Why is the SKY BLUE?

On colour signs in Icelandic Sign Language

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Berlin and Kay (1969) detected universal tendencies and implicational hierarchies in colour terms in spoken languages. Woodward (1989) suggested that the same universal patterns found within colour terms in spoken languages applied for sign languages as well (see also Nyst 2007); therefore Berlin and Kay´s theory should apply for Icelandic Sign Language (ÍTM) as well as other languages. In this talk on colour terms in ÍTM we will address the similarities between ÍTM and Danish Sign Language (DTS), look into the origins of basic colour signs in ÍTM and compare different ways of expressing nuances and complex colour constructions in ÍTM and Icelandic. This talk is based on a typology study on colour signs lead by Ulrike Zeshan.

ÍTM is an autonomous language used by approximately 300 signers and its neighboring language is Icelandic. Influence on sign languages from neighboring spoken languages and from one sign language to another is known and both spoken Icelandic and DTS are known to have had an influence on ÍTM´s lexicon (Lucas et al. 2001, Alderson and McEntee-Atalianis 2007 and Brynjólfsdóttir et al. in press).

Colour terms in all these three languages fit to Berlin and Kay´s universal implicational hierarchy. Nevertheless, basic colour terms vary between these languages, for example ÍTM and Icelandic do not have the same number of basic colour terms and none of the basic colour terms in ÍTM are the result of an influence from Icelandic. ÍTM and Icelandic also have different ways of expressing nuances in colours and complex colour constructions. Icelandic uses sequential morphology to form lighter or darker nuances of colours but ÍTM can both use sequential and templatic morphology for the same purpose . Some colour terms in ÍTM and DTS are similar and some are identical (e.g. the signs for purple) and due to
modality sign languages have similar ways of expressing nuances. Some of the similarities between ÍTM and DTS can be explained as the result of both standardization of signs in the Nordic sign languages in the sixties and the use of DTS signs in the first ÍTM dictionary (Táknmálsorðabók 1987). The colour term blue for example has two signs in ÍTM and one is older than the other. The new sign is identical to an older sign for blue in DTS (Dansk-tegn ordbog 1979). Even though this could be the result of the standardization informants say that the new variant is derived from the sign SKY in ÍTM. The semantic relation lies in the fact that the sky is typically blue.

References
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