup-cum-saucer sign for coffee, as illustrated in Figure 14. The sign for tea is in a number of sign languages based on the activity of putting a tea bag into a cup. In ASL, the dominant hand in F handshape is circling over the C or O handshape of the non-dominant hand. The same sign is found in Mexican Sign Language and Turkish Sign Language.



Figure 15. tea in ASL.

In Spanish Sign language and Italian Sign Language, only the index finger is repeatedly moved downwards and upwards over the non-dominant hand, while French Sign Language, Austrian Sign Language, Cypriot Greek Sign, and Greek Sign Language all move the thumb and the index finger over the non-dominant hand imitating the cup. German Sign Language, Lithuanian Sign Language and Estonian Sign Language use a single-hand signs, reduced to the activity of lowering and lifting the tea bag, but without imitating the cup. However, the signs used by Australian Sign Language and Hindu Sign Language are different. In fact, they are identical with the German, the Cypriot Greek and the Turkish signs for coffee, which means that this sign articulation leads to false friends, producing 6 pairs involving 5 languages, while also producing 3 pairs of true friends.

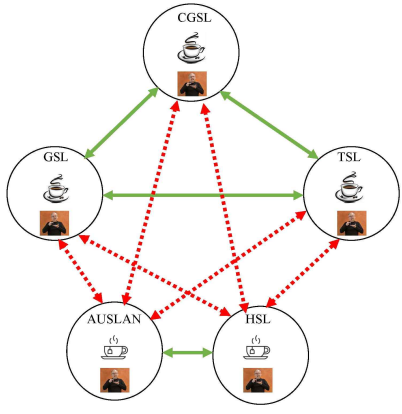



Figure 16. False and true friends in the case of identical articulation referring to coffee or to tea in five sign languages.

Another false friend relation is found between ASL, Mexican Sign Language and Turkish Sign Language, on the one hand, and Spanish Sign language, on the other, that again involves signs for tea and coffee, respectively.

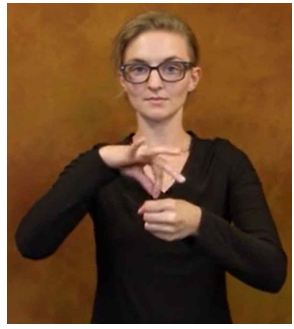


Figure 17. coffee in Spanish Sign Language.

The signs are articulated identically but denote two different types of beverages. This results in a set of 3 pairs of true friends (ASL, Mexican Sign Language and Turkish Sign Language) and a set of 3 pairs of false friends as we move from Spanish Sign Language to the other three systems or the other way around.

Another potential false pair consists of the BSL, Spanish Sign Language, or Latvian Sign Language sign for scratch and the sign for cat in certain languages: the Latvian sign language, the Romanian, the Ukrainian sign language and the variety of Greek sign language used in Cyprus, as we have already seen. There is a considerable amount of variation in the articulation of these signs denoting both of these concepts, but they are extremely similar and may be confused. The number of pairs of true friends and false friends is in this case extremely large because the list of sign languages that behave like languages in one or the other set is much larger.

Another potential source of danger, making otherwise identical signs somewhat of false friends is the variable degree of polysemy of signs belonging to different sign languages. The ASL sign for pray is obviously motivated by

the initial stage of the scenario or action for the whole scenario or action metonymy: hands are held together and moved in either a small movement or just a slight backward (repeated) movement. The equivalent signs in BLS and the Colombian sign language (Lengua de Señas Colombiana) are virtually identical. But the story need not end here as far as LSC is concerned. Even it may not be exactly the same sign as for prayer, a related sign, involving the movement of hands, is used to refer to Christmas (Navidad), and also to December (Diciembre). The latter is of course a metonymic extension of the former (event for the period of time including the event). This sort of polysemy is clearly absent in BSL, or ASL, as they have different signs for december and christmas, not related to their signs for prayer, which means that they are also a sort of false friends as signers/translators may assume that they share identical polysemy pattern.

Variable degree of polysemy may be the source of problems with some mouth morphemes, sometimes also referred to as mouth gestures. Mouth morphemes are morphemes that "involve the mouth as their primary articulator" (Bickford and Fraychenaud, 2008, p.32). While mouth is their primary articulator, they may also involve the movement of cheeks and tongue. They are not inherent parts of specific manual signs, but independent, though bound, morphemes that may be combined with a range of manual signs. Their function is adverbial/adjectival, and they are also referred to as modifier mouth morphemes, or mouth adverbials. These include [sucked-cheeks] for 'thin' or [puffed-cheeks] for 'wide', 'big', 'large' or 'long' referents in ASL (Lu and Goldin-Meadow, 2018).

The mouth gesture that is of interest for us here is the "th" [θ] morpheme. It is articulated with the mouth slightly open, with the tongue protruding slightly through the teeth, the head often tilted to one side (Liddell, 1980, p.42).



Figure 18. The 'th' mouth morpheme in driving carelessly (Lewin and Schembri, 2011, p.99)

According to Liddel, this morpheme expresses in ASL the ideas of 'lack of control, inattention, unintention and unawareness'. Lewin and Schembri, 2011, p.102) suggest that these meanings are also found in BS. Schermer (1990) reports that in Dutch Sign Language, it conveys the same cluster of meanings. However, she also observes that it can take on additional meanings, such as 'feeling negative about something'. Anderson and Reilly (1998) find that 'th' in ASL may have meaning 'false, wrong'. Bickford and Fraychenaud (2008, p.34) see it as expressing the idea 'sloppily'. For BSL, Brennan (1992) and Sutton-Spence and Woll (1999) also mention meanings 'too easy', and 'boring' and 'unpleasant', respectively. It is not immediately clear how these can be related. A possible account in terms of metonymic shifts might connect them by means of several metonymies of the type effect for cause, starting from too easy. In any case, there is polysemy in all the three sign languages, but the meanings do not match completely and are organized differently. This means that a user of BSL may combine this morpheme in a manner that would be lost on an ASL signer, and therefore be interpreted in a wrong way, etc. This means that there are several potential false friend relationships between these three languages.

4.3 False friends at the interface between sign languages and co-speech

gestures

Many gestures used more or less universally across linguistic communities may be similar to sign used in sign languages and are thus true friends. Speakers of Italian (Bonaiuto and Bonaiuto, 2014), and of Catalan (Payrató, 2014), and of many other languages refer to money by rubbing lightly the thumb and the index finger. This is also found as the sign for money in a sign language after sign language (BSL, Spanish Sign Language, German Sign Language, Hungarian Sign Language, Croatian Sign Language, Turkish Sign Language, and International Signs). This sign is considered slang in ASL, the ASL sign is different: a flattened O hand, as if holding some money (bills) is smacked lightly on the palm of the base hand. A similar sign is used in Finnish Sign Language, while Russian Sign Language and Belarus Sign Language combine the two, first the ASL style sign and then the finger-rubbing sign. As pointed out by Nakano (1974), the Japanese gesture is different: a ring is formed with the thumb and the index finger. Japanese Sign Language uses the same form but waving the hand several times.

However, users of sign languages and hearing people may often misunderstand some body movements. In particular, the latter, not familiar with the articulations and conventions used in sign languages, may believe (wrongly) to have understood some parts of signed utterances.

Fingerspelling is seen as a more efficient way of conveying meanings in the case of words that are relatively short. Thus, the ASL uses two letter signs for TV (and television, which it is an abbreviation of). Both of these can be misunderstood by hearing people. First, as they are not familiar with signing, they are not able to segment signed discourse into smaller elements and see which ones constitute units, and they misunderstand finger-spelled letters for full signs that they believe are motivated by some conventionalized gestures. The first letter, T, happens to coincide in ASL with the fig-hand, discussed above, while the second letter, V, coincides with the victory gesture (which is not used in ASL to sign victory, although an exaggerated, wavy variant that is repeated together with an appropriate face expression, is used in Indian Sign Language, along with the OK gesture). BSL also uses fingerspelling for TV, but its

finger-spelling alphabet is very different and there is no danger of the sort that exists with ASL.

Returning to the mouth gesture 'th', we may identify some further situations leading to misunderstandings. Hearing participants in a mixed discourse who are not familiar with any of these sign languages are quite likely to associate this morpheme with 'boredom and lack of interest', which means that they will miss all the other possible nuances found in sign languages that were mentioned above.

It is a plausible assumption that at least some of the signs used in sign languages have developed out of co-speech gestures at large. Many of these are therefore true friends as far as these two communication means are concerned. However, they can also be false friends in certain matchings of sign languages and the inventory of gestures in a certain linguo-culture.

The BSL sign for ok, alright can be a single-hand or two-hand thumb-up sign. When performed with a single hand, this is identical to the common gesture used to indicate approval, or to the hitchhiking gesture. This gesture can take on more specific meanings in certain areas (Morris et al., 1979, Payrató, 2014). In Germany, Finland and Hungary, it can mean simple top/number one, while in France it can mean "worthless". On social media sites the icon with this gesture is used in the sense of like. A two-hand version is used in basketball by referees to signal the jump ball. In scuba diving, the thumb(s)-up is used as a signal marking the end of the dive, and (iconically) going up. In some cultures, e.g. in Italy, Greece, Iraq or Iran, this hand gesture is considered to be an insult.

The cut-throat gesture may be performed by drawing a hand, a finger or two, across the throat. Although the accompanying facial expression is different this gesture could be confused with the sign used to denote a priest in a number of sign languages, e.g. in ASL or BSL, which can involve one or two fingers, and is typically repeated, but can be also performed only once. This sign is metonymically motivated, as it denotes the priest's collar (part for whole).

Poggi (2014) discusses a gesture used in Italy to show that you are sorry about something: a finger touches the cheek below the eye and moves down,

metaphorically suggesting the trajectory of a teardrop, i.e., indicating that one is crying in display of sadness. Tear is a metonymy for crying, and crying is metonymic of sadness/being sorry (effect for cause). This is at the same time a hyperbole: crying is not simply being sad/sorry, it is an exaggerated display. The Italian Sign Language sign for cry is very similar, though the sign for tear is slightly different, it involves a G finger that slides down in a zig-zag fashion (just like in Greek Sign Language). The cry sign is in many sign languages a two-hand sign, showing virtual tears falling on both cheeks. The teardrop sign is in many sign languages identical to the Italian hyperbolic gesture, e.g., in BSL, in AUSLAN, in Spanish Sign Language, German Sign Language, Austrian Sign Language, Chilean Sign Language, Hungarian Sign Language, etc.). This means that there is ample possibility for misunderstanding here.

Finally, we discuss a sign language sign that may be interpreted as an offensive gesture. The case in point is the sign for Albania/Albanian in Albanian Sign Language, and in many other sign languages (e.g. ASL, BSL, International Sign Language, etc.), in keeping with the recent trend of adopting signs for names of countries, languages and inhabitants from indigenous sign languages. This is a cross-at-wrist two-hand sign, with fingers moving slightly, like wings of a bird. An alternative sign for Albania, the cupped hand placed on the top of the head, is related to the white cap worn as a part of the folk costume. The cross-at-wrist hands are also used in ASL to refer to Germany, although the hands are pointed towards the observer (this is based metonymically on the German coat of arms depicting an eagle as its central element).

The sign for Albania is also metonymically motivated by the Albanian flag and the coat of arms. Their central element is a black, two-headed eagle against the red background. The cross-at-wrist obviously stands for this eagle, and then the eagle stands for the country and its inhabitants. The name of the country in Albanian is Shqipëria (which replaced the older name, Arbëria, in the last 300 hundred years). The current name of the country can be translated as the ‘land of eagles’.

The cross-at-wrist hands are also used outside the Albanian Sign Language by ethnic Albanians, from Albania, Kosovo or Greece, to symbolize their ethnic background via the country. This occasionally also happens in contexts in which

it may be offensive to ethnic Serbians because of the long-standing conflict between Kosovar Albanians and Serbs. The hand gesture is known to have been displayed by players of the Albanian national football team, but also by ethnic Albanian footballers playing in other teams. In 2018 FIFA World Cup tournament Switzerland defeated Serbia 2-1. The two goals for Switzerland were scored by Xherdan Shaqiri and Granit Xhaka, two ethnic Albanians from Kosovo who were forced to leave their homes during the fights in 1998. Both of them performed the crossed-hands gesture (but also Stephan Lichtsteiner), while celebrating their goals. In consequence of this, Serbian footballers exploded with anger. The Swiss footballers involved in the incident were later fined by FIFA for "for unsporting behaviour contrary to the principles of fair-play".

In theory, this means that an innocent use of the sign language sign denoting Albania in Albanian Sign Language, or in any other sign languages that has borrowed the sign, may be misinterpreted by observers of Serbian origin not familiar with the sign language, but familiar with the hand gesture. This then also qualifies as a special kind of false friend. Ironically, the Serbian coat of arms and flag also have an image of a double-headed eagle, though a white one, and the Serbian national football team is nicknamed Eagles (orlovi). Needless to say, the sign for Serbia in Serbian Sign language, or in ASL, BSL, etc. (in some of these it is based on C-hand moved from left to right in front of the forehead, which may be motivated by the Serbian coat of arms in which a red shield on the chest of the white double-headed eagle is divided by a cross white into four fields with one fire steel in each of them. The fire steels are in popular belief known as four Cyrillic letters C).

## 5. Conclusions

While the phenomenon of translator's false friends has been widely studied in spoken and written language, it has not yet been paid due attention in teaching and learning of a foreign sign language, or in translation studies on sign languages, or simply in cross-sign-linguistic communication. Sign languages are closely related to co-speech gestures and spoken language, the three

overlapping so as to form a continuum of verbo-gestural communication modes.

We have shown in this article that cross-linguistic and cross-cultural false friends in verbo-gestural communication are a non-trivial phenomenon which may diminish mutual intelligibility, and also make translation (i.e., trans-signing) more difficult. We have discovered various types of "friends" resulting from this extended framework that includes also relations across communication modalities. We have also documented the role of conceptual metonymy in the development of such cross-linguistic and cross-cultural contexts.

As we have demonstrated in 4.1, a co-speech gesture in one linguo-cultural community may happen to be identical with or very similar to a sign used in a particular sign language, but not necessarily convey the same idea.

False friends across signed languages are not just lexical units, i.e. manual signs that are more or less identically articulated but express different concepts in different sign languages. Their discussion in 4.2. indicates that this phenomenon is infrequently quite systematic in the sense that it involves whole networks of concepts related through one of more visuals, i.e., sign language articulations in more than just two languages. False friends may also be found at the level of non-manual, specifically mouth gestures of morphemes.

Finally, a number of signs used in particular sign languages overlap with co-speech gestures. The latter often transcend the boundaries of particular linguo-cultural communities. We have shown in 4.3 that some problems may also arise when verbo-gestural communication takes place in a cross-linguistic context, again raising the issue of mutual intelligibility and translatability.

The documentation and discussion of false friends involving SLs has by no means been intended to be exhaustive. We have rather concentrated on the overview of possible types of false and true friends as a first approximation to the problem at hand, giving a rough impression of its magnitude and significance from the theoretical and the practical point of view, and provoking further research.

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