Question Structure in British Sign Language

When discussing the description of questions within spoken language linguists make a distinction between three major types of sentences

1. Declarative sentence types – often referred to as statements
2. Imperative sentence types – often referred to as commands
3. Interrogative sentence types – often referred to as questions

Interrogatives can also be sub-divided thus making polar interrogatives (questions requiring Yes-No answers) and making Wh interrogatives (question words beginning with Wh)

The research undertaken by Greenberg (1996) when investigating language universals suggests three ways in which questions are marked as distinct from other sentence types (for all spoken languages) such as:

1. They possess an interrogative particle
2. They possess a difference in intonation pattern
3. They possess a difference in word order

Although BSL is very different to spoken languages if some features within questioning can be found in sign languages the same as above, then maybe BSL possesses some language universals.

Lyons (1997) claims that “The distinction between Yes-No questions and Wh questions is a logical or semantic distinction that is universal in the sense that it can be drawn independently of the grammatical and lexical structure of particular languages “ (cf Kyle J G, Woll B 1985 pg 158 ref 14)

To find distinctions in BSL’s declaratives and interrogatives we need to find either interrogative particles or intonation as contrasting components. From current research there hasn’t been identified any interrogative particles so we need to look at intonation. Intonation in BSL is expressed via non manual activity (ie facial expression and body posture) having specific facial expressions occurring simultaneously with signs which also differentiate between declarative and interrogative sentence types. Yes – No questions and Wh questions are also differentiated by contrasting facial expressions. Woll (1981a) suggests that “Non manual features associated with Yes-No questions are different from those associated with Wh questions” (cf M Deuchar 1984 pg 91 ref 9)
Are there similarities between Wh questions/ Yes – No questions in English against BSL?

In English the Wh question words are linked in form to each other, ie they all begin with the letters Wh (What, Where, Why, When, Who, How?) Although ‘how’ appears to be the exception in present day terms- historically it also began with ‘wh’. Several of these Wh question words are also linked to non question words such as the pairs:

Where – there
What – that
When – then

In BSL we can detect a similar theory. Some Wh question signs are linked to each other and to other non-question signs. Several of the Wh question signs resemble each other, instead of beginning with Wh they share a common handshape and movement.

For example the citation form of when, how many and how old all have 5 fingers extended, separated and have a wiggling movement.

The same handshape and movement also occurs in the sign ‘many’

Another similarity comparing with English is that these signs are also linked to other non-question signs.

When – has the same location as signs such as yesterday, tomorrow, everyday

How old?- has the same location as signs such as age, old

How many? – has the same location as the sign many

Just because certain Wh signs are used it doesn’t automatically mean it is an interrogative.

These signs could be used as a relative pronoun which is the same rule that occurs in English.

For example the English sentence “She’ll go shopping when she has time” is a declarative sentence type rather than interrogative.

“Therefore signers are able to recognise that the presence of a particular manual item does not necessarily characterise an utterance as a question” (B Woll 1981 pg 142 ref 17)

So it appears that signers can ascertain an interrogative only when certain non manual features occur.

The non manual components of questions have been generalised by researchers such as B Woll, M Deuchar and J Kyle. It can be said that for Yes – No questions the eyebrows are raised and chin head and shoulders are brought forward for the duration of the question.

Whilst for Wh questions the eyebrows are knitted and the shoulders are hunched as well as forward (cf M Deuchar 1984 pg 92 ref 9). However, as with English, there always seem to be an exception to the rule. Worswick (1982) supported the theory that if you have lowered eyebrows with Yes – No questions it could be due to the fact that there was a degree of puzzlement surrounding the question. For example the person asking the question may have initially thought that they knew the answer but after some thought realised that they could have been wrong. Worswick’s example was:

“Hearing born you” (were you born hearing?) The person originally though that the addressee was born deaf but now think that they may have been wrong (cf M Deuchar 1984 pg 92 ref 9)
The same exception occurs with Wh questions. If the sign is made with raised eyebrows then it could be due to clarification of the question. Raised eyebrows with a Wh question could indicate that the signer thinks she knows the answer but just wants confirmation.

Once it has been established that for questions to be recognised by the use of non manual activity it needs to be discovered when the actual non manual component actually occurs during the signed utterance. Within research undertaken by Baker – Shenk she discovered that non manual features appear before the onset of the manual activity in question. Of course this research was based on ASL but the theory may also be applied to BSL.

Baker-Shenk devised some optional manual markers which could be used to distinguish questions (which are treated as manual shift regulators) to show that the signer is ‘handing over the conversation’ to the other person whether it is an interrogative or a declarative.

Another way to emphasise the scope of questions especially Wh questions is the use of bracketing. This means that the Wh question sign appears both before and after the signed utterance. For example:

Where go where?

What work what?

When go holiday when?

Why you go America why?

But this isn’t a rule which is set in stone as Wh signs in a question can occur either at the beginning of a clause or at the end.