

There has been an ongoing inquiry of the degree to which the hands and mouth integrate in sign language (Sandler, 2009; Vogt-Svendsen, 2001; Hohenberger and Happ, 2001). It is difficult to determine what linguistic status mouthing has. Some believe mouthing is an integral component of sign languages while others dismiss it as having no status in the language (Hohenberger and Happ, 2001).

A current claim is that part of the natural language instinct involves the hand and mouth working together to create «symbolic symbiosis» (Sandler, 2009). The existence of mouthing and signing coordination strengthens the case for the instinct to use the hand and mouth in producing language. Research in the evolution of language has proposed a biological link between hand and mouth (Armstrong et al., 1995), or that humans first gestured, then spoke (Arbib, 2005). As speech and gesture seem to only have success when somehow combined (McNeill, 1992), the same appears true for mouthing with manual signs. The two systems are very different, yet support each other (Sandler, 2009). In a similar vein, bilingual bimodals use phonetic mouthing to support manual signs in interpretation (Weisenberg, 2009).

Ebbinghaus (1998) remarks that in International Sign Language (ISL), mouthings are restricted since the patterns of iconic mouthing or types which reflect phonological remnants might inhibit mutual comprehension between foreign deaf. Moody (2007) specifically teaches interpreters not to utilize mouthing during ISL trainings. Rather foreign deaf conversations exploit the iconic nature of manual gestures. Goldin-Meadow and McNeill (1999) suggest that the «oral modality is *not* well suited to conveying messages mimetically...» (p. 155). In sign languages the mouth does in fact do a poor job of conveying phonological information from speech (Keller, 2001). One must not overlook the fact that signing without mouthing is an option, just as gesturing is not mandatory with speech.

This is a preliminary examination of foreign-to-foreign deaf interactions with users of Russian Sign Language (РЖЯ) in contact with American Sign Language (ASL). A comparison of mouthing patterns of РЖЯ and ASL reveals why signers do not benefit from, but rather, avoid the use of various mouth gestures in foreign-to-foreign communication. Briefly, in РЖЯ there are signs that have a mandatory co-articulated lexical mouth gesture of “tongue-tip” such as Любопытный (‘curious’), Самый маленький (‘very small’), Псих (‘loony’), Насмехаться (‘mock’), Пропустить (‘let slip’). In contrast, ASL users can display a lexical mouth gesture such as “mm” for CURIOUS or “bop” for THINK-DISAPPEAR (‘slipped my mind’). The decreased use of mouth gestures in foreign-to-foreign situations also becomes evident when one compares РЖЯ mandatory lexical mouth gestures to idiosyncratic phonetic mouthings in ASL for signs such as LEAVE or WILL, or likewise, with ASL adverbial mouth gestures using the tongue which traditionally convey *distance* in ASL (Bridges & Metzger, 1996). Put simply, the form of the mouth gestures in ASL and РЖЯ may be visually similar, but there is clear disparity of meaning. Foreign-to-foreign signing encapsulates a very primitive interaction with the mimetic capacity of the hands fully exploited, while the mouth becomes dispensable.

This exploration is significant to educating gesture linguistics about the sign-phonetic interface of the uncommonly studied РЖЯ, and questioning the role of the mouth in sign language communication, if we are to build on and refine our theory of bimodal language in humans.

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