Exploring Lexical Variation in a Growing Corpus of DGS
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Data
- Filmed conversations and staged communicative events (Nishi et al. 2010)
- Multi-modal corpus,lemmatised and accessible through Lex (Hanke & Storz 2008)
- About 560 h footage of natural signing
- Lemmatised: 576,400 tokens (2019-09-23)

Starting Point
- The size of our corpus supports analyses of regional variation. Regional distribution of lexical variants of roughly synonymic sign clusters can easily be visualised on maps (cf. Hanke et al. 2017).
- However, often several competing signs of a sign cluster are used within the same region and even by a single individual.

Question
- Looking beyond regional and sociolinguistic background: What other factors influence the lexical choice of signers?

Regional distribution of lexical variants found e.g. for signs for 'girl' seems to corroborate the hypothesis of homonymy avoidance (see Gilliéron & Roques 1942, and for signed languages Boyes Braem 1981, Cuxac 2000).

But: Corpus data also show lemma pairs or clusters of homonymous signs in the same region.

Lexical Choice - Homonymy Avoidance

Regional time map (cf. Hanke et al. 2017) of one sign variant for 'woman' also suggest that homonym avoidance plays a role in regional language change. In Bavaria and Hesse the distribution of this meaning seems to be blocked by a homonymous sign for 'bread'.

Political Correctness / Age Variation

In the case of 'Africa' the preferred use of a lexical variant AFRICA1 (used by 21 informants) in comparison to AFRICA2 (used by 4 informants) is attested.

This is a case of age variation. AFRICA2 apparently is becoming obsolete. This may be due to the fact that it is perceived as politically incorrect.

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Conclusions:
- Appearant time only allows a rather coarse diachronic view on the data, computing processes like establishment of new meanings and levelling would allow a finer granularity on the times scale to be separated. Exact synonyms (lexical variants) are rare, if not regionally distributed.
- Homonymy avoidance cannot be claimed as a general rule, but we find data fitting the pattern.