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Aspect Marking in Ethiopian Sign Language

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ABSTRACT

Aspect is a grammatical system which gives information about the temporal structure of a situation or the speaker's view of the situation. The aspect marking system in sign languages is one of the less researched themes. Research findings from well researched languages such as ASL and BSL suggests different analyses. It was claimed that aspect marking, for instance in ASL and BSL is morphological (Kalima & Bellugi,1979; Metlay & Supalla,1995; Rathmann, 2005; Sutton-Spence & Woll,1999, etc.). The inflectional nature of morphology, however, has been questioned (Bergman & Dahl,1994; Maroney, 2004; Liddell, 2003, etc.) on the ground that aspect marking does not meet the basic criteria for inflectional status and is in fact derivational (Maroney, 2004), or belonging to a highly iconic class of 'ideophonic' morphology (Bergman & Dahl, 1994). It also has been argued that the system is neither inflectional nor derivational but gestural (Gray, 2010). Other research also shows that aspectual information is marked in sign languages either by verbal inflection or by separate lexical items (Janzen, 2012; Johnston, Cresdee, & Schembri, 2011; Liddell, 2003:37). These completely different systems of marking aspect on signs are still subject to argument. More research on diverse sign languages could provide more information on the nature of aspect marking in sign languages and enhance our understanding of the issue. This presentation outlines the findings from Ph.D. research in progress on aspect marking system in Ethiopian sign language, a language used by over a million users in Ethiopia.