

From Morphology to Syntax and Back Again: Agreement, Word Order, and Morphological Typology

Roland Pfau (University of Amsterdam; r.pfau@uva.nl)

While the nature of phonological building blocks is clearly modality-specific (e.g. consonant vs. location), the influence of language modality is – at least at first sight – less obvious when it comes to morphological and syntactic structure. After all, signs are made up of morphemes, and sentences are made up of signs. Also, just as in spoken languages, the order of constituents may be changed to express information structure (Kimmelman & Pfau, in press) and to convey different sentence types (Cecchetto 2012).

The aim of this presentation is to scrutinize the modality-independence of certain aspects of the morphology and syntax of sign languages. My starting point will be agreement. However, I will not focus on the phonological (i.e. spatial) instantiation of agreement (as this will be dealt with in Jörg Keller's presentation), but rather on a number of theoretical and typological implications, such as (i) the relation between pronouns and agreement (Lillo-Martin & Meier 2011); (ii) the optionality of agreement marking (Meir et al. 2007; de Beuzeville et al. 2009); (iii) the use of agreement auxiliaries (Steinbach & Pfau 2007); (iv) the existence of classifier agreement and the nature of morphosyntactic features (Zwitserslood 2003); and (v) the influence of agreement morphology on word order in declarative clauses (Rathmann 2001).

The last point will allow me to address the issue of basic word order in more detail. Various studies have reported that word order in sign languages may be influenced by a number of morphosyntactic and pragmatic factors (Kimmelman 2012), and I will try to disentangle which of these factors can be considered modality-specific. Simultaneity, that is, the potential to use the two hands as independent articulators, is a good candidate for a modality-specific factor, as it allows, for instance, for the simultaneous articulation of a verb and one of its arguments – clearly, this would make the notion “word order” inapplicable. It will be shown that true (manual) simultaneity is very infrequent at the level of syntax.

However, at the level of morphology, simultaneity abounds. In fact, across sign languages, sequential morphology is the exception, not the rule (Aronoff et al. 2005). It is therefore worth investigating in how far sign languages fit into the well-established typological scheme proposed for spoken languages (Comrie 1981). This is particularly interesting, as various classifications have been proposed in the literature.

References

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