Signers of a number of emerging and young sign languages have been shown to favor certain iconic strategies when naming man-made tools, fruits & vegetables, and animals (Padden et al., 2013, 2015; Hwang et al., under review). Different strategies can be identified for different classes of objects, forming what they call patterned iconicity. In this paper, I discuss sub-lexical variation among six families who use a recently identified emerging sign language, San Juan Quiahije Chatino Sign Language (SJQCSL). Because the language does not yet exhibit systematic phonological organization based on contrastive primitives of formational parameters, there is substantial variation in individual signs across families.

This paper makes two central claims about iconic strategies used by signers of SJQCSL. First, the greatest variation across the signing families occurs for the category of animals, compared to that of tools and food, based on the number of different iconic strategies the participants used to depict referents (Table 1). Second, signers of SJQCSL often create new signs for animals in the form of multi-sign strings, based on facial attributes, a strategy not discussed by Padden et al. (2013, 2015).

I analyzed 48 items from a larger lexical elicitation task with 13 participants from six families. The items were evenly divided among tools, food, and animals. Responses often occurred as multi-sign strings; each individual sign was coded for the type of strategy participants used. Among tools and food, the most common strategies were HANDLING, INSTRUMENT, and OBJECT (Padden et al., 2013, 2015):

- **HANDLING**: The signer’s hand represents a human hand in action, i.e. grasping an imaginary object while performing a canonical action;
- **INSTRUMENT**: The signer’s hand depicts the shapes or features of the object, while performing a canonical action;
- **OBJECT**: The signer’s hand only depicts the shape or features of the object without demonstrating any simulated human action. This strategy also encompasses “height specifiers” or conventional gestures found in Mesoamerica for measuring the height of animals.

For animals, I propose an additional iconic strategy not yet discussed by others, CHARACTERISTIC. The signer represents a specific characteristic of a referent with her hands and/or body. This strategy can be further divided into the sub-strategies based on whether the signer depicts first, (1) a characteristic action or (2) attribute of the referent and secondly, whether the signer depicts (a) the body or (b) face of the referent:

1. **Characteristic body action**: The signer represents a characteristic action of a referent’s body such as representing the flying action of an owl (Fig. 1).
2. **Characteristic facial action**: The signer represents a characteristic action of a referent’s face such as representing the biting action of a dog (Fig. 2).
3. **Characteristic body attribute**: The signer represents a characteristic attribute of a referent’s body such as representing the feathers of an owl (Fig. 3).
4. **Characteristic facial attribute**: The signer represents a characteristic attribute of a referent’s face such as representing the whiskers of a cat (Fig. 4).

SJQCSL favors the INSTRUMENT strategy for depicting tools and a combination of HANDLING, INSTRUMENT, and/or OBJECT strategies for foods. Like other emerging sign languages, SJQCSL signers also favor the CHARACTERISTIC strategy for depicting animals; the participants used multi-sign strings more often, which often consisted of multiple strategies, including at least one type of CHARACTERISTIC sub-strategy and sometimes another type of strategy (Table 2).
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In contrast to what we found across families, the participants’ responses within families were more consistent. The most common shared sub-strategies within families were the specific CHARACTERISTIC FACIAL ATTRIBUTE (2b), and CHARACTERISTIC BODY ACTION (1a). When they used the characteristic facial attribute sub-strategy, the families varied in which facial attribute they used to represent an animal. Within families, they referred to the same attributes, forming what we call a “family-based lexicon.”

Based on the case study of SJQCSL, one may anticipate that when a sign language emerges, signers from different families may produce similar signs for tools and food, because these items are likely to elicit similar iconic prototypes. Animals, on the other hand, may elicit different iconic prototypes. This may inform us as to what to expect from the emergence of sign language lexicons with respect to semantic categories.

Table 1: Number of strategy for each item

Table 2: Number of characteristic sub-strategy and other strategies for each item

Fig. 1: OWL
Fig. 2: DOG
Fig. 3: OWL
Fig. 4: CAT

References


