

«2nd International Symposium on Signed and Spoken Language Linguistics»

**Word Order and Sentence Structure in Languages**

National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, Japan

September 29, 2013

Abstract

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

**Vadim KIMMELMAN**

University of Amsterdam

Sign Languages (SL) are in many aspects less linear than spoken languages: 1) parts of signs (phonemes) combine with each other simultaneously; 2) there are two main partially-independent articulators (two hands) and 3) there is a set of other articulators (the non-manual component) that also expresses linguistic information. In this paper it will be shown how linear and non-linear means combine in expressing Information Structure in two unrelated SLs: Russian SL and SL of the Netherlands. The research is based on an analysis of small corpora of RSL and SLN as well as controlled elicitation using the question-answer task with picture stimuli.

The results demonstrate that both SL have means of expressing topics, which in some respects are parallel to spoken languages: topics are placed sentence-initially and marked non-manually and prosodically (which is similar to intonation marking in spoken languages). However, in both RSL and NGT discourse topics can be marked using a special means of “weak hand hold” when the sign referring to a discourse topic is held on the one hand while the other expresses other parts of information. The hold can span across several sentences which has no parallels in spoken languages.

Focus in both SL is expressed mostly by prosodic means (by stress which is manifested in changes in movement patterns of signs) and non-manual markers (eyebrow movements, head nods, body tilts). As in spoken languages, the non-focus part of the utterance is often elided.

An interesting strategy to express information structure that both SL have is doubling when a constituent appears twice in a sentence (ex: READ BOOK READ) to express foregrounding of salient information. Although this strategy is linear, it is much more common in SL than in spoken languages, which calls for a modality-specific explanation.