

Tense, Time, and Adverbs in Italian Sign Language

Abstract

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One difference between the Italian Sign Language sentences in (1)-(3) below and their English translations is that, while the English predicates are inflected for tense, the sign for the verb in Italian Sign Language (LIS) appears in its citational form:

- (1) GIANNI HOUSE BUY
“Gianni is buying a house”
- (2) TIME-AGO GIANNI HOUSE BUY
“Some time ago Gianni bought a house”
- (3) TOMORROW GIANNI HOUSE BUY
“Tomorrow Gianni will buy a house”

Similar facts have also been observed for ASL and have led some authors (Friedman 1975, Pizzuto *et al.* 1995, for example) to conclude that these sign languages, on a par with spoken languages like Chinese, lack grammatical tense. Neidle *et al.* (2000) and Jacobowitz and Stokoe (1988) have challenged this view for ASL and have argued that ASL sentences contain tense markers (lexical tense markers according to Neidle *et al.*, tense inflection encoded by movement features of verbs according to Jacobowitz and Stokoe). In this talk, I'll present some data showing that LIS verbs are inflected for tense. If we acknowledge the existence of tense inflection in LIS, however, it seems that there is a conspicuous difference concerning tense between LIS and tense inflected languages like Italian and English. In Italian and English, past and future tense inflection cooccurs with past and future time adverbs. In the corresponding LIS sentences containing past and future time adverbs, on the other hand, past and future inflection on the verb is absent. Thus, for instance, the verb BUY in (2)-(3) does not carry past and future inflection. If we add past and future inflection to the verb, the resulting sentences are anomalous:

- (4) *TIME-AGO GIANNI HOUSE ^{past}BUY
“Some time ago Gianni bought a house”
- (5) *TOMORROW GIANNI HOUSE ^{fut}BUY
“Tomorrow Gianni will buy a house”

In the talk, I'll present an analysis of the tense system of LIS that explains why verbal inflection and time adverbs interact differently in LIS and in spoken languages like Italian and English. I'll argue that the analysis has some consequences for current theories of the interpretation of tense. Finally, I'll extend the analysis to account for the behavior of the lexical marker DONE in LIS.