Signs and Structures: Formal Approaches to Sign Language Syntax ed. by Pawel Rutkowski (review)

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BOOK REVIEW

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Signs and Structures: Formal Approaches to Sign Language Syntax,
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SIGNS AND STRUCTURES: FORMAL APPROACHES TO SIGN
LANGUAGE SYNTAX is a collection of papers published as a special
issue of *Sign Language & Linguistics* 16(2) (2013); the papers were initial-
ly presented at the Warsaw conference on Formal and Experimental
Advances in Sign Language Theory in 2012. Since this conference was
not devoted to one particular topic, the book is also not thematically
homogeneous. Nevertheless, the motivation for publishing this col-
lection is clear and commendable: Its contributions reflect some of
the most important directions in the current research on the syntax
of sign languages within formal linguistics. The topics discussed in the
book have been widely explored recently, and these papers add valu-
able data, analyses, and theoretical implications to the debate.

The first contribution, by Natasha Abner, is devoted to the ASL
possessive marker POSS, which can be used attributively (e.g., BRUNO
POSS BOOK "Bruno's book") and predicatively (BOOK POSS BRUNO
"The book belongs to Bruno"). Contrary to previous analyses, Abner
argues that the attributive POSS is derived from the predicative POSS.
She provides several convincing arguments (from morphology, syntax,
and semantics) in favor of her analysis. For instance, she notes that
the predicative POSS but not the attributive POSS has a transitive
agreement pattern and that some of the word orders possible for
the predicative POSS are not possible in the attributive construction.
Semantically, the predicative POSS is more restricted: It can express
only ownership (strict possession), but not other interpretations, such
as authorship, so BOOK POSS BRUNO can mean only that he owns it,
not that he wrote it. Focusing on the predicative POSS, Abner shows
that it is a verb: It appears in the same positions as lexical verbs, shows

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object and optional subject agreement, and can be aspectually marked. She then offers an explicit syntactic account in which predicative POSS is combined with the possessor and the possessee to build a VP, and then the VP is embedded as a complement of a locative predicate (Loc), which forms a complex predicate together with POSS. This (in combination with object shift) accounts for possible word orders in the predicative structure and also explains why only strict possession can be expressed by the predicative POSS: The locative head is responsible for this semantic restriction. Attributive POSS is not restricted this way because it is derived through relative clause formation that targets the structure below Loc. Other properties of attributive POSS are also accounted for by the explicit analysis of the relative clause formation. The article is well argued and clearly written, which should also make it accessible to nonformal linguists.

The second contribution, by Chiara Branchini and colleagues, addresses the phenomenon of *wh*-doubling (*wh*-duplication in the authors' terms) in Italian Sign Language (LIS). The phenomenon of doubling has recently received a good deal of attention, and a formal analysis in term of Nunes's (2004) copy theory of movement has been suggested for other sign languages. However, previous research (including some conducted by the same authors) has claimed that LIS does not have *wh*-doubling. In this contribution the authors report that, in corpus data, 13 percent of all cases of *wh*-questions involve *wh*-doubling. The authors then use the corpus data to analyze general properties of this phenomenon and to demonstrate that the copies are phonologically and prosodically identical if one takes into account the effect of phrase-final lengthening. By drawing on additionally elicited data, the authors argue that the copies of the *wh*-word occur in Spec,CP (which is to the right in LIS) and in Spec,FocP (which is to the left). They account for the identical phonological realization of the copies and other syntactic properties of the construction by claiming that the copies actually belong to different chains sharing one foot (the in situ instance of the *wh*-word). This is an important conclusion because it shows that doubling in sign languages can arise from processes other than the overt realization of two copies in one chain, as previously suggested. Another important issue raised by this article is the necessity of using naturalistic corpus data in formal

research inasmuch as elicitation alone can lead to overlooking a relatively common syntactic phenomenon. Hopefully more researchers will take note of it.

The third contribution, by Roland Pfau and Markus Steinbach, presents a formal account of the grammaticalization of agreement auxiliaries in sign languages. The authors have previously written a number of papers on the topic of grammaticalization, but this is their first explicitly formal account. They explore the hypothesis that grammaticalization is reanalysis upward along the functional structure: For instance, a verb can be reanalyzed as a functional element, which will then merge as the T-head (V-to-T reanalysis) with the VP; the opposite would be unexpected. It turns out that grammaticalization of auxiliaries in sign languages is fully compatible with this theory. In particular, in Greek and Catalan sign languages the verb GIVE has grammaticalized as an agreement auxiliary with causative semantics, which can be described as the reanalysis of the verb from a lexical V-head to a functional v-head. Also, in German and Catalan sign languages, the sign PERSON has undergone a somewhat longer grammaticalization path: from noun to classifier to determiner to agreement auxiliary. All of the steps of this path conform to the upward along the functional structure direction; however, the final D-to-Aux change seems to be a modality-specific phenomenon. The authors argue that this specific path is possible in sign languages because the noun PERSON has several semantic and phonological properties that make it a particularly likely source of grammaticalization for an auxiliary.

The final contribution, by Ronnie B. Wilbur, touches on some of the most actively debated topics, namely pointing and verbal agreement. Other authors argue that verbal agreement in sign languages is in fact agreement, although an interface with the gestural system is also involved (Lillo-Martin and Meier 2011). Wilbur provides a broad and deep discussion of the relation between pointing, agreement, and gesture and argues for the radical view that no interface with gesture is needed to account for the properties of pointing and agreement in sign languages: The similarities between gesture and sign are a result of the visual channel of communication, but sign languages integrate visual information into the linguistic system, unlike gesture. She discusses issues such as the *listability* problem, the number of pronominal

distinctions, different types of pointing, and more general questions of iconicity present in the grammar of sign languages. She calls for both methodological and theoretical rigor, which would allow describing and explaining the properties of pointing and verbal agreement in sign languages, and offers some suggestions for future research. Finally, having argued against the nonlinguistic view of pointing and agreement, Wilbur claims that agreement in fact should not be analyzed as such, discussing an operator analysis suggested by Gökgöz (2013).

To sum up, this book is an example of high-quality theoretical research addressing some of the most exciting topics in sign linguistics. Its contributions should be interesting to those linguists who are working on these topics.

References

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