Why Include Recurrent Constructed Action (CA) in a Dictionary?
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In the past, the distinction between lexicalized, partly lexicalized and productive signs (for example Schembri & Johnston 1999, Fenlon et al. 2015) was made in order to distinguish which signs should be described in a dictionary and which should not. CA - a linguistic phenomenon where the signer is showing the actions of a referent that is not themselves at the time of signing - is often considered as gestural (for example Emmorey 1999, Ferrara & Johnston 2014). It thus belongs to the category of productive signs that do not get a dictionary entry as they are not considered to be entrenched in the respective sign language. The 'lexicon' is the linguistic knowledge consisting of chunks of structure (Lepic 2019). Chunks of structure are understood as recurring form-meaning constructions that may be for example single signs, multi-word expressions, classifier constructions, constructed action or grammatical templates (like numeral incorporation). In comparison, a dictionary is usually a corpus-based description of how the chunks of a particular language are used. However, the number of chunks to be described in a dictionary are necessarily limited e.g. because of the dictionary's scope or target group. According to Bybee (2010) chunks become entrenched through repeated use of a chunk as well as through repeated perception by a language user.

In a subset (~ 22 min of narrations, 15 signers) from the DGS corpus[1] consisting of narrations of experiences made during border controls between West and East Germany, certain uses of CA recurred. The representation of a person that does not know what to do in a difficult situation was used 4 times by 3 different signers within the dataset in a strikingly similar way, sharing handshape (flexed B-Hand) and movement (none) (see figure 1). This indicates that this use of CA is entrenched in DGS and thus qualifies for lexicographic description. Based on the descriptions of recurrent gestures in the field of gesture studies (for example Bressem & Müller 2014) and recent works on usage-based approaches to lexicalization (for example Lepic 2019), I argue that certain uses of CA may be described within a dictionary, assuming that there is a continuum from highly productive to entrenched or even conventionalized uses of CA.

To support this claim, I started to explore a route to find further candidates for entrenched CAs, i.e using a query searching for annotator comments on CA in the DGS corpus and sense-tag the occurrences. The query is focused on the elicitation tasks "Free conversation" and "Experiences of Deaf Individuals" and displays 1184 search results (as of 2021/10/15). These two tasks were chosen as the influence of stimuli was fairly low thus the chance of finding CA that also occurs in day to day communication increases. So far, four more candidates could be found with annotation of CA and sense-tagging of the occurrences still ongoing. One of the candidates is shown in Figure 2. That expression is used to show a situation in school (especially oral teaching settings) where the pupils had to put their hands onto the table. The signers put their dominant hand (flat B-handshape) onto the non-dominant arm (flat B-handshape). Figure 3 shows a third candidate where the fist-handshape is held at hip height, arm (slightly) flexed donating "to hold a child's hand". Considering that the form and meaning of these CAs seem to recur across different signers and text-types Atkins' and Rundell's (2008, 48) criterion for language events that should be described in a dictionary is fulfilled.

keywords: constructed action, usage-based, lexicography, conventionalization

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[1] As of 2021/10/15 approximately 91 hours of the DGS corpus data are lemmatized of which about 50 hours are publicly available (see Konrad et al. 2020).
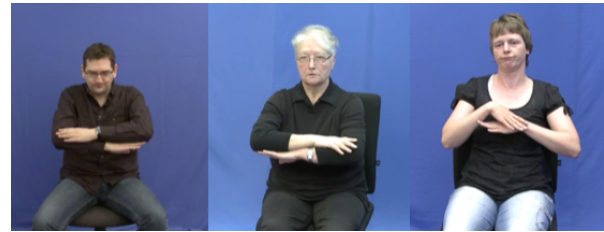
Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

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