

Negative constructions in South African Sign Language: Question-Answer clauses

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How negation is expressed by means of manual and/or non-manual markers has been described for a wide range of sign languages. This work has suggested a split between sign languages requiring a manual negative element in negative clauses (manual dominant sign languages) and those where a non-manual marker only can be used (non-manual dominant sign languages) (Zeshan 2006; 2004). However, Oomen and Pfau (2017) have recently indicated that such a typological split is too radical. They also show that larger data sets are necessary to identify the range of expressions used within one sign language to express negation. This paper will contribute to this typological debate by considering some preliminary data from South African Sign Language (SASL), as well as propose an analysis of a particular construction, namely a polar Question-Answer clause (QAC) (Caponigro & Davidson 2011), which is not generally mentioned in the literature on negation in sign languages.

Despite the growing body of research on the grammar of sign languages, and negation in sign languages in particular, SASL remains an under-researched language. For example, the only available study which examines the basic word order of SASL is Vermeerbergen, van Herreweghe, Akach and Matabane (2007), who posit that SASL has, in most cases, an SOV or OSV word order. To date there is only one published study on negation in SASL which (on the basis of limited data) describes SASL as a non-manual dominant language (De Barros & Siebörger 2016). De Barros & Siebörger (2016) describe an optional manual negator, occurring in post-verbal position, accompanied by a side-to-side headshake. The minimal scope of the non-manual marker of negation is argued to be over the matrix verb of the clause, and the maximum scope over the verb phrase and the manual signs of negation. Following Pfau and Quer's (2002) analysis of sentential negation in German Sign Language (DGS), De Barros and Siebörger (2016: 11) apply a split-headed structure to SASL, arguing that the [+neg] feature, carried by the non-manual headshake, is a featural affix (Akinlabi 1996). They note that further research is needed to cross-check their analysis, given that the aim of their analysis was to provide a structure that may be subsequently refined and improved upon.

While De Barros and Siebörger (2016) provide a useful starting point, it is clear from our preliminary observations, that negative structures in use in SASL are in fact more diverse than De Barros and Siebörger's description leads us to expect. Using a database (under construction) of spontaneous and elicited SASL material across several provinces we already have evidence that the negative structures in use exhibit variation with regard to the scope of the non-manual marking of negation and in the syntactic configuration employed to negate a proposition. In this paper we illustrate that, contrary to the previous description of negation in SASL, non-manual marking of negation does not necessarily take scope over the matrix verb. Instead, non-manual marking appears to occur utterance-finally, with possible overlap on the last signed element in the clause. Furthermore, negative constructions in our sample of SASL negative sentences often take the form of a polar QAC.

While the polar QAC construction has been described, in terms of negation, for ASL (Caponigro and Davidson 2011; Davidson and Caponigro 2016), it is not generally mentioned in previous literature on negation in sign languages, even in Zeshan (2004; 2006) which examined negation in 38 sign languages. According to Caponigro and Davidson (2011), QACs are syntactically declarative sentences, composed of an embedded interrogative clause (Q-

constituent) followed by an embedded declarative clause (A-constituent), of which part is elided, and connected by a silent copula. In the case of polar QACs, the Q-constituent is a polar interrogative and the A-constituent is the answer particles YES or NO.

In the SASL data, we find utterances that look like polar interrogatives as they are accompanied by the polar interrogative non-manual marking of raised eyebrows (glossed as 're'). This is followed by a headshake (glossed as 'hs'), which conveys the negation, accompanied by lowered eyebrows (glossed as 'le'), as illustrated in (2) below. In some cases the headshake spreads over the last signed element in the clause, which, given that SASL is posited to be an SOV or OSV language, results in the non-manual marking taking scope over the verb.

- hs
 _____ re le
- (1) MAN HOUSE BUY [SASL]
 "The man is not buying the house."

This paper will extend Caponigro and Davidson's (2011) analysis of polar QACs, supported by Davidson and Caponigro's (2016) analysis of embedded polar interrogative clauses in ASL, by making use of Holmberg's (2013) analysis of the syntax of answers to polar questions. Holmberg proposes that bare yes and no-answers to yes/no-questions are sentential expressions with the structure [yes/no Foc [IP . . .[Pol x]. . .]], where the answer particle is merged in the spec of Focus in the CP-domain, and assigns a value, either affirmative or negative, to the polarity variable in IP (Holmberg 2016: 31). According to his analysis, the IP has a polarity variable because it is inherited from the question, which is why the IP is typically elided, being identical to the IP of the question. Our analysis of the polar QAC in SASL takes the non-manual headshake, the spelled out negative operator in the A-constituent, to be Holmberg's low negation, with vP scope. And so in polar QACs, the IP of the A-constituent is elided under identity with the IP of the Q-constituent.

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