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Filling the gap: A novel test to elicit nominal plurals in Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT)

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Previous research:

- Challenge when eliciting plural nouns by means of picture stimuli: When describing the pictures, signers not only encode plurality, but also the spatial distribution of the plural entities, using localization [1; 2]:
(1) FIVE BICYCLE CL_{BICYCLE}-AT-SEVERAL-LOCATIONS [1; NGT]
'There are five bicycles in a line.'
- Moreover, studies on pluralization in NGT offer contradicting conclusions (e.g., whether nominal reduplication is a pluralization process) [1; 3].

Aims:

- Design + pilot a **gap-filling task** to elicit NGT plural nouns, disentangling pluralization from spatial distribution;
- Present the first results.

A novel gap-filling task (Figure 1):

- Signed sentences in which the (plural) noun is replaced by a question mark sign. The targeted plural noun is shown on a picture;
- Spatial configuration is irrelevant in the contexts;
- After a pilot, 5 native signers participated. They repeated the sentences and filled in the gap;
- 53 clips eliciting both plural and singular forms; plural contexts with and without numeral/quantifier in the sentence (for comparison).



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Main findings:

- The gap-filling task worked as intended: it yielded pure plural forms that were not spatially distributed.
- NGT usually marks the plural by means of:

1. Simple reduplication [repeating the noun at the same location]



Figure 2a. CHAIR in NGT



Figure 2b. CHAIRS in NGT

2. Sideward reduplication [repeating the noun combined with a sideward movement]



Figure 3a. CHILD in NGT

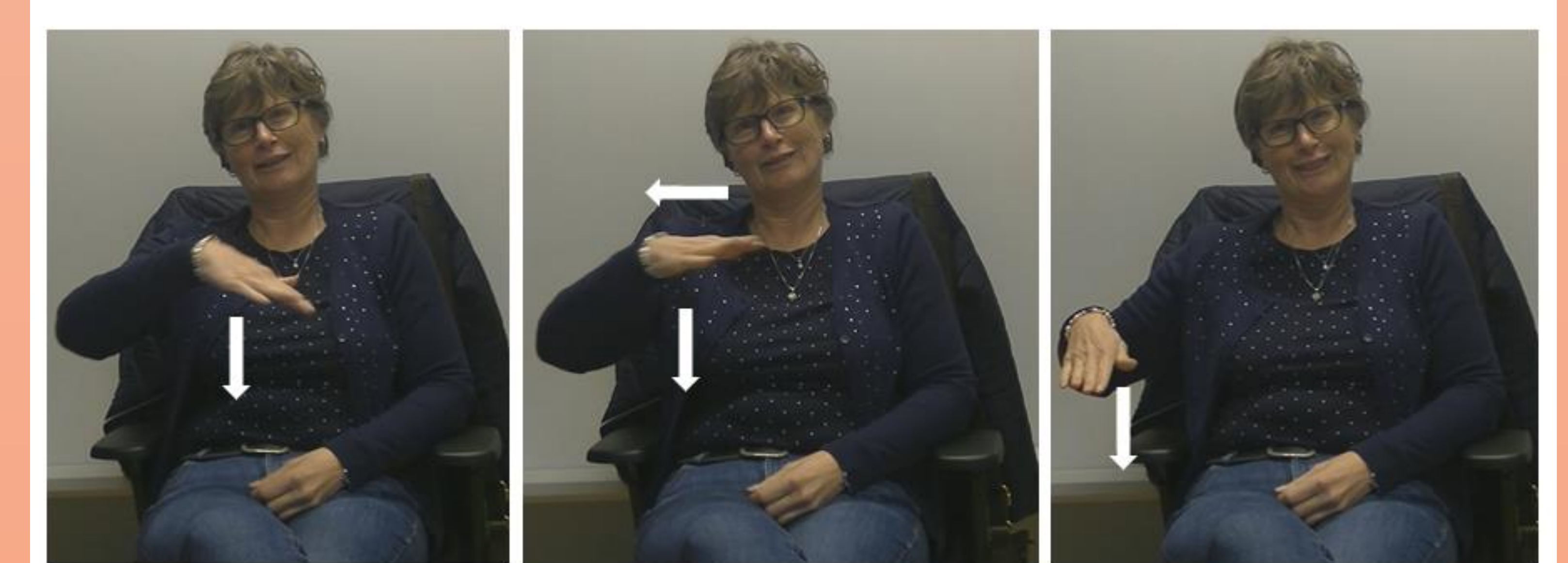


Figure 3b. CHILDREN in NGT

These processes are non-obligatory: nouns are often zero-marked. Simultaneous reduplication also occurs, but very rarely.

Advantages:

- Elicitation without written language, yet targeting the desired structure;
- Complementing previous findings;
- Plural of all types of (concrete) nouns can be targeted.

Potential drawbacks:

- Plurals are elicited only in certain semantic environments;
- No elicitation of abstract nouns;
- Sometimes, plurality was expressed on elements other than the noun.

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