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DIANE C. LILLO-MARTIN

UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR AND AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE

Setting the Null Argument Parameters



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*To Stephen Thomas Martin
and
Stephanie Mae Martin*

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PREFACE

AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE

American Sign Language (ASL) is the visual-gestural language used by most of the deaf community in the United States and parts of Canada. On the surface, this language (as all signed languages) seems radically different from the spoken languages which have been used to formulate theories of linguistic principles and parameters. However, the position taken in this book is that when the surface effects of modality are stripped away, ASL will be seen to follow many of the patterns proposed as universals for human language. If these theoretical constructs are meant to hold for language in general, then they should hold for natural human language in any modality; and if ASL is such a natural human language, then it too must be accounted for by any adequate theory of Universal Grammar. For this reason, the study of ASL can be vital for proposed theories of Universal Grammar.

Recent work in several theoretical frameworks of syntax as well as phonology have argued that indeed, ASL is such a language. I will assume then, that principles of Universal Grammar, and principles that derive from it, are applicable to ASL, and in fact that ASL can serve as one of the languages which test Universal Grammar.

There is an important distinction to be drawn, however, between what is called here 'American Sign Language', and other forms of manual communication. It is possible to use signs from the ASL vocabulary, and arrange them in English word order with English syntax without the morphological and syntactic systems of ASL. This kind of signing, which is often called signed English (or Manually Coded English), is understood by many of today's deaf adults. There are also invented systems using ASL vocabulary for basic signs with invented symbols for English morphology such as *-ing* and *-ed*. These systems are often used in educational programs to teach English to deaf children. There is often said to be a continuum of these

signing systems, from manually representing exact English to pure ASL.

In this book, I am considering only the sign system which is the one most often used between deaf adults: ASL. My consultants, for the most part, have deaf, signing parents, have used ASL since childhood, use ASL in their daily lives, and are members of the Deaf community. In addition, the children included in the acquisition studies also have deaf parents, and have been exposed to ASL since birth. (One exceptional group is discussed in the text.) By working with deaf signers from deaf families, I ensure relative homogeneity of linguistic input. This is not to say that I did not find some differences from the West coast to the East coast. Where differences have come up, I have used the West coast data. Although there are many interesting questions to be asked of other sign systems, and other signers, in this work my focus is on ASL.

NOTATION CONVENTIONS

- SIGN** Upper case English glosses stand for signs with approximately the same meaning as the English word.
- SIGN-SIGN** If more than one English word is required to gloss a single sign, the words will be connected with hyphens.
- SIGN^[aspect]** When a sign is marked for an aspectual inflection, the name of that inflection is given in superscript.
- CL:C''** ASL classifiers are indicated using the abbreviation 'CL,' followed by a symbol for the hand configuration used in the classifier, and a description of the meaning in single quotes.
- _aSIGN_b** Subscripts from the beginning of the alphabet are used to indicate spatial locations. Nouns

are marked with a subscript at the beginning of the gloss to indicate the locus with which they are associated. Inflected verbs are marked with a subscript at the beginning to indicate the onset location, and/or at the end to indicate the endpoint location.

- _{a-c}SIGN** Subscripts with a dash indicate a plural index, in which the hand moves from point 'a' to point 'c'. **_bSIGN** then represents a point in between 'a' and 'c', referring to one of the referents picked out by the plural.
- SIGN_i** Subscripts from the middle of the alphabet are used to indicate abstract coreference.
- *()** An asterisk indicates an ungrammatical sentence. An asterisk outside of parentheses indicates that the elements inside are obligatory. An asterisk inside the parentheses indicates that the elements inside are ungrammatical.
- t** A line on top of a sign or signs indicates that a specific grammatical facial gesture was used during the sign(s). 't' stands for the topicalization marker; 'whq' the wh-question marker; 'ynq' the yes-no question marker; 'rhq' the rhetorical question marker; 'neg' the negation marker; 'br' a brow raise when used as a clause marker; 'hn' a head nod.
- (she)** A pronoun will be included in parentheses if it is not given in the original language but is needed for a grammatical English translation.
- (-them)** A pronoun within parentheses is marked with a hyphen if it is signified by verb agreement.
- [he]** A pronoun within brackets is used to indicate an index to a real world referent.

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This book is based on research performed for my 1986 Ph.D. dissertation. It has been greatly revised, however, due to the surge of interest in null arguments and the increase in available literature on the topic. Because of this literature, parts of my 1986 analysis have been revised. I expect the analysis to need further revision well before another 5 years pass; such is the nature of cross-linguistic work.

I would like to thank the people who played a role in all the stages of this work. First, I would like to thank my advisory committee at the University of California, San Diego: Edward S. Klima, Sandra Chung, Jeffrey Elman, Hugh Mehan, and Carol Padden. They gave me advice and an invaluable education. I thank Ursula Bellugi for help of many types, especially for directing the lab in which this study, and so many others, could take place. Other friends and researchers from UCSD and Salk who deserve special mention are David Corina, Carol Georgopolous, Mary Hare, Peggy Hashemipour, Geraldine Legendre, Marina McIntire, Judy Reilly, Leslie Saxon, Chilin Shih, and especially Sally Rice.

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