

Information Structure in Russian Sign Language and Sign Language of the Netherlands

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This dissertation explores Information Structure (IS) in two unrelated sign languages: Sign Language of the Netherlands (*Nederlandse Gebarentaal*, NGT) and Russian Sign Language (RSL). We study the expression of IS in RSL and NGT, investigate the similarities and differences between the two languages, and discuss the data within a typological framework; in addition, we assess the modality effects in this domain.

This is an original contribution to sign language typology since these two languages have not been compared before in the area of IS. It is also for the first time that a deep exploration has been carried out into the IS-related forms and functions in these two sign languages in search for possible universal and modality-specific aspects. Finally, the analysis is based on corpus data and involves both quantitative and qualitative descriptions.

The **first chapter** of the dissertation introduces the main notions and research questions. First, the importance of studying sign languages is emphasized: in order to understand the human language capacity, to make both typological generalizations and to develop theoretical models of language, cross-linguistic data, including sign language data, are indispensable. Previous research on sign languages, with a focus on comparative studies and sign language typology (Zeshan 2008), is also discussed in this chapter. Additionally, we address the fact that sign languages exist in the visual-spatial modality, which has its effects on the grammar and use of these languages in comparison to spoken languages (Meier 2012). Possible modality effects will therefore be examined in the domain of IS as well.

This chapter also provides the necessary background on RSL and NGT. NGT is a language used by approximately 16,000 deaf and hard-of-hearing people in the

Netherlands. It is characterized by a high regional lexical variation: there are five major dialects attributed to the five schools for deaf children. RSL is used by more than 120,000 deaf and hard-of-hearing people in Russia. Some previous studies have shown that even comparing two European sign languages can yield interesting results. In addition, since RSL and NGT are unrelated, we can discuss the issue of modality effects. Finally, given certain sociolinguistic differences between RSL and NGT, we can also address their effects on the linguistic properties of the languages.

The first chapter also introduces the main notions of IS (Krifka 2008). IS is concerned with the signals that the interlocutors give each other in order to control and manage information flow, such as marking given information as such and highlighting new and important information. These two functions are tightly connected to the notions of topic and focus, respectively.

The **second chapter** summarizes previous research on IS in sign languages. We decided to approach IS in RSL and NGT with two goals: to look for markers of the common IS notions of topic and focus, and also to investigate IS-related functions of some typical sign language constructions previously connected to IS, namely doubling and weak hand holds. Therefore, in the second chapter, we also discuss these four domains as they have been studied for other sign languages.

Moving on to the specific studies conducted for this thesis, the expression of topics in RSL and NGT is explored in **Chapter 3** by analyzing two small corpora: one of RSL, collected specifically for this project, and a part of a larger existing corpus of NGT, selected for this project. The formal markers of aboutness and scene-setting topics proved to be (i) sentence-initial position of the topic, (ii) a prosodic break following the topic, and (iii) non-manual markers, including eyebrow raise ('er') and backward head tilt ('bht'), as in (1). In NGT and RSL, all these markers are used but, in addition, NGT topics are sometimes also marked by a clause-final pointing sign referring back to the topic of the sentence (Crasborn et al. (2009); see example (3) below); this last strategy was not evidenced in RSL.

- ____ er+bht
- (1) INDEX_a CAT INDEX_a THINK [RSL]
 'The cat thinks.'

Topics in RSL and NGT are not marked obligatorily. Some potential topics are not marked even prosodically. Our analysis revealed that eyebrow raise and head tilt only mark shifted topics. In addition, in both RSL and NGT, the VS order is used inthetic sentences. However, this strategy is optional, so the SV order is also accepted inthetic sentences. Thus, according to the criteria of topic prominence commonly applied in the literature (Sze 2008), RSL and NGT cannot be considered topic-prominent.

How focus is marked in RSL and NGT is addressed in **Chapter 4**. The analysis in this chapter is based on elicited rather than on corpus data. In order to study focus, we collected question-answer pairs based on picture stimuli from 10 RSL and 10 NGT signers. A variety of syntactic and prosodic markers of focus showed up in both languages. In particular, ellipsis of the non-focused part and doubling are the syntactic strategies employed by both languages. Manual prosodic markers such as repetition, modification of the size, speed and length of movement, as well as modification of the height of the sign, are used in both languages, and in both languages, they interact with the type of movement of the focused sign. As for non-manual markers, NGT uses eyebrow raise, backward head tilts, head nods, and body leans to express focus. In contrast, RSL only uses nods and body leans, and less often than NGT. In addition, both languages use a modality-specific strategy of body leans to express contrast in certain situations.

In **Chapter 5**, we discuss doubling as a potential IS-marker in RSL and NGT. In order to study doubling, we used corpus data, mostly overlapping with the data used in Chapter 3. Doubling turned out to be a very frequent phenomenon in both languages. Doubling may result from hesitation and clarification, but at the same time, doubling with the X Y X pattern is a grammatical mechanism regularly used in these languages (2). RSL and NGT behave similarly with respect to doubling. In general, the same types of constituents can be doubled, but NGT has an additional mechanism of topic doubling (3) which RSL lacks. Moreover, the overall frequency of doubling is very similar for the two languages, but in RSL verbal doubling is much more common, while in NGT clause doubling is prevalent within the X Y X pattern.

(2) MEET INDEX_a POSS_a FRIEND MEET [RSL]
 ‘He met his friend.’

(3) INDEX₁ STILL INDEX₁ [NGT]
 ‘I’m still.’

It turns out that doubling following the X Y X pattern is used for foregrounding of the doubled constituent (which typically means that some part of the information is marked as more salient than the rest) and for emphasis. Our analysis thus accounts for doubling of different types of constituents, including topic doubling in NGT.

We also propose a possible path of grammaticalization from repetition of clauses to clause-internal doubling. This path of grammaticalization accounts for the emergence of both formal properties and functions of doubling in RSL and NGT. Although no direct diachronic evidence is available to support this path of development, the synchronic data support the hypothesis.

Weak hand holds are analysed in **Chapter 6** based on the same data set as used in Chapter 3 as well as some additional NGT data. Both languages turn out to make frequent use of weak hand holds, and the holds have a variety of functions, only some of which are related to IS. These functions can be divided into phonetic (holds due to articulatory reasons), syntactic (holds marking boundaries of syntactic constituents), iconic (holds expressing spatial and temporal relations iconically), and discourse-related (holds expressing information status of referents) functions. Interestingly, the same functions of holds are found in both languages.

Holds in RSL and NGT are, however, quantitatively different: in RSL holds are significantly more frequent than in NGT. There are several possible explanations for this difference in frequency, but they are all hypothetical at this stage of research. The differences in frequency might be connected to different influences of the respective spoken languages, to differences in regional variation, or to differences in co-speech gesture in the respective hearing communities.

Section 6.6 can be considered a sidestep from the main line of research pursued in this dissertation, as it proposes a formal syntactic account of weak hand holds. Within a formal syntactic framework, the rules of linearization, which turn the hierarchically organized syntactic structure into a linear string of words/signs, must be formulated. However, sign languages are challenging in this respect, as they have two partially independent articulators, which also means that they have more options for linearization. Hence, it is crucial to formulate the rules of linearization for sign languages as well, and to compare them to those of spoken languages, in order to pin down the modality effects. It is suggested that the formalism of multidimensional trees, independently proposed for spoken languages (de Vries 2009), can be applied to weak hand hold constructions, but that additional modality-specific rules of linearization are also required.

In the **concluding chapter**, the results are summarized, typological and theoretical implications of the data are discussed, and modality effects are explored. In particular, we address the questions of how different RSL and NGT are from each other in the domain of IS, and how “normal” they behave from a typological perspective. RSL and NGT data are highly relevant for such theoretical questions as the status of scene-setting topics, the definition of topic prominence, focus projection, focus versus contrast, and explanations for the existence of doubling, amongst others. With respect to modality effects in the domain of IS, our investigation reveals that RSL and NGT commonly use strategies that are also attested in spoken languages. However, some modality-specific tools, such as non-manual markers and weak hand holds, are also used. In addition, we point out important parallels between such markers and co-speech gesture.

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Table of contents (abbreviated)

1. Introduction
 - 1.1 Sign language linguistics
 - 1.1.1 Why study sign languages?
 - 1.1.2 Some properties of sign languages
 - 1.2 Sign languages: typology and modality
 - 1.2.1 Comparison of sign languages
 - 1.2.2 Sign languages and typology
 - 1.2.3 Modality differences and modality effects
 - 1.3 Background information on RSL and NGT
 - 1.3.1 Sign Language of the Netherlands
 - 1.3.2 Russian Sign Language
 - 1.3.3 Comparison between RSL and NGT
 - 1.4 Notions of Information Structure
 - 1.4.1 Information Structure
 - 1.4.2 Topic
 - 1.4.3 Focus
 - 1.5 General research questions
 - 1.6 Structure of the dissertation
2. Previous research
 - 2.1 Introduction
 - 2.2 Topic
 - 2.2.1 Semantics of topics
 - 2.2.2 Syntax of topics
 - 2.2.3 Non-manual marking
 - 2.2.4 Topic prominence

- 2.2.5 Research questions
- 2.3 Focus
 - 2.3.1 Types of focus
 - 2.3.2 Prosodic/stress marking
 - 2.3.3 Non-manual marking
 - 2.3.4 Contrast in space
 - 2.3.5 Research questions
- 2.4 Doubling
 - 2.4.1 Doubling as a morphosyntactic strategy
 - 2.4.2 Doubling and Information Structure
 - 2.4.3 Research questions
- 2.5 Weak hand holds
 - 2.5.1 Form and function of weak hand holds
 - 2.5.2 Weak hand holds and Information Structure
 - 2.5.3 Unresolved issues
 - 2.5.4 Research questions
- 2.6 Summary
- 3. Topic
 - 3.1 Introduction
 - 3.2 Methodology
 - 3.2.1 Data collection
 - 3.2.3 Participants
 - 3.2.3 Identifying topics
 - 3.3 Topics and topic marking
 - 3.3.1 Syntactic markers
 - 3.3.2 Non-manual markers
 - 3.3.3 Prosodic boundaries
 - 3.3.4 Optionality of aboutness topic marking
 - 3.3.5 Non-prototypical topics
 - 3.4 Topic shift
 - 3.4.1 Definition and challenges
 - 3.4.2 Topic shift in RSL and NGT
 - 3.4.3 Topic shift with zero expression
 - 3.4.4 Differences between cartoon retellings and personal stories
 - 3.4.5 Topic shift and non-manual marking
 - 3.5 Thetic sentences
 - 3.6 Topic prominence
 - 3.6.1 Topic prominence in sign languages
 - 3.6.2 Topic prominence in RSL and NGT
 - 3.7 Summary
- 4. Focus
 - 4.1 Introduction
 - 4.2 Methodology
 - 4.2.1 Participants
 - 4.2.2 Elicitation material
 - 4.2.3 Elicitation procedure

- 4.2.4 Analysis
- 4.3 Syntactic marking of focus
 - 4.3.1 Fronting
 - 4.3.2 VO vs. OV
 - 4.3.3 Doubling
 - 4.3.4 Focus particles
 - 4.3.5 Ellipsis
 - 4.3.6 Summary
- 4.4 Manual prosodic markers of focus
 - 4.4.1 Length
 - 4.4.2 Repetition
 - 4.4.3 Speed
 - 4.4.4 Size
 - 4.4.5 Height
 - 4.4.6 VP and sentence focus
 - 4.4.7 Summary
- 4.5 Non-manual markers of focus
 - 4.5.1 Eyebrow raise
 - 4.5.2 Head tilt
 - 4.5.3 Body lean
 - 4.5.4 Head nods
 - 4.5.5 Mouthing
 - 4.5.6 Eye gaze
 - 4.5.7 VP and sentence focus
 - 4.5.8 Summary
- 4.6 Interaction of syntactic, prosodic, and non-manual markers
- 4.7 Marking contrast
- 4.8 Discussion
 - 4.8.1 Focus types and marking
 - 4.8.2 Focus projection
 - 4.8.3 Comparison of RSL and NGT
 - 4.8.4 Modality effects
- 5. Doubling
 - 5.1 Introduction
 - 5.2 Methodology
 - 5.2.1 Data collection
 - 5.2.2 Participants
 - 5.2.3 Defining doubling
 - 5.3 Data
 - 5.3.1 The X X pattern: hesitation
 - 5.3.2 The X X' pattern of doubling: clarification
 - 5.3.3 The X Y X(°) pattern of doubling
 - 5.3.4 Identical and modified copies
 - 5.3.5 Prosody of doubling
 - 5.3.6 Summary
 - 5.4 Functions of doubling

- 5.4.1 Morphosyntactic motivation
- 5.4.2 Emphasis and doubling
- 5.4.3 Pragmatic explanation
- 5.5 Discussion
 - 5.5.1 Notional consequences
 - 5.5.2 Prosody and doubling
 - 5.5.3 Why is doubling so prominent?
- 5.6 Conclusions
- 6. Weak hand holds
 - 6.1 Introduction
 - 6.2 Methodology
 - 6.2.1 Data
 - 6.2.2 Participants
 - 6.2.3 Annotation
 - 6.3 Functions of holds
 - 6.3.1 Phonetic holds
 - 6.3.2 Marking a syntactic domain
 - 6.3.3 Iconic functions
 - 6.3.4 Discourse-related functions
 - 6.3.5 Form-function relations
 - 6.3.6 Summary: form and function of weak hand holds
 - 6.4 Frequency and distribution of hold types
 - 6.4.1 Overall frequency of weak hand holds
 - 6.4.2 Phonetic characteristics
 - 6.4.3 Summary
 - 6.5 Discussion
 - 6.5.1 Weak hand holds and Information Structure
 - 6.5.2 Differences between genres and languages
 - 6.5.3 Form and function
 - 6.5.4 Modality effects
 - 6.6 A sidestep: a syntactic account of weak hand holds
 - 6.6.1 The linearization problem
 - 6.6.2 Multidominance in spoken languages
 - 6.6.3 Multidominance and weak hand holds
 - 6.6.4 Discussion
- 7. Discussion and conclusions
 - 7.1 Summary of the empirical results
 - 7.1.1 Topics
 - 7.1.2 Focus and foregrounding
 - 7.1.3 Other results of the project
 - 7.2 Intra-modal typology: comparison between RSL and NGT
 - 7.2.1 Topic marking
 - 7.2.2 Focus marking
 - 7.2.3 Doubling
 - 7.2.4 Weak hand
 - 7.2.5 How different are RSL and NGT?

- 7.3 Cross-modal typology
 - 7.3.1 Topics in typological perspective
 - 7.3.2 Focus in typological perspective
 - 7.3.3 Doubling in typological perspective
- 7.4 Modality effects
 - 7.4.1 Prosody and modality
 - 7.4.2 Gesture and sign languages
 - 7.4.3 Is doubling special?
 - 7.4.4 Wh-clefts
- 7.5 Future research directions
 - 7.5.1 Methodological issues
 - 7.5.2 Related topics
 - 7.5.3 Gesture vs. sign

Appendix A1. Stimuli

Appendix A2. Testing reliability of coding for manual prosodic markers

References

Summary / Samenvatting / Краткое содержание

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