

**Area of Specification:** Sociolinguistics/phonology

'Mouthing'-A Discourse strategy in signed language-spoken language interpretation

**Abstract:**

"Mouthing" involves the voiceless visual representation of words on a signer's lips, produced concurrently with manual signs. Mouthing has been observed in many of the world's signed languages (Boyes-Braem 2001; Schermer 1990; Ebbinghaus & Hessman 1996; Coerts 1992, Davis 1989; Neidle et al 1994; Berent 2003). The simultaneity of manual signs and unvoiced pronunciations is possible because the two channels of expression are distinctly different: one, a visual-gestural channel, the other, oral-aural. In addition to deaf native signers, studies have also examined the use of mouthing in hearing bilinguals who use both signed and spoken language (see Weisenberg 2003, Davis 1989, and Wilbur & Peterson 1998 for American Sign Language/English). There has been agreement in the above literature that for both deaf natives and hearing bilinguals, the mouthing appears to be systematic and rule-governed. However, some researchers have argued that the mouthed elements are code-mixes employed to elucidate the translation (Davis 1989), intra-sentential code-mixes largely driven by discourse dominance (Weisenberg 2003), and borrowings used to fill lexical gaps in the discourse (Boyes-Braem 2001).

Weisenberg (2003) attempts to describe the sociolinguistic factors that cause bilingual interpreters to mouth and the syntactic structures of the simultaneous code-mixes. Results of this experiment indicate that discourse environments containing a high frequency of technical terms and where deaf clients are 'English-dominant' tend to elicit the highest incidences of mouthing among interpreters. Yet despite this knowledge, the prevailing question is whether, and if so, how interpreters co-articulate manual signs and mouthing out of necessity (lexical gaps or prosodic function) or stylistic considerations (emphasis).

The current research attempts to construct a theoretically based model of mouthing by analyzing pre-existing data in an approach that incorporates statistical evidence and phonological investigation to demonstrate that mouthing is not a form of simultaneous intrasentential code-mixing, as previously suggested, but rather a borrowing which in ASL/English interpretation serves a prosodic and grammatical function as well as a cohesive function. In addition the interplay of the mouthing and gesturing is described in detail and two environments, (a) avoidance of homonyms and (b) distinction between word and discourse level meanings are identified. These environments support earlier findings by Boyes-Braem (2001) for Swiss German Sign Language (DSGS).

Within one given text (a simulated interpreting scenario) the interpreters predominantly mouth one English word together with one manual sign, "*Well, it makes your motor, which is sticking into the water, your propeller, lose electrons...*" (Subj 1) In this example, the mouthing of 'water' was produced concurrently with the manual sign, WATER, likewise for 'your' and 'propeller'. However, as exhibited elsewhere in the text by more than one subject, mouthing can likewise extend over more than one sign. For example, mouthing of 'into the' is extended through the production of the semantically equivalent manual sign, articulated here as a pronominal classifier VEHICLE-IN-LIQUID (to show the boat resting in the water) (Weisenberg 2003). This occurs because ASL requires a 'mapping' of the signer's space, not found in English (Neidle et al 2000). By extending the mouthing over the entire ASL verb phrase the prosodic unit is marked.

Elsewhere the interpreter utilizes mouthing to emphasize that the concepts previously presented by the speaker, is now being contradicted. For example, *'two metals can not form a relationship in which they share electrons, but two nonmetals can.'* (Subj 3) The interpreter mouths 'but' while using the manual sign BUT and manually produces CAN while silently pronouncing 'can' (Weisenberg 2003). According to (Humphries & Alcorn 2002), interpreters are trained to utilize what is referred to as 'contrasting structures' in ASL (i.e. '1<sup>st</sup> index, SICK? fs N-O, FINE' too convey the message 'I am well.'). They are also sensitive to contrasts in a discourse, actively 'flagging' them for the deaf consumer to avoid misunderstanding (Melissa Pendergast, personal communication). These factors may make mouthing more likely to occur in structures with contrasts.

An exploration of mouthing by sign language/spoken language bilinguals is particularly significant because of the contrastive modalities of sign and speech and because the interpreters themselves perform daily at this sign/phonetic juncture. This line of research will contribute to studies of language acquisition and language contact in general.

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