Annual report 2016 of ACLC research group: *Sign Language Grammar and Typology (SiLaGaT)*

Coordinator: Roland Pfau

Web page: **SILAGAT**

Current external funding:
- 722.835 Euro from NWO, Project "Argument structure in three sign languages: Typological and theoretical aspects" (dossiernummer PR-14-15)
- 218.648 Euro from European Commission, Horizon 2020 (Reflective Society) project "Sign Hub: preserving, researching and fostering the linguistic, historical and cultural heritage of European Deaf signing communities with an integral resource" (grant agreement number 693349)

Participants in 2016:
- Prof. Enoch Aboh (ACLC), senior researcher
- Prof. Anne Baker (ACLC), senior researcher
- Eveline Boers-Visker (ACLC), PhD candidate on external project (in cooperation with Utrecht University of Applied Sciences) "Learning to use space: a study into the SL2 acquisition process of adult learners of Sign Language of the Netherlands" (since March 2016)
- Prof. Beppie van den Bogaerde (ACLC), senior researcher
- Dr. Vadim Kimmelman (ACLC), Postdoc on Pfau's NWO project (since February 2015)
  - Subproject "A comparative study of argument structure in sign languages: Typological and theoretical implications", February 2015 – January 2019
- Ulrika Klomp (ACLC), PhD candidate on Pfau's Horizon2020 project SIGN-HUB (since July 2016)
  - Subproject "A descriptive grammar of Sign Language of the Netherlands", July 2016 – April 2020
- 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), Postdoc
- Dr. Victoria Nyst (Universiteit Leiden), Postdoc

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 2016:
- In collaboration with South African colleagues, **Anne Baker** discovered that claims about South African Sign Language (SASL) belonging to the group of sign languages formed by British Sign Language (BSL), Australian Sign Language, and New Zealand Sign Language are not correct. There is some influence from BSL in a few varieties of SASL but not enough to claim it forms part of the so-called BANZSL family.
- **Eveline Boers-Visker** developed materials to elicit the use of space in first year students enrolled in the sign language interpreter/teacher programs offered by Utrecht University of Applied Sciences. She recruited 22 students (approximately 25% of the 2016 cohort) and filmed them every two/three weeks. Filming will continue in 2017. Data transcribed and analyzed so far suggest that learners move through phases in their acquisition process. For instance, depicting constructions involving classifiers seem to be acquired earlier than non-iconic syntactic structures, and within the category of depicting constructions, some semantic categories seem to be acquired earlier than others. This might have implications for the teaching process.

- For the first time, turn-taking in Sign Language of the Netherlands by a deaf mother with two deaf children has been described by **Beppie van den Bogaerde**, in collaboration with Anne Baker, in dyadic and triadic interaction. The results provide insights into sign language pragmatics, a field which is seriously under-researched.

- **Brendan Costello** looked at the use of space in the agreement system of Spanish Sign Language (LSE). His application of the notion of canonical agreement contributes to the debate on the nature of agreement in sign languages by showing that the term may usefully be applied to these languages. Additionally, together with Gemma Barberà, he has also carried out a comparison of impersonal reference in LSE and Catalan Sign Language, finding commonalities between both languages, as well as strategies that are unique to each.

- **Vadim Kimmelman**, in collaboration with Roland Pfau and **Enoch O. Aboh** proposed a theoretical analysis of complex classifier predicates in Russian Sign Language, building upon the results from the previous year. Making use of experimental elicitation techniques, he also found that impersonal reference in Russian Sign Language can be expressed by a variety of strategies, most notably by pro-drop, by using a plural pointing sign, and by a second person pronoun.

- Soon after starting her project on the grammar of NGT, **Ulrika Klomp** realized that exact information concerning the number of deaf, deaf-blind, and signing people in the Netherlands is hard to come by, but that the numbers estimated by some welfare foundations are probably incorrect. She found that the number of native sign language users is probably lower: about 7,500 people instead of the often reported 15,000.

- **Vanja de Lint's** research on NGT revealed (i) that NGT classifier constructions show correlations between argument structure and classifier type; (ii) that, specifically, NGT Handling and Whole Entity classifier predicates may take part in a transitive-intransitive alternation, and (iii) that with respect to NGT classifier constructions, we need to distinguish manner verbs from causative verbs. The third finding in particular goes beyond what has previously been described for other sign languages.

- **Marloes Oomen** continued her work on iconicity in verbs in German Sign Language (DGS), building on her previous research on psych-verbs in Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT). Preliminary results indicate that DGS patterns like NGT: in both languages, body-anchored verbs can license the drop of a first person subject argument. She argues that this occurs because the location for first person and the iconically motivated place of articulation of these verbs coincide.

- Drawing on data from a variety of signed and spoken languages, **Roland Pfau** offered a detailed comparison of the behavior of suprasegmentals in the two modalities. He shows that non-manual markers like mouth movements and facial expressions fulfil functions at various grammatical levels and are capable of spreading – just like tones in spoken languages. He suggests that the spreading domains can be defined in

prosodic terms. Also, he adds to the picture eye blinks, which are punctual markers that function like boundary tones.

Valorisation

- Members of the research group maintain a Facebook page (with approx. 380 subscribers) on which information related to sign language is posted.
- In the context of the Horizon2020 project SIGN-HUB (www.sign-hub.eu/), Roland Pfau collaborates with De Gelderhorst (www.gelderhorst.nl/), a center for elderly deaf people in Ede. The societally relevant goal of the project is the documentation of the cultural and linguistic heritage of this population by means of semi-structured interviews.
- The sign language group interacts closely with the Hogeschool Utrecht in the context of the Horizon2020 project and in the context of a joint PhD project on second language acquisition of NGT. Both projects are relevant (i) for improving the status of NGT and (ii) for improving language reaching for future interpreters and teachers.
- Since 2012, yearly summer schools on sign language linguistics (for MA/PhD students) have been organized in the context of the previous COST project SIGNGRAM and the ongoing Horizon2020 project SIGN-HUB; these summer schools are accessible for deaf participants. Societally relevant goals are education, integration, and networking.
- Within the ZonMW-Inzicht project "Tell it! Fostering influence in communication and language by people with congenital visual and auditory people", Beppie van den Bogaerde is collaborating with Marleen Jansen (RUG) on research that aims at (i) improving the communication of deaf-blind people with their environment, (ii) at testing the effect of training on actual communicative interactions, and (iii) at developing an app. The project has clear societal relevance for deaf-blind individuals and the people they interact with, including professionals.
- Presentations about the work of sign linguists addressed to the Deaf community in South Africa, to sign interpreters, and also to pan-African audiences is improving awareness of the importance of linguistic research on African sign languages.