

## **Relative Clauses in Japanese Sign Language**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In this study, the authors (one hearing, two Deaf-of-Deaf) analyzed four texts totaling 25 minutes of video in natural Japanese Sign Language from a discourse/typology perspective to determine how relative clauses are handled in normal language use. We first defined a relative clause as an embedded clause that modifies a head noun or pronoun (expressed or implied) and either helps narrow down its reference or further describes it. With this definition, we then examined each verb in the corpus to determine whether it was the main verb of an independent clause or whether it was in a subordinate clause—either an adjunct, complement, or relative clause. We found 31 relative clauses in the small corpus, which we then examined in greater detail.

We find that Japanese Sign Language is unique among signed language relative clauses studied so far. First, we see clear examples of three separate structures that serve the function of a relative clause. In one, the verb that defines the head noun precedes it. In another, the verb follows the head noun. In the third structure, the head noun is not stated at all, but only implied. Secondly, we find that the relative clause is not restricted to the topic position overlapping with points of departure or other fronted elements, as is the case in most signed languages for which literature is available. Although in some cases we do see topic-marking non-manuals coinciding with the relative clause and the head noun, this not required. Finally, we find the head noun or its token playing a variety of grammatical roles. In our data, a relative clause can further define a noun that functions in the matrix sentence either as the subject, object, or indirect object of the main verb. The function of the head noun (or its token) within the relative clause itself can also be either subject or object.