

List Constructions in Two Signed Languages.

Sherman Wilcox¹, André Xavier² & Satu Siltaloppi³

¹University of New Mexico, wilcox@unm.edu ²Federal University of Parana, andrexavier@ufpr.br

³University of Helsinki, satu.siltaloppi@tuni.fi

Keywords: list constructions, signed languages, cognitive grammar

Lists help us to remember what to do and to organize our thoughts. Lists also play an important role in conversational interaction to structure discourse for the speaker and the audience. Lists occur in spoken, written, gestural, and signed modalities. Liddell (2003) introduced the concept of list buoys for signed languages, that is, a set of signs in which the non-dominant hand is held in a stationary configuration while the dominant hand continues producing signs. Liddell coined the term “buoy” based on an articulatory property — “they maintain a physical presence”; he noted that semantically, buoys “guide the discourse by serving as conceptual landmarks” (Liddell 2003, p. 223). Our analysis is grounded in previous research on pointing constructions in signed and spoken languages (Martínez & Wilcox 2019).

Our study focuses on two signed languages: Libras, the language of Brazilian deaf communities, and Finland-Swedish Sign Language (FinSSL), an endangered signed language used by approximately 90 native deaf signers in Finland and a smaller minority group in Sweden. The goal of our study is to apply a cognitive linguistic approach to the analysis of list buoys. We claim that these expressions are a type of pointing construction composed of two conventional linguistic components: a dominant hand pointing component and non-dominant hand finger locations, which we call the pointing device and the Place, respectively.

Data come from YouTube and Teckeneko videos and are analyzed within the theory of Cognitive Grammar. Whereas previous research only attributed linguistic status to the list hand and considered the dominant hand to be a pointing gesture, we analyze signed lists as constructions. List fingers are symbolic structures with referential meaning, and the dominant hand directs attention to the list finger referent.

We show that list constructions in Libras and FinSSL show striking similarities and some interesting differences, both when compared with each other and with the reports of list expressions in other signed languages. We also show that the typology of list constructions is more diverse than previously described. The list-hand in a list construction does not always remain stationary, and thus its function as a conceptual landmark is more complex than previously thought. In addition, we show that the list-hand itself is a symbolic structure that may be placed at meaningful spatial locations.

The dominant hand has not been given sufficient attention as a linguistic structure in previous research. The dominant hand, canonically an index finger, is also a symbolic structure that directs conceptual attention to the referent associated with a list-finger. Our approach shows that while its primary semantic function is to direct attention to list-hand referents, the dominant hand also creates a variety of higher-order entities or conceptual groupings.

References

Liddell, Scott K. 2003. *Grammar, gesture, and meaning in American Sign Language*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Martínez, Rocío & Sherman Wilcox. 2019. Pointing and placing: Nominal grounding in Argentine Sign Language. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 30(1), 85-121.