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Greek Sign Language documentation: theoretical implications and practical considerations.

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The Greek Deaf Community is a small, lively community of about 40,000 users gathered in major urban centres of Greece. Not much is written about Greek Sign Language the language of this community (henceforth referred to as '*GSL*'), but there seems to be some evidence on its nature and its use in and across communities. At this stage the call for a more concise attempt of documentation of GSL seems not only valid but urgent: there are a few smaller scale dictionaries, with the occasional counter-suggestions on lemmata from community members; the Deaf community is still strong, but parts of it go away each year, as valuable fluent signers age, and as new legislation focuses more on mainstreaming deaf children in the hearing community. In this context, use of GSL comes disproportionately more often from hearing sign language interpreters (most now coming from the hearing community), under circumstances that socially and linguistically 'stretch' and 'push' GSL register boundaries; language planning and bilingual education issues finish the picture.

The initiative for GSL documentation came from the Institute for Language and Speech Processing (Athens), an institution with a rich experience in applying theoretical linguistic work to sensitive populations. For the present study, four language consultants were carefully selected in order to meet different criteria, such as fluent native knowledge of Greek Sign Language, some degree of metalinguistic awareness, even familiarity with recording. The corpus of the research consists of (i) several hundreds of everyday use individual signs (lemmata of existing dictionaries), (ii) basic structures of sentences (according to cross linguistic and to sign specific typology), and (iii) short narrated GSL texts. These have been described in tiers adapted so as to suit the needs of those who would benefit from GSL documentation, be them academics, school policy makers, teachers or parents of deaf children. To this end a team with expertise in the areas of linguistics, information technology and interpreting has collaborated using suitable digital technology for glossing (HamNoSys) and annotation (ELAN). Description tiers include plain Greek and English words and sentences, linguistic coding of the grammatical or syntactic properties of GSL signs as well as more marginal information on gestures or code-switching. Conversations with language consultants about GSL, prior or during recordings were also encouraged, recorded (with the signers' permission) and annotated for reference, hence they are viewed as an essential part of GSL documentation. Although the present research was *based on* existing theories for language structure, some contribution *to* the existing theories and trends is attempted through examination of features of GSL that are for the first time analysed and identified such as multilinearity, gesture/sign borders and non manual movements.