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Antisymmetry and sign languages: a comparison between NGT and LIS

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Summary

This aim of this dissertation is to provide a first (partial) account for a wide range of syntactic constructions in Italian Sign Language (LIS) and Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT) within an antisymmetric framework. On the one hand, it tries to evaluate the attested crosslinguistic variation between these two languages; on the other hand, it assesses whether the observed differences can be derived from a strict specifier-head-complement deep structure where only leftward movement occurs.

Chapter 1 provides some theoretical and descriptive background for the following chapters, including the theoretical framework that forms the basis for analysis. It also illustrates the conventional notations used throughout the dissertation and the methodology employed. In particular, the data stem from different sources. Some examples were collected from the literature, others were elicited from informants and/or subjected to their grammaticality judgements.

Chapter 2 compares the DP domain of LIS and NGT. It takes into account a wide range of elements that may accompany the noun: adjectives, numerals, demonstratives, possessives, and quantifiers. The results provide evidence for cross linguistic variation. In LIS, these elements are postnominal, whereas in NGT, according to the data available, some of these elements are prenominal.

The linear orders of both LIS and NGT appear to be compatible with accounts based on antisymmetry. I demonstrate that in both languages, the surface order of the elements analyzed can be derived by means of successive leftward movements within one universal hierarchy of projections. The cross-linguistic variation, that is, the different linear orders observed, results from the different extent of leftward raising in the two languages. At present, the necessity of leftward movement, in both languages, seems to be motivated only in a general way by the lack of functional elements (e.g. articles) in the higher part of their DP. However, further research is necessary to offer independent motivation for all the derivational steps proposed in the analysis.

Chapter 3 deals with the IP domain of LIS and NGT. Again, the order of elements considered – some selected aspectual markers, modals, and negative elements – show interesting crosslinguistic variation. In LIS, these elements are postverbal, whereas NGT, modals occur also

preverbally. Moreover, in LIS, the lexical negator NOT is obligatory, whereas in NGT, the negative non-manual marker (NMM), a headshake, is sufficient to negate a proposition. The orders of signs analyzed are compatible with antisymmetry: they can be derived from one universal hierarchy of projections via leftward movement. The analysis proposed also accounts for the distribution of negative NMMs. The different extent of leftward raising is reflected by differences in the surface order of signs and the scope of the NMMs.

According to the data, LIS and NGT employ specific negative modal signs except when conveying the meaning of "non-obligation". In this case, each language resorts to its standard negative construction. The analysis is based on the semantics of the modal signs and proposes that the differences observed depend on the scope relation between modals and negation within a universal deep structure.

The landing sites of the derivational movements proposed are not always exactly determined. However, it is hypothesized that the leftward movements of the derivation target projections already independently motivated for other languages.

The antisymmetric account is supported by the fact that it plays a crucial role in relating the linear order of elements and the position of subject agreement on LIS and NGT agreeing verbs, without requiring additional stipulations, as compared to head-initial spoken languages as, for instance, Italian and French.

Chapter 4 addresses the CP domain, by comparing imperative and interrogative clauses of LIS with their NGT counterparts. It also addresses the interplay between these constructions and topicalization in both sign languages.

The data show a considerable degree of cross- and intralinguistic variation, but are still compatible with antisymmetry. In particular, when it comes to the distribution of wh signs in both sign languages, it is observed that constructions with clause-final wh elements and doubled wh elements (co-)occur also in some Romance spoken languages. The clause-final position of functional signs and the scope of NMMs in imperative clauses, polar interrogative clauses, and wh interrogative clauses are accounted for along the lines of antisymmetric accounts previously put forward both for sign languages and spoken languages.

It is proposed that the different leftward movements involved in the derivation are driven by the need to check features necessary to all

languages: (i) focalization of the questioned element, (ii) interrogative marking, and (iii) marking of the type of interrogativity (which may depend on the presence of an open or closed set of answers to the interrogative clause). Different topic projections are claimed to be present in the left-periphery of the clause and it is suggested that not all of these topic projection may be associated with a "raised eyebrows" intonation, along the lines of proposals put forward for topic intonation in Italian.

Chapter 5, addresses combinations of CPs, that is, combinations of clauses, in LIS and NGT. Specifically, it deals with conditionals and with restrictive relative clauses.

However, while data suggest that a variety of internally-headed and externally-headed relative clauses exist in LIS, there is, at present, no clear evidence that NGT has a dedicated relative clause construction (although informal observation suggests that such constructions might exist). The chapter thus offers an account for conditional clauses of both LIS and NGT, while for relative clauses, an account is only put forward for LIS. The derivation proposed benefits also from a comparison with other sign and spoken languages.

The antisymmetric framework is compatible with the data about conditionals and with most LIS relative clauses. As for conditionals, an antisymmetric account is motivated in the two sign languages by the left-peripheral position of the conditional subordinate clause with respect to the matrix clause as well as by the clause-initial position of the optional lexical markers within the conditional subordinate clause. The presence, at least in NGT, of topics embedded within the conditional subordinate clause further supports this account. An antisymmetric approach to LIS relative clauses is supported on basis of the fact that these clauses show a considerable intralinguistic variation that patterns with the variety attested in LIS interrogative constructions, which are in turn similar to interrogative clauses of specifier-head-complement structured spoken languages (as argued in chapter 4).

The fact that LIS, in addition to internally-headed relative clauses, has postnominal externally-headed relative clauses, which have a linear order analogous to the order observed in specifier-head-complement spoken languages, also suggests that an antisymmetric account for LIS should be taken into consideration. In particular, with antisymmetry, it is possible to account for the LIS intralinguistic variation (internally-headed and externally-headed relative clauses) with a specifier-head-complement

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deep structure responsible also for postnominal externally-headed relative clauses of spoken languages.

Finally, the chapter offers some support for the hypothesis that conditional clauses are in fact a sub-type of relative clauses. This proposal is based on the observation that LIS conditional and restrictive relative NMMs are similar and that lexical conditional markers of LIS and NGT share some properties with a functional element that also occurs in LIS relative clauses,.

Chapter 6 puts the conclusions of the previous chapters in a broader perspective, highlighting some interesting parallelisms observed in the accounts of different LIS and NGT constructions.

After addressing briefly some potential counterarguments to antisymmetry, which have previously been put forward for LIS, the chapter presents an overview of the results and sketches promising avenues for further research. The general conclusion of this feasibility study is that a comparative antisymmetric analysis of LIS and NGT (and other sign languages) is certainly an exciting and worthwile undertaking, although further research must still cover further aspects of these languages to yield a more complete picture of their structural organization and the attested inter- and intra-modal variation.