

## Definiteness marking in Korean Sign Language

Min-Joo Kim (Texas Tech University), Youngju Choi (Chosun University), and Arum Kang  
(Chungnam National University)

Definiteness marking has received much attention in recent sign language studies, as it has in spoken language studies.<sup>1</sup> However, definiteness marking in Korean Sign Language (KSL) remains largely underexplored, even though definiteness marking in spoken Korean has been extensively studied (see, a.o., Ionin et al. 2012; Kang 2015, 2021; Ahn 2019a; Kim 2023; Kim 2025; and references there). This paper aims to fill this gap by presenting data from KSL. We show that the definiteness marking system of KSL is both similar to and different from that of spoken Korean. We also show that the way KSL uses index finger pointing gesture (IX) differs from the way American Sign Language (ASL) does.

Three most notable findings of our study are as follows: First, KSL makes a more explicit differentiation between situationally used demonstratives and non-situationally used ones than spoken Korean does. Second, KSL employs IX only when there is a need to encode what Kim (2023) calls [+exophoric] feature, which is a way of indicating that the referent of the definite at issue  $x$  stands in a locative relation (LR) to the speaker and there is another entity  $y$  that is not explicitly introduced into the discourse and  $y$  stands in an LR to  $x$ . Third, KSL has a definite expression that carries [+exophoric], [+specific], and [+anaphoric] meanings, namely, NP-IX<sub>THIS</sub>, and NP-IX<sub>THIS</sub> is—at least to our knowledge—typologically unattested.

Our research builds on, but departs from, Kang et al. (2025), which is the first and the only work on definiteness marking in KSL conducted within a formal semantic framework. According to our research, there are six types of definite expressions in KSL if we consider demonstrative-NPs as a type of definite expressions, following authors like Hawkins (1978), Löbner (1985), and Kim (2023): (i) IX<sub>HERE</sub>/IX<sub>THERE</sub>; (ii) bare noun; (iii) null argument; (iv) NP<sub>LOC</sub>, which encodes definiteness through spatial loci (LOC); (iv) IX<sub>LOC</sub>; and (iv) what Kang et al. (2025) call NP-IX<sub>THIS</sub>. Of these, in this paper, we focus on NP<sub>LOC</sub>, IX<sub>LOC</sub>, and NP-IX<sub>THIS</sub>.

From what have found, NP<sub>LOC</sub>, IX<sub>LOC</sub>, and NP-IX<sub>THIS</sub> are only used in anaphoric contexts, and they are used in lieu of the default or more neutral anaphoric expression. NP<sub>LOC</sub> is used when there is a need to disambiguate and thus it is not grammatically optional; for example, in (1), using NP<sub>LOC-A</sub> in the second sentence is obligatory to convey the intended meaning because there are two new discourse referents introduced in the first sentence. IX<sub>LOC</sub> is an apparent alternative to a null argument: it is used when the speaker intends to add a pragmatic meaning such as emphasis or contrast. For example, the use of IX<sub>A</sub> in (2) indicates that the dog at issue exhibits cuteness that is higher than (any) other dogs or entities that were not overtly introduced into the discourse. Using a null argument does not give rise to such an implicature, so IX<sub>LOC</sub> is not a true alternative to a null argument. Finally, NP-IX<sub>THIS</sub> is used instead of a bare noun, an NP<sub>LOC</sub>, or an IX<sub>LOC</sub>, and its use is also grammatically optional. To illustrate, using NP-IX<sub>THIS</sub> in (3) and (4) instead of a bare noun or a null argument indicates that the referent of the definite at issue has a noteworthy property that is only known to the speaker, so it is *specific*, even though it is also anaphoric, unique, familiar, and therefore is definite. Moreover, NP-IX<sub>THIS</sub> cannot mark entities that are physically present in the discourse context, as exemplified in (5), so it can only occur in non-situational (i.e., non-deictic) contexts, in contrast with IX<sub>HERE</sub>/IX<sub>THERE</sub>.

KSL is similar to spoken Korean in that it frequently uses bare nouns and null arguments to encode definiteness. However, spoken Korean does not have *exact* counterparts to NP<sub>LOC</sub>, IX<sub>LOC</sub>, and NP-IX<sub>THIS</sub>: although demonstratives in spoken Korean can mark anaphoric definites by “competing with” other types of definite expressions (see Ahn 2019; Kim 2023), the meanings conveyed by using the three expressions in KSL cannot be conveyed by simply using demonstrative-NPs. Moreover, IX in KSL also differs from IX in ASL, which can be used to mark any type of definites (see Ahn et al. 2019). Finally, even though demonstratives in spoken English are well known to mark *affectivity* (Lakoff 1974), “this” can only be used for marking *specific*, *indefinite* entities (see Ionin 2006; and references there). This makes KSL a unique language. And it shows that even though there are some commonalities between spoken languages and sign languages, there are also some differences between them which stem from the different modalities that are involved in encoding meaning.

---

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Lillo-Martin and Meier 2011, Zucchi 2012, Irani 2016, Ahn 2019b; Ahn et al. 2019, Esipova 2019, Davidson 2022 for definiteness marking in sign languages; and see, e.g., Schwarz 2009, 2013, Simpson et al. 2011, Simonenko 2014, Ahn 2017, 2019, Jenks 2015, 2018, Bombi 2018, Aguilar-Guevara et al. 2019, Dayal and Jiang 2023 for definiteness marking in spoken languages.

## Data

- (1) GIA<sub>LOC-A</sub> LEX<sub>LOC-B</sub> HELP<sub>(LOC-A→B)</sub>. WONDERFUL ARTIST<sub>LOC-A</sub>  
'Gia<sub>i</sub> helps Lex<sub>j</sub>. She<sub>i</sub> is a wonderful artist.'
- (2) ANIMAL-HOSPITAL PUPPY<sub>A</sub> THERE SEE, IX<sub>A</sub> CUTE  
'I saw a dog<sub>i</sub> at the animal hospital — it<sub>i</sub> is so cute.'
- (3) SUN<sub>A</sub> SUN-IX<sub>THIS</sub> RED BIG. IX<sub>A</sub> A-FEW-DAYS TODAY DIFFERENT  
'That sun<sub>i</sub> — this morning, big and red. The sun<sub>i</sub> today is different from a few days ago.'
- (4) YESTERDAY MEET JANE. JANE-IX<sub>THIS</sub> TALL.  
'Yesterday I met Jane<sub>i</sub>. This Jane<sub>i</sub> was (surprisingly) tall.'
- (5) \*IX<sub>HERE</sub> BOOK-IX<sub>THIS</sub> TAKE  
Intended: 'Take this book that lies here.'

## Selected references

- Ahn, Dorothy. 2019a. THAT thesis: A competition mechanism for anaphoric expressions. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University.
- Ahn, Dorothy. 2019b. ASL IX to locus as a modifier. Paper presented at NELS 50, MIT, October 27.
- Ahn, Dorothy, Annemarie Kocab, and Kathryn Davidson. 2019. The role of contrast in anaphoric expressions in ASL. In *Proceedings of Glow-in-Asia XII*, 321–340.
- Davidson, Kathryn. 2022. Formal semantics and pragmatics in sign languages. Manuscript, Harvard University.
- Dayal, Veneta, and Li Julie Jiang. 2023. The puzzle of anaphoric bare nouns in Mandarin: A counter point to Index! *Linguistic Inquiry* 54(1): 147–167.
- Esipova, Maria. 2019. Acceptability of at-issue co-speech gestures under contrastive focus. *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics* 4(1).
- Hawkins, John A. 1978. *Definiteness and indefiniteness: A study in reference and grammaticality prediction*. London: Croom Helm.
- Ionin, Tania, Soondo Baek, Eunah Kim, Heejeong Ko, and Kenneth Wexler. 2012. *That's not so different from the*: Definite and demonstrative descriptions in second language acquisition. *Second Language Research* 28(1): 69–101.
- Ionin, Tania. 2006. This is definitely specific: Specificity and definiteness in article systems. *Natural Language Semantics* 14: 175–234.
- Irani, Ava. 2016. Two types of definites in American Sign Language. Presented at the Workshop on Definiteness Across Languages, Mexico City.
- Kang, Arum. 2021. Marking definiteness in an articleless language: The role of the domain restrictor KU in Korean. *Language and Linguistics* 22(2): 301–336.
- Kang, Arum, Youngju Choi, and Min-Joo Kim. 2025. Definiteness in Korean Sign Language: The role of NP<sub>LOC</sub> and NP-IX<sub>THIS</sub>. Paper presented at WCCFL 43, Seattle, Washington, USA, April 25.
- Kim, Min-Joo. 2023. Anaphoric definiteness marking in Korean: Focusing on subject definites. *Journal of East Asian Linguistics* 32(3): 373–409.
- Kim, Min-Joo. 2025. Definiteness in Korean and beyond. Paper presented at the Distinguished Lecture Series in Sign Language Linguistics, Chosun University, South Korea. April 11.
- Lakoff, Robin. 1974. Remarks on 'this' and 'that'. In *Proceedings of the Chicago Linguistics Society* 10, 345–356. Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society.
- Lillo-Martin, Diane, and Jon Gajewski. 2014. One grammar or two? Sign languages and the nature of human language. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Cognitive Science*, 5(4): 387–401.
- Löbner, Sebastian. 1985. Definites. *Journal of Semantics* 4(4): 279–326.
- Schwarz, Florian. 2009. Two types of definites in natural language. Doctoral dissertation, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.
- Simonenko, Alexandra. 2014. Grammatical ingredients of definiteness. Doctoral dissertation, McGill University.
- Zucchi, Sandro. 2012. Formal semantics of sign languages. *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 6(11): 719–734.