

Reiterative codeswitching in Cena as emergent Agent-Marking

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Considering that contexts of language contact are the norm for sign languages, we present one such case wherein an emerging or village sign language has contact with a majority national sign language. The two languages in question are **Libras**, the national sign language of Brazil, and **Cena**, an emerging sign language of northeastern Brazil with a time-depth of around 60 years. We present cases of *reiterative codeswitches*, in which signs for the same referent (in our case WOMAN and MAN) from distinct sign languages are used in a sequence which appears to function as a single unit. Our work details an investigation of the linguistic context and function of such codeswitches, using production data (N=19) from the Haifa Clips task.

We first consider a hypothesis that these result from neologisms, as Stamp & Jaraisy (2021) found a formationally similar construction in Kufr Qassem Sign Language, an emerging sign language in a comparable situation of unimodal language contact with Israeli Sign Language. Here, we find the construction GIRL_[ISL]^GIRL_[KQSL] ‘wife’, where the meaning of the structure differs from that of its constituent parts. We found no evidence for signers picking out one referent to the exclusion of others in Cena. We then considered hypotheses from accommodation and repair, given that codeswitching can serve functions of clarification (Quinto-Pozos, 2009), both to allow for varying (or unknown) language competency of recipients in multilingual contexts, and to repair misunderstandings. Again, our findings suggested this was not the case; the constituent signs of the reiterative codeswitches were extremely frequent as plain signs throughout our data, and all our deaf native signer participants were matched for age and neighbourhood of residence. Almost half the attested reiterative codeswitches were used in absence of misunderstandings. In short, if there is a clarification function, it appears as though it is not the main one.

We argue instead that Cena signers make use of reiterative codeswitches to help disambiguate referents in complex (ditransitive and transitive) events involving animate referents, as these events were significantly overrepresented in contexts in which reiterative codeswitches occurred, compared to the overall stimuli set. Overt argument marking is advantageous – computational studies suggest this lessens the cognitive burden in correctly interpreting argument structure (van Trijp, 2012). This is pertinent for any situation where a language may not have a conventionalised strategy to disambiguate. When we repeated the task with Libras signers, we found ubiquitous use of space for argument marking, supporting the idea that language time-depth -- and thus where Cena lies along the pathway to conventionalisation -- is indeed the conditioning factor. Moreover, the strategy we propose is itself striking, as it is previously unattested in existing literature, which details word order, use of syntactic space, and successive one-argument structures as strategies of argument disambiguation (Ergin et al., 2018). Our poster contributes investigation into an additional method signers of a young sign language employ to mark the thematic role of agents, in a language where use of syntactic space is not yet widespread.

KEYWORDS: reiterative compounds; emerging sign languages; morphosyntactic strategies

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Figure 1. Reiterative codeswitches in Cena.

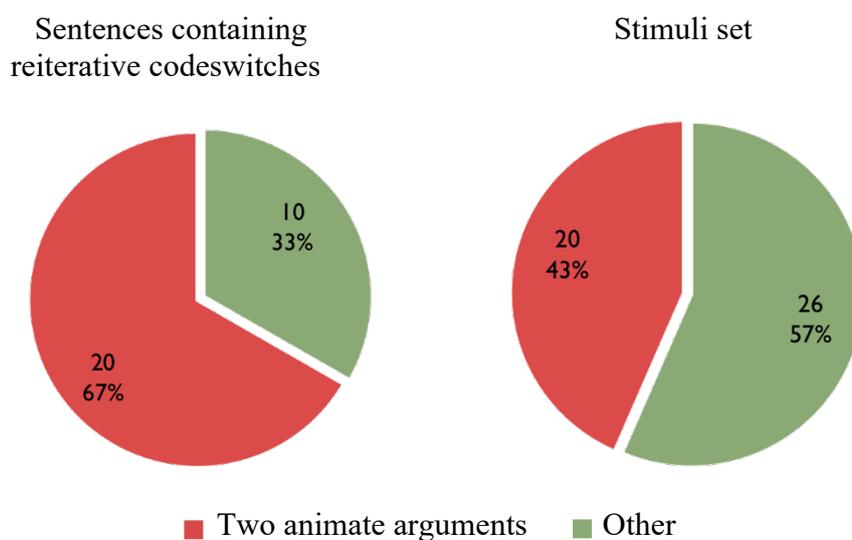


Figure 2. Proportion of two-animate argument events in sentences containing reiterative codeswitches and the Haifa Clips stimuli set.