INITIALIZED SIGNS IN (OR OUTSIDE OF?) QUEBEC SIGN LANGUAGE

Dominique Machabée and Colette Dubuisson

Introduction

Initialized signs are signs whose handshape is chosen in order to correspond – via fingerspelling – to the first letter of the equivalent written word of the oral language (here, French). Our interest in initialization was triggered by the observation that this phenomenon, also observable in other sign languages, has rarely been an object of study. While mouthing and fingerspelling are commonly discussed outcomes of language contact (Battison 1978, Lucas/Valli 1989, 1992, Schermer 1990; for LSQ, see Dubuisson/Vercaigne-Ménard/Pinsonneault/Desouvre 1992; Desouvre/Dubuisson/Vercaigne-Ménard 1992), initialization is generally neglected. One of the goals of this work was first to describe initialized signs, and to verify the extent to which they are used by Deaf people. While working on this subject, we faced various difficulties originating from the fact that these signs seem to have a particular status for Deaf people; they are sometimes considered to be “bad signs”. We therefore decided to interview several Deaf people in order to gain a better understanding of their attitudes toward initialization. We will first review Machabée’s work on initialization (for more details, see Machabée 1995), and

1. The authors are grateful to Christopher Miller for the work he did to transform the first version of this work into acceptable English. Also, we would like to thank the Deaf participants with whom we had fruitful exchanges.
2. It is important to mention that the manual alphabet of LSQ is, for all intents and purposes, identical to that of ASL.
3. In this text, following Woodward (1982), we capitalize the word ‘Deaf’ when referring to Deaf people as members of a culture rather than to the physiological condition.
then report on the attitudes of Deaf people towards initialization and subsequently try to answer the following question: are initialized signs part of LSQ or not?

**Part One: Description of Initialized Signs**

*1 Theoretical framework*

Little has been written specifically on the subject of initialized signs (see Peet 1868, and Crain 1993), most references referring to the subject in a cursory manner. A review of the literature on initialized signs can be summarized as follows: initialized signs appear to be either the result of a reduction of fingerspelling, or the result of a change to an existing sign's handshape (Stokoe 1976, Battison 1978, Woodward 1979, Bellugi/Newkirk 1981, Kyle/Woll 1985). An analysis of a LSQ corpus demonstrates that these two major definitions are applicable to LSQ initialized signs. However, some LSQ signs appear to fit none of these definitions.

*2 Data collection*

All the signs for which the handshape corresponded to the first letter of an equivalent written French word, that is, all signs that could have been influenced by the process of initialization, were collected. The most important source was a corpus of free conversations in LSQ (see details in Machabée 1995). Three hundred ninety-eight different possible initialized signs were obtained in this way. Signs articulated in the fingerspelling area (110 different signs) were easily identified as initialized. However, a set of criteria had to be developed in order to determine the status of the remaining 288 signs. First, all possible initialized signs were presented to Deaf signers, who were asked to give their native intuitions on whether or not the sign was initialized. Indications whether signs appeared to be commonly initialized or not could be obtained, since the answers were frequently unanimous. As an example, the signs having an /R/ handshape were generally considered to be initialized, whereas the signs having an /A/ handshape were not. On the basis of the signers’ intuition, the handshapes were separated into two groups, one of them corresponding closely to the set of unmarked handshapes identified by Battison (1978), a classification that also applies to LSQ. Signs having an unmarked handshape were then all rejected unless one of the following selection criteria was applicable:

4. Signs representing proper nouns – which are frequently initialized – were excluded from our corpus.

*5.

The unmarked handshapes identified by Battison are /k/ /s/ /b/ /s/ /g/ /c/ and /f/. The set of unmarked handshapes identified in this study did not correspond exactly to Battison’s for several reasons. First, the /s/ handshape is irrelevant to the study of initialization. Moreover, in LSQ, the status of the /c/ and /f/ handshapes is different (Christopher Miller, personal communication) in that they are more constrained, only appearing on the non-dominant hand if they have a classifier status. We therefore considered these handshapes to be marked (additionally, this classification corresponds more closely to signers’ intuitions). Signs having /d/ and /m/ handshapes were grouped with the unmarked handshapes because of their propensity to change to /g/ and bent /b/ handshapes.

(1) The sign was part of a group of initialized signs. (SOCIÉTÉ (society) which is part of a group of signs having common meaning of “group”).

(2) The sign was based on another sign which is not initialized. (SOUTIEN (support) based on the noninitialized sign AIDE (help)).

(3) We had historical information on the origin of the sign. (MILLE (thousand), in French Sign Language (1865), was identical to the modern LSQ sign except for the handshape, which was /m/ and is now a bent /b/).

Signs with marked handshapes were all retained as initialized unless one of the following analytical criteria were applicable:

(1) If the sign was in fact a derivation of another sign, whether initialized or not, the sign was rejected. For example, the sign PERSONNE (person) can be modified to mean POPULATION or PUBLIC by adding a movement. In this case, PERSONNE was included in the corpus but the modifications POPULATION and PUBLIC were not.

(2) If an iconic explanation was available, the sign was rejected. For example, for the sign FRÈRE (monk), the /f/ handshape may represent the buttons of the monk’s robe rather than an initialization.

(3) If there was no indication of initialization for a sign, and if the signers did not feel that the sign was initialized, the sign was rejected.

After the application of these criteria, 93 signs were rejected. The initial corpus of 398 signs was thus reduced to 305 initialized signs.
3 Classification of initialized signs

3.1 Classification based on form

If we consider structural factors such as place of articulation, orientation and movement, initialized signs can be separated into two major groups, which were called class I and class II signs. Class I signs (110 signs) are all characterized by a restricted manner of formation. They are clearly formed with a handshape representing the first letter of a written French word. To this handshape are added a restricted set of places of articulation and movements. Places of articulation of class I signs are limited to two (fingerspelling space and neutral space), the former being more common. A few signs are made in neutral space, specifically those that are made with two hands (signs of family relationships, such as ONCLE (uncle), NIÈCE (niece), etc.), as well as those that are affected by context. For example, the sign VENDREDI (Friday) was signed in neutral space in the following context: VENDREDI SOIR (Friday evening), in anticipation of the signing space of SOIR which is neutral space.

The movements of these signs are also restricted to small movements which we will call internal movements, in other words, they have no path movement. Generally, they have a side-to-side movement (→). An up-and-down movement (↑), which is a variant of the former, is found with the horizontal handshapes (/G/ and /H/). A few other internal movements are also found, such as a circular movement, a twisting movement of the forearm, a twisting movement away from the signer, a flexion of the finger’s first interphalangeal joint and a swinging movement. Even though the citation form always has a movement, in context almost one third of the class I signs had no movement at all.

Unlike the others, class II signs can be executed in different places of articulation, and may have different possible movement types. By their form, they have the same characteristics as noninitialized LSQ signs. They may either be articulated in neutral space or have an internal movement. Having both of these characteristics would classify them as class I signs.

3.2 Classification based on meaning

If we consider characteristics based on meaning, we notice that many initialized signs are “motivated”: for two thirds of class II signs, form appears to be related to meaning. For example, some have a symbolic place of articulation, such as the sign IDÉE (idea) which is made near the temple. Some are based on classifiers, such as the signs RÉGLEMENT (regulation) and LOI (law), where the /R/ or /L/ handshapes contact a /B/ handshape (representing a flat surface, the paper). Some other signs represent some physical aspects of the referent, such as ROI/REINE (king/queen, in reference to the royal itself) and VIETNAMIEN (Vietnamese, it reference to “asiatic” eyes).

Signs are frequently based on a noninitialized existing sign. This is clearly the case for one third of class II signs. For example, the sign FÉDÉRAL (federal), POLITIQUE (politics) based on the noninitialized sign GOUVERNEMENT (government). Signs are then always semantically related. However, many other class II signs do not appear to be based on a noninitialized sign. We could then not define initialized signs in LSQ exclusively as fingerspelling reductions or changes to an existing sign.

Many initialized signs may be grouped into families, some of which are composed of signs based on a noninitialized sign, others being composed only of initialized signs. Families can include from two to twelve signs, but most of them are composed of only two or three signs.

Signs from both classes I and II can be grouped in families. Class I signs are grouped on the basis of semantic field (signs for the days of the week, signs of family relationships), while class II signs are grouped both on the basis of their meaning and form. Class I signs are all identical except for handshape. Since class II signs show a greater variety in form, it is possible to use this as a basis for family groupings. Class II contains 44 families, which make up more than 50% of class II signs. All sign families can be extended, representing a productive means of lexical creation in LSQ.

4 Established and unestablished initialized signs

One of the issues dealt with in this work was to determine whether initialized signs really are used by Deaf people. The total number of different initialized signs in our data is 305 (110 class I signs, 195 class II signs). However, the total number of tokens observed was 733 (182 class I signs, 551 class II signs), meaning that some signs are used more than once. Looking at these repetitions, along with the native signers’ intuitions, we were able to identify some widespread initialized signs. The signers’ intuition also helped us identify some idiosyncratic initialized forms. From this information, we concluded that initialized signs can be distinguished by degree of integration into LSQ. First, some initialized signs are well integrated, are no doubt part of the lexicon, and have no noninitialized synonyms (at least, none that are widespread). Second, we found some initialized signs that are common but have a noninitialized synonym that was typically more commonly used. Third, we found a grey area: some signs

72
are usually known to signers, but are generally not accepted as "true LSQ". Fourth, we found initialized signs that are idiosyncratic. These signs, when from class II, are generally created by modifying a base sign that has the same meaning, or a related meaning.

For established initialized signs, a significant degree of linguistic integration within LSQ appeared to be possible. Established initialized signs were examined with the help of a native signer in order to determine if they could be integrated into LSQ morphological structure. Most of the initialized signs are nouns. It appears that they can frequently be modified for plurality in a number of ways, such as repetition of the sign, repetition superimposed on an arc movement, adding a second hand to a one-handed sign, as well as via facial expression. Many signs can also have qualitative modifications, made by a change in movement and facial expression, to express qualities such as big, small, tall, short, nice, ugly, good and no good. Some initialized adjectives can be modified to mark degree; some initialized verbs can be modified to mark their arguments, number and aspect.

5 Conclusion

We have seen that initialization is not an irrelevant process, since it is used by Deaf people themselves. Initialization might have been inspired by hearing people in contact with Deaf people, such as teachers. However, it has clearly been adopted – at least in part – by Deaf people, who even use it as a productive means of lexical creation.

Part Two: Attitudes toward Initialization

1 Introduction

In our summarization of the first step of our work on initialization, we have not discussed an important aspect which constantly had to be dealt with, namely attitudes toward initialization. As is true for any phenomenon resulting from contact, it is an emotionally-loaded issue. However, initialization appears to be singled out in particular as an undesirable process by Deaf people, while mouthing and fingerspelling are not so severely criticized. Consultation with Deaf signers was sometimes difficult because of the emotions that were often brought to the fore during discussions of initialization; it was difficult for them to accept that we were trying to objectively describe a corpus without passing judgments. One of the most commonly expressed fears was that non-established initialized signs observed in the corpus would be considered by readers to be real LSQ signs. As a result, we have taken care not to illustrate non-established signs but only to describe them. Also, non-established signs are identified as such, whether in the text or in a note.

In a subsequent study we attempted to understand Deaf signers' feelings about initialization. We did not attempt to carry out a formal study on attitudes, but rather to get an insight of Deaf signers' feelings on the subject. While our study revealed that Deaf people do use initialized signs (both established and non-established) and use this phenomenon creatively as a means of lexical creation, we know that some Deaf people resist initialization on the basis that it is an artificial phenomenon. Among other questions, we thought it would be interesting to understand why mouthing and fingerspelling, though they are also linked to French, appear to be less stigmatized and are more widely used than initialization.

2 Methodology

The three participants in this part of the work were selected for different reasons. One of them was selected on the basis of his participation in the descriptive work. He had thus had occasion to reflect on initialization, and to discuss his work with other Deaf people. The other two participants were not involved in the first part of the work and were selected on that basis. They are Deaf people who are active in the Deaf community, are also conscious of the importance of their language (they are both LSQ teachers), but were not involved in any linguistic research on LSQ.

The two participants who had not been involved in the first part of the work were first given an overview of the previous work to familiarize them with our interest in this issue. What we consider an initialized sign was also clarified. All the participants were first asked if they had personal opinions on initialized signs. Then, the discussion was oriented to specific aspects we were concerned with. One of the first questions we wished to clarify was whether initialized signs were all equivalent for the participant. Some signs might be not accepted by the participant while some others might be more easily accepted. If the answer, as we expected, was that different signs had different status for the participant, we asked him if he could see any criteria that might explain why some signs are clearly unacceptable while others are accepted. We also wished to know if the participant had a different perception of signs which are initialized in the fingerspelling space (whether established or not) and signs that are made in the LSQ signing space, with movement, etc. Was one of these types of signs more easily acceptable than the other?

We also wished to discuss mouthing and fingerspelling, which are two other ways of incorporating French elements in LSQ. We asked the
participants if they considered fingerspelling more or less acceptable than initialization, and in case of abusive use of both, which was less acceptable. The same questions were asked about mouthing and initialization. Finally, we asked the participant if he thought his opinions reflected the opinions of the Deaf community.

The discussions were made with the help of an interpreter. The interviewer’s and the interpreter’s voices were recorded in order to facilitate recall of the discussions. Use of cameras was avoided in order to ensure that the participant would feel more at ease.

3 Main points of the discussions

As for their general opinion on initialization, the three participants agreed perfectly: none of them positively evaluates initialized signs. When asked if they had anything to say about initialization or if all initialized signs are equally stigmatized, the three participants, as a first reaction, gave examples of initialized signs which are unacceptable, that is, signs used in Signed French (although not used by Deaf people themselves). These signs are unanimously rejected. As an example, the sign FORET (forest) was mentioned by one participant who observed it in a classroom. The original – and widespread – sign is derived from the sign ARBRE (tree) with repetition of the sign and an addition of path movement (see figure 1, FORET).

The /S/ handshape of FORET is replaced by a /F/ handshape in Signed French to match the first letter of the French word (see figure 2, FORET in Signed French).

Figure 1: FORET

The link between form and meaning is thus lost. The sign TABLE was also mentioned by two participants. The sign is usually made with two hands in a bent /B/ handshape and was observed with two hands in a /T/ handshape. Many other examples of unacceptable Signed French signs were given.

Eliciting discussion of initialized signs commonly used by Deaf people generally required that a specific question be asked by the interviewer; participants did not spontaneously mention these signs. When specifically asked if a particular sign is acceptable (the sign RESTAURANT, for example, which we knew is very widely used by Deaf people), they agreed that it is acceptable, since they learned it this way from the beginning.

It clearly appears that Deaf people we talked with first think of signs used in Signed French when discussing initialization. They do not tend to talk about their own use of initialized signs, but rather the way they perceive that initialization is misused in Signed French. Signs that are commonly used by Deaf people do not appear to be very positively evaluated, rather, it seems that participants finally accepted them because many people use them and they are more easily understood.

We also discussed the different classes of initialized signs (that is, the two form-based classes described in part One). We wished to know if signs made in fingerspelling space (class I signs, which are fingerspelling reductions) and other initialized signs (those made in the LSQ signing space) had the same status in terms of participants’ evaluations. They appear to be very different. Initialized signs that use LSQ space (those that
are well integrated in LSQ structure) are less easily accepted than those
that are made in fingerspelling space.

We tried to evaluate what the participants thought of mouthing and
fingerspelling in comparison with initialization. The participants do not
seem to consider mouthing and fingerspelling as disturbing as initialization
can be. In fact, mouthing appears to be well accepted; fingerspelling is
poorly evaluated if used too frequently. One of the participants said he
more easily tolerates non-integrated class I initialized signs (that is, finger-
spelling reductions) than fingerspelling. This can be easily explained by
the fact that understanding fingerspelling requires more attention than
understanding a simple letter in fingerspelling space accompanied by
mouthing. Communication is more easily interfered with by an exagger-
ated use of fingerspelling. Note that the use of fingerspelling reductions is
accepted easily only if there is no sign that could be used in the place of
initialization in fingerspelling space. Mouthing appears to be a lot less dis-
turbing than fingerspelling and initialization. Participants appear to adapt
themselves to a person who mouths a lot or very little, although it seems
important that the signs, rather than mouthing, dominate. When specifi-
cally asked what he thought of mouthing that serves to distinguish two
meanings of otherwise homonymous signs (QUI and FINLANDE, who
and Finland), a participant said there is a good reason for mouthing and
the sign is then totally accepted. Another participant said that in formal
situations, signed discourse is difficult to understand if there is no mouthing
at all. One participant clearly set out his preferences towards these three
phenomena: he prefers mouthing, followed by fingerspelling and finally
initialization. The statements of other participants allow us to think they
would agree if they were to set out their preferences.

4 Hypotheses on refusal of initialized signs

Our main observation during discussions with the participants was
that they all mentioned various Signed French signs and rarely brought up
initialized signs commonly used by Deaf people. This brought us to think
that the use (and misuse) Signed French makes of initialized signs might
explain part of the discomfort of Deaf people with regard to initialization.

4.1 Some Signed French signs

We systematically examined a Signed French dictionary (Delage/
Tremblay 1983) and noted all the initialized signs. We did not find all the
signs that were mentioned by our participants, such as FORET and
TABLE; these last signs figure in the Signed French dictionary without
initialization. We then consulted our participants and other educational
workers and found out that these signs are frequently initialized in class-
rooms.

Most of the initializations found in the Signed French dictionary
are superimposed on an existing LSQ sign in order to adapt the signed
vocabulary to the semantic field of French. For example, the sign VÊTE-
MENT (clothes) is made on the body without initialization, just as it is
made in LSQ. Signed French adds the signs PYJAMA and COSTUME
(costume or suit) with, respectively, /R/ and /C/ handshapes. These semi-

tonic differences are not expressed by different signs in LSQ. Another exam-
ple is the sign CAMPAGNE (country) which is not initialized in the
dictionary and is made with a /B/ handshape (thumb extended), the palm
contacting the elbow with a circular movement (this sign was also given
by two of our participants as frequently initialized in Signed French with a
/C/ handshape). On the basis of this sign, the Signed French dictionary
gives the following initialized signs: AVOINE (oats), BLÈ (wheat), FOIN
(hay) and PAILLE (straw) with /A/, /B/, /F/ and /R/ handshapes, respec-
tively. These handshapes contact the elbow, but this time it is the back of
the hand that is in contact (palm facing the interlocutor). This point of con-
tact is physiologically difficult, making these signs extremely unnatural.
Furthermore, these different meanings are already expressed in LSQ by
distinct signs.

Another example is the Signed French sign TEMPS (time) that is
based on an LSQ sign used with the meaning of "second" or "minute" and
also in different expressions in reference to a lapse of time. This LSQ sign
is iconic; the dominant hand has a /T/ handshape turning in contact with
the palm of the non-dominant hand, in reference to the turning hand of a
clock. Changing the /T/ handshape to a /R/ handshape eliminates most of
the iconic references.

Some other Signed French signs do not respect the formational
requirements of LSQ signs. One example is the Signed French sign
CHAISE (chair) which was observed in the dictionary. This sign usually
made with the index and middle finger of the dominant hand contacting
the index and middle finger of the non-dominant hand, is changed in
Signed French to the same handshape contacting the base of a /C/ hand-
shape. This doesn’t violate the dominance constraint of Battison for ASL,
but does violate it in LSQ. Another example is the sign FIL (thread),
made with two /R/ handshapes in LSQ. The non-dominant handshape is
changed to /R/ in Signed French (see figures 3 and 4).
4.2 The link between Signed French signs and the rejection of initialized signs

It appeared to us that Signed French as it is used in teaching might be a good explanation for the negative affect Deaf people have towards initialized signs. Signed French is a code used in teaching which uses LSQ signs as its base. These are then augmented with different signs in order to correspond to French - many of these signs are initialized. The fact that it makes partial use of LSQ vocabulary makes it dangerous because it is easy for young students who are constantly exposed to Signed French to mix up LSQ signs and Signed French code. Deaf people, however, feel that their language is threatened by all these non-LSQ signs.

Initialized signs are threatening, unlike mouthing and fingerspelling. Mouthing is accepted as a phenomenon that is parallel in status to signs - it does not affect the manual part of the language and thus does not appear to be as dangerous to Deaf people. Fingerspelling, if overused, breaks the rhythm of communication but does not change the signs. It is important to mention that restructuring of fingerspelling in LSQ is rarely used. Initialization is probably perceived more as an internal change. The fact that initialization is often the result of an external manipulation of LSQ, along with these other factors, appears to explain the reluctance of Deaf people towards initialization.

Conclusion

Our research on the description of initialized signs revealed negative affect toward these signs on the part of Deaf consultants. Part of the reason for this negative affect was already clear, but discussions with the consultants helped to bring to light the main source of these attitudes: it became clear that Signed French is perceived as threatening by Deaf people. The negative attitudes we find toward initialization in general, could be largely due to this code system.

Signers are now better informed with regard to the status of LSQ as a language and the importance of protecting it from external manipulation. One way in which they resist such manipulation is to reject initialized signs. In fact, many initialized signs from Signed French justify this reaction. On the other hand, initialization is sometimes used as a means of lexical creation by Deaf signers themselves and it is then an acceptable process, since it is used without excess and respects the sign formation principles native to LSQ. Some initialized signs are established and clearly part of LSQ, but in Signed French misuse of LSQ signs and initialization
Machabée • Dubuisson

might negatively affect its use in LSQ.

It would be interesting to observe conversations between youngsters and teenagers to see if initialized signs are frequently used by them and also if Signed French signs are used currently in conversations out of the classroom. Observation of conversations between the same persons a few years later might also give us an idea of the changes that could have occurred after they left school (when they are no longer in continuous contact with Signed French). Some signs might be used in the school context, and for a while afterwards, but might disappear as a result of contact with other Deaf people, others might stay in their language. This kind of large-scale study would be important to confirm or disconfirm the fear on the part of the Deaf signers of the influence of Signed French in the language of younger signers and in the language in general.

References
