Chapter 1
Introduction

Sign languages are languages of the hands. While this is probably what most people and even linguists associate with sign languages, it is not consistent with linguistic reality. Although it is certainly true that sign languages are visual-gestural languages in which the hands and manual signs play an important role in conveying meaning, there are other articulators that are equally important. Kutscher (2007) mentions three types of signs:

1. Manual signs
2. Signs of the mouth, head and torso
3. Voiceless words of the surrounding spoken language, formed with the mouth

As becomes clear from the list above, there are other major articulators apart from the hands. The signs formed by these articulators are usually called “non-manuals” and include actions of the mouth. While non-manuals in general and mouth actions in particular were rather neglected in the beginning of sign linguistic research, the past two decades have brought forth an increasing number of in-depth studies of non-manuals in various sign languages. Mouth actions and the generally assumed dichotomy of “signs of the mouth” and “voiceless words of the surrounding spoken language” that are mentioned above remain an under-researched and controversial topic. For Irish Sign Language (ISL), used in the Republic and Northern Ireland, this topic has not been researched empirically as yet. This book constitutes the first systematic analysis of the structure and dynamics of these kinds of non-manuals. The main topics discussed in this study will be elaborated in the next section.

The main research question underlying this analysis is whether the general dichotomy of mouth actions that has been established for other sign languages can be found in ISL and whether these mouth actions are used systematically. Further, it will be investigated whether mouth actions fulfill specific linguistic functions and if so, what the nature of these functions is. It will be especially interesting to look at the voiceless words of the surrounding spoken language (also called “mouthing” in the literature (Boyes Braem & Sutton-Spence 2001)), as these have been a highly controversial topic in sign linguistics thus far. While they are frequently found and used in some
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sign languages with a strong oral tradition in education such as German Sign Language (DGS), for example, they are said to be absent from or rarely used in others such as American Sign Language (ASL). Moreover, it has frequently been claimed that they do not form part of the linguistic system of a sign language and could be discarded (e.g. Happ & Hohenberger 2001). This claim will be tested with respect to ISL.

Concerning the other type of mouth actions (also called “mouth gestures” in the literature (Boyes Braem & Sutton-Spence 2001)), it will be interesting to see whether the same subtypes that have been found for other sign languages such as Dutch Sign Language (NGT), can be found in ISL.

With special reference to the linguistic and sociolinguistic situation of ISL, there are additional research questions that are relevant. One of the most prominent features of ISL is the striking gender difference at the linguistic and paralinguistic level. This can be traced back to gender segregation in schooling (cf. chapters 2.1 and 2.2). It will therefore be interesting to investigate whether these gender differences can also be observed with respect to mouth actions. Age is another sociolinguistic factor that has been mentioned as being relevant for linguistic variation in ISL (Ó Baoill & Matthews 2000). Consequently, the influence of this factor on mouth actions will be analyzed as well. Referring to linguistic factors, word class or morphological complexity have been mentioned to be interrelated with the use of mouth actions (e.g. Crasborn et al. 2008). Therefore, this claim will be examined in conjunction with the ISL data, too.

In order to answer the aforementioned research questions, the book is structured as follows. Chapter 2 provides a short outline of Irish Sign Language and its sociolinguistics, as well as general structural characteristics. This will be useful for interested linguists who do not possess further knowledge of sign languages and their structures. Chapter 3 introduces non-manuals in sign languages from a cross-linguistic point of view. Differences and similarities in form and function of these non-manuals are outlined; a special focus is on mouth actions as the main focus of this volume. In chapter 4, the data sources and methodology applied to the language data from ISL are introduced. In the second part of the chapter, a general typology of mouth actions with respect to the SOI data is introduced. Chapter 5 investigates the influence of sociolinguistic factors on mouth actions in ISL and describes the interrelations between mouth actions and gender and age in ISL. Chapter 6 constitutes the second empirical chapter of this book. In order to make the investigation of the interrelation between mouth actions and word classes more comprehensible, the first part of the chapter shortly sketches the history and theoretical framework of word class research in spoken and
sign languages. The second part of the chapter provides the analysis of the data with respect to this issue and situates the analysis in a grammatical framework. Chapter 7 summarizes the results of the study and provides some concluding remarks.