

Report 2014 & 2015 of ACLC research group: Sign Language Grammar and Typology (SiLaGaT)

Coordinator: Roland Pfau

Web page: <http://aclc.uva.nl/research/groups/groups/groups/content/folder/sign-language-grammar-and-typology/sign-language-grammar-and-typology.html>

Participants in 2014 and 2015:

Prof. Enoch Aboh (ACLC), senior researcher

Prof. Anne Baker (ACLC), senior researcher

Prof. Beppie van den Bogaerde (ACLC), senior researcher

Dr. Vadim Kimmelman (ACLC), post-doc on Pfau's project (since February 2015)

Subproject "A comparative study of argument structure in sign languages: Typological and theoretical implications", February 2015 – January 2019

Vanja de Lint (ACLC), PhD candidate on Pfau's NWO project (since September 2015)

Subproject "Argument structure in Sign Language of the Netherlands", September 2015 – August 2019

Marloes Oomen (ACLC), PhD candidate on Pfau's NWO project (since September 2015)

Subproject "Argument structure in German Sign Language", September 2015 – August 2019

Dr. Roland Pfau (ACLC), senior researcher, coordinator

External members:

Brendan Costello (Basque Center on Cognition, Brain and Language, Spain), senior researcher

Dr. Victoria Nyst (Universiteit Leiden), post-doc

Description of the research group:

Comparative studies on languages of different language families have revealed striking differences as well as interesting (possibly universal) similarities concerning their grammatical – in particular, morphological and syntactic – structure. However, traditionally, these studies were only concerned with the comparison of grammatical phenomena across spoken languages. Once we include sign languages in the typological picture, new research questions emerge.

First of all, we need to ask whether grammatical models that have been developed on the basis of spoken language data can also be applied to sign languages. The general picture that emerges is that many of these models are in fact applicable to visual-gestural languages. While studies that test the cross-modal applicability of theoretical models often focus on a single sign language, it is also important to include, in a second step, typological comparisons in the investigation. On the one hand, we want to know whether typological classifications and generalizations that have been established on the basis of spoken language samples also hold for sign languages despite the different language modality. In case we find modality-specific patterns, we need to investigate whether these can be accounted for in a theoretical model. On the other hand, we also want to know in how far sign languages differ from each other. And even more importantly: do they differ along the same lines as spoken languages do?

Research highlights in 2014:

A true highlight in 2014 was the news that Enoch Aboh and Roland Pfau received an NWO Vrije Competitie grant to start a 4-year project on argument structure in three sign languages – argument structure being a topic that to date has only received little attention in sign language linguistics. The project will be typological and theoretical in nature and thus fits very well with the spirit of the research group. A reading group has been established to discuss topics related to argument structure in spoken and signed language. Besides that, members continued their work on various aspects of sign language grammar and acquisition.

Enoch Aboh joined the research group as co-applicant for the NWO Vrije Competitie grant. While most of his research focuses on spoken language structure and issues in language learning, the topics he addresses are highly relevant to the study of sign languages. One of his main interests concerns issues of bimodal code-mixing and -blending. In this regard, he has invited Chiara Branchini, who has done important work on Italian Sign Language – Italian code-blending, to an international workshop on the emergence of linguistic competence in a multilingual setting, which he organized at the NIAS in April 2014.

Anne Baker continued her joint work with Beppie van den Bogaerde on bimodal bilingual children. They reviewed studies, including their own, on Kids of Deaf Adults in terms of their spoken and sign language development, concluding that these children function in many ways like unimodal bilinguals. Interesting forms of code-mixing are observed, which are referred to as code-blending, since the mixing of the two languages is simultaneous rather than sequential. A study on dementia in NGT signers also appeared, which indicates characteristics similar to those described for unimodal bilingual dementia patients. Given the explorative nature of this work, it is hoped that it can be continued in a European project. In November 2014, Anne visited Stellenbosch University, where she is helping to set up a sign linguistics program within the linguistics department, and where she also taught at the undergraduate level.

Beppie van den Bogaerde, in collaboration with Anne Baker, studied further aspects of bimodal bilingualism (see above); she also co-authored a methodological paper with Smeijers et al. in which they describe the procedures for adapting and translating (written) standardized tests into a signed language. She is one of the editors of DuJAL (Dutch Journal of Applied Linguistics) and LIA (Language, Interaction and Acquisition). In October 2014, she was invited for workshops and presentations on sign linguistics in Hong Kong (Center for Sign Language at the Chinese University of Hong Kong). Her oratory speech in November, the first oratory speech held in NGT, was attended by approximately 400 people and drew much media attention.

Vadim Kimmelman was mainly busy with the completion of his dissertation, that is, summarizing the results of the studies that he had conducted in previous years, namely on topics, focus, doubling, and weak hand holds in NGT and RSL. He also wrote a chapter on typological and theoretical specifics of Information Structure in these languages, and discussed modality effects. In addition, he has conducted fieldwork to describe quantifiers in RSL. This research reveals that RSL has all main types of quantifiers attested in spoken and signed languages, but also employs interesting modality-specific markers of quantification, such as distributive marking which applies to different constituents in a sentence. Finally, together with Roland Pfau and Enoch Aboh, he started the first investigation into argument structure of classifiers in RSL, and found out (i) that RSL generally follows the well-known tendencies in correlating argument structure with classifier type, (ii) but that the corpus data also shows some interesting digressions from the previously established patterns.

Roland Pfau continued the work on a 'blueprint for sign language grammars' in the context of a European COST project with 13 participating countries. As working group leader, he supervises the parts of the manual on phonology, morphology, and the lexicon. In his research, he focused on

various aspects of grammaticalization in sign languages, including modality-independent and modality-specific aspects. As for the former, he demonstrates how selected grammaticalization phenomena in sign languages can be accounted for within a phrase-structural account according to which grammaticalization proceeds “up the tree”; as for the latter, he co-authored a handbook article which investigates the grammaticalization of manual and non-manual co-speech gestures in sign languages.

Research highlights in 2015:

Anne Baker, together with colleagues from the National Institute for the Deaf in Worcester (SA), investigated lexical variation in South African Sign Language (SASL). They found a considerable amount of variation, with as its basis the school that the young deaf adult attended during secondary education. Interestingly, even schools only a few kilometers apart can have different signs since there is so little contact between schools. At the College in Worcester where the young people come together, a new variety of SASL is emerging. These findings impact on the SASL dictionary that is presently being created.

Brendan Costello completed his PhD thesis on the agreement system of Spanish Sign Language (LSE), which was defended at the UvA. An important contribution of the thesis is that it demonstrates that LSE agreement displays properties that are canonical in the sense of Corbett (2006). It further offers an analysis of spatial agreement within a Minimalist framework. It thus makes an important typological and theoretical contribution to sign language linguistics.

Vadim Kimmelman focused on research on argument structure of Russian Sign Language (RSL). Together with **Enoch Aboh** and Roland Pfau, he investigated properties of RSL classifiers, eliciting new data to confirm that classifiers have a more complex internal structure than previously argued. He also conducted the first corpus-based study of transitivity of RSL verbs. To that end, he developed a novel method of assessing transitivity in a sign language corpus and found that transitivity in RSL is predicted by the verb’s meaning and is in agreement with the typologically-based transitivity hierarchy. He also continued his research on question-answer pairs in NGT, arguing that the variable properties of this construction can be explained by ongoing grammaticalization.

Based on an experimental study, **Vanja de Lint** demonstrated that in NGT, specific differences in the stimuli – in particular, the presence of an agent – yield systematic differences in the use of classifier handshapes, thus confirming previous findings (for ASL) concerning the relation between argument structure and morphosyntactic structure.

Marloes Oomen conducted the first corpus-based study on psych verbs in a sign language. Based on a substantial amount of naturalistic NGT data, she shows that psych-verbs iconically encode a locative relation between a psychological state and a metaphoric location through their articulation on the body. Drawing parallels to theoretical proposals made for spoken languages, she argues that this relation should be represented structurally. These findings are of relevance for her PhD-project which, however, will focus on argument structure in German Sign Language. In another corpus-based study, conducted together with Roland, she investigated the expression of standard negation in NGT. A fine-grained typological comparison reveals that NGT displays patterns that are different from those previously described for other sign languages.

Roland Pfau, as member of a European research team involving 10 partners from 7 countries (France, Germany, Italy, Israel, The Netherlands, Spain, and Turkey), received a Horizon 2020 grant that will investigate the linguistic, historical, and cultural heritage of European Deaf signing communities. Subprojects include the description of sign language grammars, a typological on-line atlas, sign language assessment, and interviews with elderly signers – the first two of these are of particular relevance to the research group. Together with Connie de Vos (MPI Nijmegen), he

investigated typological properties of rural (village) sign languages. They found that rural sign languages as a group pattern differently from large community sign languages in some lexical and grammatical domains.

Valorisation

In September 2014, members of the research group participated in the Werelddovendag in Dordrecht, where they presented the UvA sign linguistics program and research results to the Deaf community.

Roland is in regular contact with *Interpres*, the journal of the Dutch sign language interpreter association, in which UvA BA and MA students report findings of their theses, thus making them available to a broader audience.

Members of the research group participated in the *Wereld Doven Dag* in Utrecht in September 2015 to give visibility to sign language related teaching and research activities at the UvA. Also, they maintain a Facebook page (with approx. 180 subscribers) on which information related to sign language is posted.

Following the publication of an article in *PNAS*, Roland Pfau was interviewed by Mark Beekhuis from BNR nieuwsradio in April 2015. Roland also contributed a presentation on “The grammar of headshakes” to a popular science event (organized by taalblog Milfje Meulskens) at the DRONGO language festival in Utrecht.

Anne Baker’s work on lexical variation in SASL has an important impact for the development of teaching materials.

As member of a European team, Beppie van den Bogaerde contributed to an online resource that establishes European standards for sign languages for professional purposes in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and provides an overview of assessment descriptors and approaches (<http://www.ecml.at/ECML-Programme/Programme2012-2015/ProSign/tabid/1752/Default.aspx>).