Several phonological models have been proposed (e.g., Brentari, 1998; Sandler, 1989; van der Kooij, 2002) that aspire to account for all the possible phonological contrasts within a given (or multiple) sign language(s). These models have typically been applied to the core, native lexicon but have been extended to show how signs from the non-native lexicon (i.e., fingerspellings; Brentari & Padden, 2001; Cormier, Schembri, & Tyrone, 2008) and non-core lexicon (i.e., classifier constructions; Eccarius & Brentari, 2007) largely fit the same phonological patterns as the core, native lexicon. However, these phonological models have yet to be used in practice within a large dataset representing the core lexicon of a sign language (i.e., a lexical database that has been consistently lemmatised). Here, we outline an ongoing attempt to identify the minimal features required for an adequate phonological description of a sign language lexicon within a lemmatised lexical database of British Sign Language (BSL), and we describe some issues that arise when attempting to apply phonological categories from existing models to a sign language lexicon. In particular, we explore the phonology of signs which are part of the core, native lexicon but have been lexicalised from classifier constructions and/or fingerspelling.

The BSL lexical database, adapted from the Auslan lexical database (Johnston, 2001), consists of 2500 lexical signs (in their citation form) lemmatised from a BSL lexical frequency study (Cormier et al., 2011) and an earlier dictionary of BSL (Brien, 1992). To provide a basic phonological description of all these entries in the BSL lexical database, phonological categories from Johnston’s database (Johnston, 2003) have been modified using modern phonological models proposed for other sign languages as a guide (e.g., Brentari, 1998; van der Kooij, 2002). However, these phonological models do not always lend themselves neatly to an overall description of the core lexicon within a lexical database, particularly for core signs that have been lexicalised from classifier constructions or nativised from fingerspelling. For example, the BSL sign GOAL is difficult to describe using conventional phonological categories traditionally applied to the core lexicon because categories used to describe the location of the dominant hand with respect to the non-dominant hand cannot be applied (i.e., no phonological model specifies the space between the extended index and pinky fingers on the non-dominant hand as a place of articulation). Additionally these signs may or may not adhere to phonological constraints proposed for lexical signs (e.g., Battinson, 1978). Thus, the ‘horns’ handshape used on the non-dominant hand in BSL GOAL is a violation of Battison’s dominance constraint. Nonetheless, this sign is conventionalised in form and meaning and is regarded as a fully lexical sign. Similar issues arise when considering signs that have been nativised from fingerspelling. We describe how these entries are accounted for within a phonological description of BSL’s core lexicon. In doing so, we show how theory (via phonological modelling) is applied to a lexicon (which relies on phonological contrast) and how this practice can then help inform theory, in an iterative process.

References


