

The Interplay Between Iconicity and Arbitrariness in Italian Sign Language (LIS) Idioms: A Theoretical Proposal for the Analysis of Signed Idioms

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Abstract This paper investigates the relationship between iconicity and arbitrariness in the comprehension of idioms in Italian Sign Language (LIS). Unlike spoken language research on this topic, this study includes monomorphemic signs, offering a broader perspective on the phenomenon. The research explores how LIS idioms convey meaning through the visual-manual modality: the central proposal is that iconic features aid in the literal interpretation of signs, whereas arbitrary features facilitate the comprehension of idiomatic or figurative meanings – emphasizing the inherently simultaneous and visual-spatial nature of sign language expression.

Keywords Idioms. Idiomatic expressions. Italian Sign Language (LIS). Iconicity. Arbitrariness.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Definition of Idioms. – 2.1 Properties of Idioms. – 2.2 Pattern of Figuration. – 3 Idioms in Sign Languages. – 3.1 Types of i.e. in Sign Languages. – 4 Iconicity and Arbitrariness in Sign Languages. – 5 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

Idioms, or idiomatic expressions (i.e.), are linguistic elements that have generated considerable interest within the scientific community.¹ While extensive research has been developed in the understanding of i.e. in spoken languages, the domain of sign languages has not been deeply explored yet. Only a few studies have been conducted on the topic in some sign languages (for British Sign Language, Sutton-Spence, Woll 1999; for American Sign Language, Wilcox 2001; Taub 2001; for Australian Sign Language, Johnston, Schembri 2010; Johnston, Ferrara 2012; for French Sign Language, Pierrot 2020).

Generally speaking, i.e. appear to be extremely complex to describe in all languages (Čermák 2001), and their definition is still a matter of debate, regardless of their spoken or signed nature. Among various reasons, this is due to their inherently complex and multidimensional nature. Traditionally, i.e. have been described as semantically non-compositional expressions. However, some scholars pointed out a gradient of transparency (Nunberg et al. 1994), which can be related to the *Pattern of Figuration* proposed by Langlotz (2006). Further complicating the picture is their syntactic behavior: idioms were once thought to be fixed and frozen, but numerous examples show they can undergo some syntactic transformations while retaining their idiomatic meaning (Fernando, Flavell 1981). This (semi)flexibility poses challenges for formal syntactic theories to account for such variability. Additionally, the analysis of sign languages may suggest reconsidering the definition and the parameters of i.e., broadening the research and the concept of idiom, since signed idioms appear to differ in some respect from spoken i.e.

In particular, this article aims to enhance the ongoing discourse by investigating the nature and the interplay of iconicity and arbitrariness in signed idioms, with a specific attention to LIS. Nonetheless, this contribution is intended to extend the current understanding and stimulate additional research in this field and topic.

At first, reconstructing the descriptive definition of idioms is necessary. However, it is important to change standpoint and avoid a purely word-centered perspective.² When studying idioms in sign languages, such as LIS, some distinctions emerge from the observations made in spoken languages.

1 Burger et al. 1982; Cacciari 1989; Nunberg et al. 1994; Casadei 1994; 1995; 1996; Moon 1998; Langlotz 2006.

2 In other terms, when studying sign languages, it is important not to always compare them to spoken languages. Also, the focus should not be the word, cf. the wordhood concept (Zingler 2020). See also Volterra et al. 2019 for a further comparison of the structures of spoken and sign languages.

Traditionally, for example, one distinctive feature is the number of elements in an i.e., which is connected to the concept of non-compositionality.³ In this article, I will present the possibility of idioms to display this feature in a different way, since it is easy to find monorematic idioms in LIS (meaning only one sign is produced). Unlike their counterparts in spoken languages, signed i.e. can present an internal non-compositionality referred to the parameters. This concept will be further explained in the forthcoming sections.

Understanding the broader context of i.e. involves recognizing the defining parameters and the concept of *Pattern of Figuration* (Langlotz 2006). These parameters, presented in §2, collectively shape the idiomatic nature in a simultaneous and synthetic manner, referring to sign languages.

Significantly, in these languages, idioms may be composed of a variable number of signs, challenging the conventional notion of idioms as polirematic expressions seen in spoken languages.

Upon delineating all the parameters and exploring the definitional aspects of these elements in LIS, this contribution will discuss the role of iconicity and arbitrariness in the formation and comprehension of i.e. in this language. Finally, it will be considered the relation between level of interpretation of idioms and their manual-visual nature.

2 The Definition of Idioms

Traditionally, in spoken languages, i.e. are described as semantically opaque and structurally fixed polysemous units (Squillante 2014; Langlotz 2006). Specifically, the defining parameters of i.e. are illustrated in Table 1, whose structure is based on the subdivision proposed by Langlotz (2006, 3) and expanded by combining the theories of the aforementioned studies.

Table 1 Parameters for a definition of idiom

Semiotic dimension	Feature	Term
Grammatical status	Degree of conventionalization or familiarity	<i>institutionalization</i>
Form	Formal complexity of construction	<i>compositeness</i>
	Degree of invariability	<i>frozenness</i>
Use	Recognition and use in a community	<i>conventionality</i>
Meaning	Meaning cannot be derived from constituent words; it is extended to a figurative interpretation	<i>non-compositionality</i>

3 This concept will be explained in §2.

In previous studies, it was observed and suggested that idioms and i.e. are informal and typically used in colloquial settings (Schweigert, Moates 1988; Nunberg et al. 1994). However, several pieces of evidence suggest their widespread presence even in formal or official settings and registers, such as political speeches and academic writing (Squarcione 1995; Simpson, Mendis 2003; Miller 2020). It is crucial to note the diverse nature of i.e., spanning the whole spectrum of (in)formality. Hence, it is important not to generalize and categorize the idiomatic class as solely informal.

Another noteworthy characteristic, which is not further analyzed in this contribution, is the so-called affect, signifying the emotional or evaluative undertones conveyed by an idiom towards its referents (Nunberg et al. 1994, 249). Determining and standardizing this parameter pose challenges, as acknowledged by the authors themselves.

2.1 Properties of Idioms

As mentioned above, there is a set of parameters that can indicate the idiomatic nature of an expression or element.

The characteristics outlined in Table 1 are further presented.

Institutionalization indicates the degree of familiarization and formalization of an idiom within a given linguistic community (Fernando 1996). Langlotz (2006, 3) considers this feature as the grammatical status: the expression is institutionalized because it is part of the grammar of a language as a single complex unit, rather than a set of independent words. In other terms, since idioms are institutionalized expressions, their meaning is fixed in the lexicon of a given language. The sociolinguistic concept of institutionalization is strictly linked to the linguistic concept of lexicalization, since the grammatical behavior of an e.i. becomes idiosyncratic (99).

Compositeness refers to the polirematic nature of i.e., consisting of at least two lexical elements, if we focus only on spoken languages.⁴ For instance, 'bite the bullet' consists of the verb 'bite', the definite article 'the' and the noun 'bullet'.

The notion of compositeness is closely related to the concept of *frozenness*, or *fixity*, introduced by Fraser (1970), which defines the lexicogrammatical restrictions of i.e. For this reason, they are both classified under the semiotic dimension of form. In particular, referring to the degree of frozenness, an idiomatic production cannot be modified. Casadei (1995) defines four types of fixity: i) fixity in

⁴ In §3 I will present the possibility of sign language idioms to be a one-sign expression, in contrast to the notion of idioms as multi-word expressions (MWEs).

the order of constituents; *ii*) transformational fixity for a certain structure; *iii*) fixity of grammatical categories; *iv*) fixity in the inventory of components.⁵ Since types *i*) and *iii*) appear controversial and have been largely discussed by Langlotz (2006) in his second chapter, they will not be further presented in this article.

On the other hand, an example for *ii*) is provided below:

- (1) To kick the bucket
- a. *the bucket has been kicked by *NP* (English, adapted from Langlotz 2006, 28)
 - b. *the bucket, *NP* kicked (English, adapted from Langlotz 2006, 31)

The syntactic structure of an i.e., like the English idiom in (1), cannot change, as in (1a) where it is passivized or in (1b) where the NP ‘the bucket’ has been moved in a marked position. These operations result in the loss of the idiomatic meaning associated with the given expression.

In the case of *iv*), the same phenomenon occurs, wherein an internal lexical element is not susceptible to substitution with an alternative or different term, as exemplified in the following from Inzerillo (2011, 40) for Italian:

- (2) avere la coda di paglia
 to have the tail of straw
 ‘to have a guilty conscience’
- a. **avere* la coda di fieno
 to have the tail of hay’

In (2) the idiom is presented in its institutionalized and frozen form, whereas in (2a) the term *paglia* has been replaced by *fieno*. The substitution of a word with another term results in the loss of the idiomatic-figurative meaning and the expression can only be interpreted as literal.

Another property of i.e. is *conventionality*, which is related to institutionalization and indicates the association between the particular configuration or order of words and a specific idiomatic meaning (Titone, Connine 1999). In other words, speakers or signers of a certain language recognize idioms as typical expressions, even though idioms contrast with ordinary speech or signing. Hence, a linguistic community recognizes and collectively agrees upon the idiomatic meaning while, at the same time, can interpret each element in isolation with a different meaning, the literal one (Casadei 1995).

5 As translated in Marabini and Mezzina (2020) from the Italian.

Non-compositionality denotes the impossibility of deriving the meaning of the entire expression through the simple understanding of its individual constituents (Katz, Postal 1963). Hence, idioms violate the Principle of Semantic Compositionality, also known as Frege's Principle.⁶ Traditionally, this feature has been the primary property to identify or define an idiom. For example, the English idiom in (1) 'to kick the bucket' does not mean to physically hit a pail but has an idiomatic-figurative reading as the concept of dying.

Related to this feature, the connection established between the overall meaning of an idiomatic construction and the set of meanings of its constituents is defined as Pattern of Figuration (Langlotz 2006, 4). This principle is presented in §2.2.

In general, therefore, the defining parameters presented in Table 1 and discussed above can be applied to any element to analyze its idiomatic nature. However, studying such forms can be challenging as the defining parameters lack clear boundaries (Langlotz 2006, 5), making the classification and the definition of idioms complex to determine (Barkema 1996; Skandera 2004).

2.2 Pattern of Figuration

Since idioms are institutionalized expressions, their idiomatic meaning is fixed in the lexicon of a given language (Burger 1989; Langlotz 2006). Considering the non-compositionality feature, an idiom has an idiomatic-figurative reading and a literal one:

Table 2 Pattern of Figuration scheme

Compositional interpretation (the sum of the meaning of each component) 	<i>Pattern of figuration</i> 	Non-compositional interpretation (the specific lexicalized meaning of the expression)
Literal meaning		Idiomatic-figurative meaning

Each idiom can be approached with a dual interpretation: one that interprets the idiomatic meaning, and another dedicated to the literal sense of the elements composing it. For example, the idiom 'to break the ice' has a dual reading: primarily, this idiom should evoke an idiomatic-figurative interpretation (as to ease the tension), but it can also be read as the literal act of shattering a block of ice.

⁶ "The meaning of a sentence is determined by the meaning of its components and the manner in which they are arranged in syntactic structure" (O'Grady et al. 1997, 260).

Studies suggest that processing idioms is not uniform across all users and for all kinds of expressions, in any language (Ding 2020). There seems to be a correlation between the level of linguistic proficiency and the activation of one interpretation over the other. A speaker's or signer's linguistic competence appears to influence the likelihood of the activation of the idiomatic-figurative interpretation.⁷

After defining the characteristic properties of i.e. in spoken languages in section 2, it becomes important to consider and analyze how idioms present themselves in languages that utilize a different channel from the acoustic-vocal one. The next part will focus on idioms in sign languages, presenting the differences between the two linguistic modalities. For example, the aspect of multi-word compositeness seems to be missing in some cases in languages that exploit the manual-visual channel. These languages, in fact, might also admit monorematic idioms.

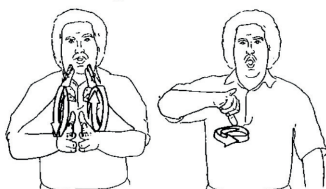
3 Idioms in Sign Languages

The literature reviewed to understand and define the meaning of i.e., as discussed in the previous section, is mostly based on spoken languages.

Before presenting the concept of iconicity and arbitrariness in signed idioms, this article aims to discuss some issues about the definition and the properties of i.e. in sign languages. Primarily, for example, the compositeness feature seems not to appear obligatory in sign languages (Johnston, Schembri 2010; Johnston, Ferrara 2012; Pierrot 2020). Before delving into this topic, however, it is necessary to define how idioms are formed. I.e. can originate from tropes such as metaphors and metonymy (Gibbs 1994; Kövecses 2002). In cognitive linguistics, metaphors are considered fundamental mechanism for conceptualizing abstract experiences through more concrete domains (Lakoff, Johnson 1980), and this process is particularly evident in sign languages due to their visual-manual modality. Hence, in sign languages, metaphors are constructed depending on the visualization of the represented object, so that the form of signs varies according to lexical choices and the use of signing space (Amorini 2008, 118). These tropes are the core of several figurative expressions in both sign and spoken languages. The phenomenon has been widely known and observed since the 1990s, with the publication of the first LIS

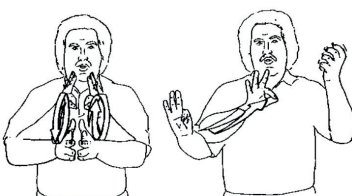
7 There are several factors that can influence the understanding of an idiom, like sociolinguistic variables (age, gender, education), familiar vs unfamiliar expressions, real time vs retrospective processing (Ding 2020). These elements will not be further investigated though.

grammar by Romeo (1997), which provides a number of expressions identified as idiomatic, either typical of the Deaf culture or influenced by spoken Italian. Below are images taken from the aforementioned grammar. Examples (3) and (4) illustrate polirematic i.e. such as **SEGNARE OLIO** and **SEGNARE VIOLINO**, used respectively to refer to a person who signs particularly well and fluently, and to someone who, through their signing, seeks to persuade or flatter another person.



(3)

SEGNARE OLIO
(to) sign oil
'to sign fluently'



(4)

SEGNARE VIOLINO
(to) sign violin
'to persuade/to flatter'

(Romeo 1997, 38)

The example in (5) is a monorematic sign typical of LIS and widely used. **CHIODO_IN_TESTA** is a sign that refer to an event firmly fixed in one's memory, something that will never be forgotten. The metaphoric image evoked is that of 'nailing' a memory into the mind.



(5)

CHiodo_IN_TESTA

nail on head

'burned into one's memory

(Romeo 1997, 38)

In addition, the manual-visual channel allows conveying a greater amount of information at the same time, thanks to the simultaneous combination of different formational parameters⁸ (a.o. Klima, Bellugi 1979), as demonstrated in the example (5). Through the vocal-auditory channel, on the other hand, phonemes can only be pronounced sequentially, one after the other.

As previously mentioned, traditionally the literature concerning i.e. (and more in general, phraseology) has focused, almost exclusively, on polirematic expressions. Only few scholars have shown interest in idiomatic compounds and monorematic idioms. Among them, Čemák (2007), Johnston and Ferrara (2012), Vašku (2019), and Pierrot (2020) analyze the possibility of extending the definition of idioms to monorematic complex elements. In a similar vein, Quer et al. (2017) suggest that sign languages rarely have any fixed idiomatic expression consisting of multiple signs. In particular, Johnston and Ferrara (2012) propose that, in Australian Sign Language (Auslan), monorematic idiomatic signs exist and they analyze their properties. Pierrot's hypothesis for French Sign Language (LSF), on the other hand, is that compositeness presents itself differently in signed languages: an idiomatic sign (like any lexical sign) is constituted by various formational parameters, which contribute simultaneously and, oftentimes, synthetically to the formation of the idiomatic meaning as a whole.

In other words, as we saw i.e. in spoken languages are composed of multiple words that, when taken together, have an idiomatic meaning

8 Parameters in sign languages are: handshape (the configuration of the hand during the production), place of articulation (where the sign is produced), orientation (the direction of the palm during the sign), movement (the action of the sign) and non-manual components (such as facial expressions and torso or head movements).

derived from interpreting the entire sentence as a whole; on the other hand, if read compositionally, these elements have an entirely different meaning. In sign languages, however, the parameters contribute to the formation of a specific idiomatic interpretation only when they appear in specific (institutionalized) distributions. Moreover, just like frozenness in spoken language's idiom, if a parameter is modified, it is likely to lose the idiomatic-figurative meaning.

Therefore, i.e. in sign languages can be formed by a variable number of signs, often even just one. Examples of multi-sign i.e. in LIS are CUORE NERO in (6), used to describe a cruel person, TESTA DURA, meaning stubborn, or MISURA FUORI, indicating something exaggerated and/or indescribable. As interesting as these expressions may be, when analyzing i.e. in LIS (generally, in all sign languages), monorematic idioms can be spotted, such as MANICA_LARGA, MANI_IN_TASCA, or ZERO_IN_FRONTE, proposed in the next sections. A characteristic of sign languages is the low number of multi-sign i.e. that are not actually calques from the spoken language used in the same territory (Johnston and Schembri 2010).



(6)

CUORE	NERO
heart	black
'cruel'	

(Rigo 2022, 91)

At this point, it is essential to reflect on the simultaneous nature of signed languages: these languages are characterized by the possibility to convey more information synchronously, unlike spoken languages, which are sequential (Vermeerbergen et al. 2007; Branchini, Mantovan 2022). As mentioned above, some studies (Čemák 2007; Vašku 2019; Johnston, Ferrara 2012; Pierrot 2020; Rigo 2022; Pasin 2023) suggest that all articulators contribute synchronously to convey a more complex meaning, in a sort of simultaneous compositeness.

An example of this feature is represented by the sign CAPELLI_DRIITTI in (7), another i.e. in LIS composed of a single sign, with a meaning similar to the English expression 'hair-raising', literally

meaning ‘my hair stands on end’. In this case, all the information is produced simultaneously, while it would be presented sequentially in a spoken language. In other words, in this specific example, the handshape indicates the hair, the movement represents the action of raising and standing, the place of articulation is clearly related to the body part where the hair is.



(7)

CAPELLI_DRITTI

hair raised

‘having someone’s hair raised on their head’

(Branchini, Mantovan 2022, 846)

Furthermore, in sign language idioms, the idiomatic feature could reside in the iconic meaning that formational parameters can recall: if analyzed compositionally, the literal meaning conveyed by these parameters may not result in the overall idiomatic reading of the sign. This complexity might be one of the reasons why i.e. in sign language literature are still understudied: this type of signs could be simultaneously analyzed from different perspectives, depending on the adopted approach (Johnston, Ferrara 2012), resulting in a complex field, always open to several analyses.

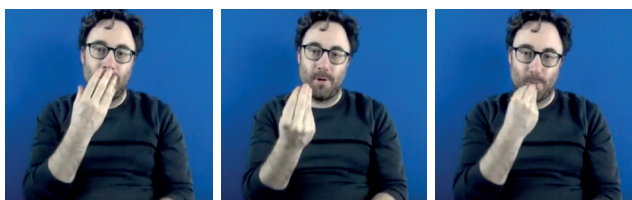
Regardless, there seems to be a connection between the iconicity that some parameters can acquire and the arbitrariness of the non-compositional meaning. Before exploring this concept, though, in the next section the types of signed i.e. will be presented, to better understand what kind of idioms are detectable in sign languages.

3.1 Types of i.e. in Sign Languages

The few studies carried out on sign language idioms have identified three main types of i.e. in these languages (Sutton-Spence, Woll 1999; Claus 2010; Johnston, Schembri 2010; Pierrot 2020; Rigo 2022; Pasin 2023):

1. Calques from the surrounding spoken language: i.e. derived from the spoken language used in the same area as the sign

- language. An example of this is the LIS i.e. LUPO IN_BOCCA in (8), which is a way to wish good luck;⁹
2. loan with cultural adaptation: i.e. derived from the spoken language but are modified and adapted to the Deaf culture and community; for example, the ASL idiom IN_ONE_EYE_OUT_THE_OTHER in (9), from the English expression '(go) in one ear and out the other';
 3. typical of sign language: i.e. of a specific sign language, which are not detectable in the spoken language used in the same territory. For this category, an example is ZERO_IN_FRONTE in LIS (but also found in German Sign Language) idiom that means to not know a thing about something, in (10).



(8)

LUPO IN_BOCCA
wolf in mouth
'good luck'

(Rigo 2022, 92)



(9)

IN_ONE_EYE_OUT_THE_OTHER
go in one eye and out the other
'to go in one ear and out the other'

(ASL, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddXRp5XAhwQ>, 2018)

⁹ In spoken Italian '*in bocca al lupo*', literally 'in the wolf's mouth', is an i.e. that means 'good luck!'.



(10)

ZERO_IN_FRONT

zero on forehead

‘to have no idea about something’

(DGS, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XI01FyGo9mI>, 2016)

4 Iconicity and Arbitrariness in Sign Languages

All languages, spoken or signed, have examples of iconic and arbitrary forms. A symbol is considered arbitrary when there is no inherent or perceptible connection between its form and the concept, object or action it denotes (Valli et al. 2011, 5). In contrast, an iconic symbol reflects some aspects of the entity or action it symbolizes. In the realm of sign languages, the role of iconicity seems to become markedly significant in the formational processes of signs. Iconicity can reveal the derivative origin of a sign and the physical characteristics to which it refers in expressing a specific subject, action, or object. As demonstrated by numerous studies in phonology and lexicon,¹⁰ often the formal features of signs can be iconically associated with precise semantic domains. Specifically, attention is drawn to the iconic traits of the formational parameters that comprise signs, particularly the chereme (minimal unit of the sign), which determines the iconic representation of the parameter. These are often selected to visually allude to a specific characteristic linked to the meaning of the sign, establishing shared traits among signs belonging to the same semantic field. For example, concepts related to cognitive activities are typically produced near the signer’s head.

It is essential to note that sign languages may employ different formal properties to indicate the same referent. The intrinsic iconic characteristics of signs are influenced by linguistic and cultural elements (Klima, Bellugi 1979; Boyes-Braem 1981), making them

10 Russo 2004; Volterra 2004; Bertone 2011; Lerosé 2012; Volterra et al. 2019; Branchini, Mantovan 2022.

also arbitrary. In other words, although iconic representations are widespread in the lexicon of sign languages, some studies (see Pietrandrea 2002 for LIS) argue that arbitrariness remains a fundamental feature of sign formation. One key argument in support of this view concerns the phonological status of iconic elements: the iconic aspects of a sign must conform to the phonological rules of the language and can only be realized through the phonological parameters permitted by that system. Furthermore, the articulatory features of a sign that are considered linguistically salient are selected arbitrarily, regardless of any potential iconic motivation. Consequently, understanding the manual form of a sign is generally insufficient as a cue to its interpretation, posing challenges for individuals learning a sign language as a second language, particularly in interpreting the meaning of a sign. Conversely, proficient signers of different sign languages often find better mutual understanding compared to speakers of different spoken languages (Corazza, Volterra 1988).

This role of iconicity in sign languages extends to figurative expressions, which are conveyed through a different channel from the acoustic-vocal, making them intriguing subjects for research. Before delving into the role of iconicity in idioms, it is useful to define iconicity in sign languages. Russo (2004, 18) characterizes it as the “depictive power of words concerning the things signified”, where the depictive trait corresponds to the alignment between the form and the meaning of the sign.

The formational parameters of a sign, as previously presented, may be linked to visual metaphors that collectively invoke identifiable (and iconic) features of one or more characteristics linked to the meaning. However, again, the transparency of a sign depends on linguistic and cultural factors as well. There is no universal iconicity; in other words, access to the meaning of a sign and the culturally determined criteria for selecting its iconic aspects might help to better understand a language, but only that specific language. The selected parameters can assume different iconic meanings based on the culture and linguistic conventions within the language itself (Russo 2004).

The theory presented above demonstrates how in sign language using visually iconic elements is natural. These elements can be tied to the iconic or partial iconic traits of the meaning. Studies on this subject are hereby crucial, not only for revealing the pervasive presence of visual metaphor and iconicity in sign languages, but also for comprehending the underlying process of idiom creation. This understanding allows for the recognition and comprehension of the semantic (and pragmatic) core of idioms.

So, to summarize, the general key concept is that in the manual-visual channel it is possible to map abstract concepts into concrete ones (Calderone in Branchini, Mantovan 2022, 841). In sign creation,

the selection of parameters and features is not universal, and each sign language can convey a concept differently (Pietrandrea 2002). The crucial aspect is the relationship established between the standardized form and meaning (Valli, Lucas 1998).

Iconicity in sign languages can refer to the frequent possibility of recognizing the elements that signs represent. The hypothesis is that iconicity could be significant in the creation and in the literal interpretation of idiomatic signs as well: the relationship between what is being presented and the sign can, therefore, be clearer through the visual transmission of meanings (Pierrot 2020 for LSF), as seen in MANICA_LARGA in (11) and LAVARSI_MANI in (12).



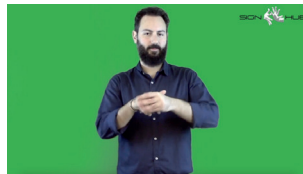
(11)

MANICA_LARGA

sleeve wide

‘to be generous/indulgent’

(Romeo 1997, 38)



(12)

LAVARSI_MANI

wash hands

‘to wash one’s hands of’

(Branchini, Mantovan 2022, 282)

Regarding arbitrariness, different sign languages arbitrarily select certain distinctive traits. However, there are also intrinsic cultural aspects specific to each language in the selection and creation of idioms, components that are entirely arbitrary (Pierrot 2020), as in MANI_IN_TASCA (13).

While the parameters forming an idiom in LIS might be easily comprehended in a compositional reading, as seen for (11) and (12), the interpretation might not result in the overall idiomatic meaning of the sign, especially for those unfamiliar with LIS linguistic and cultural conventions.



(13)

MANI_IN_TASCA

hands in pockets

'to shut up/to stop signing'

(Rigo 2022, 92)

To conclude, with regard to Langlotz's Pattern of Figuration, iconic traits appear to help in the interpretation of the literal meaning, facilitating the compositional reading of the idiom. Meanwhile, arbitrary traits may come into play in interpreting the idiomatic-figurative meaning, fostering the non-compositional reading. In any case, both can contribute to the formation and understanding of idioms; the transfer of meanings occurs through the selection of iconic elements, while the total meaning of the idiom is conventional (and institutionalized).

5 Conclusion

As presented in this brief article, although sign languages can feature monorematic i.e., the idiomatic-figurative comprehension of these in LIS cannot derive from the individual elements that compose them. The creation and understanding of idiomatic signs depend on both iconic and arbitrary aspects.

The traditional understanding of idioms in spoken languages, marked by a dual interpretation (literal vs idiomatic-figurative) and polirematicity, becomes complex when applied to sign languages. Unique features of sign languages, such as their simultaneous nature, challenges the conventional view of idioms as polirematic expressions found in spoken languages.

This article also addressed the role of iconicity and arbitrariness in sign languages, emphasizing the significance of visual metaphors in conveying idiomatic meanings.

The compositional reading seems to be linked to the iconic and visual nature of signs. The literal meaning is more easily interpretable thanks to the visual metaphors underlying the formational parameters (Boyes-Braem 1981; Volterra et al. 2019). Although there may be an iconic motivation at the origin, the selection of certain formational parameters is the result of negotiations within the community, namely arbitrary choices. For this reason, knowledge of linguistic and cultural aspects allows for non-compositional reading, which requires a specific understanding of the Deaf culture in a given territory.

The lack of in-depth studies on idioms in sign languages makes research complicated and raises numerous unanswered questions and issues. For this reason, it is interesting to better understand these elements and expand the analysis further.

This preliminary study tries to delineate the complexities of i.e., particularly within the context of sign languages, with a specific focus on LIS. The study of idioms in sign languages is still an underestimated area, and this contribution sought to improve the discussion by exploring the interplay of iconicity and arbitrariness in signed idioms.

Moreover, this theoretical study encourages further research in this field, recognizing the need for continued investigation into the linguistic and cultural richness of idioms in LIS.

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