

# Conditional and concessive constructions in Russian Sign Language

## Introduction

**Conditional constructions** express **causal relations** between two situations. A prototypical conditional sentence 'if P, (then) Q' consists of two clauses, one of which (*the protasis*) expresses a proposition whose fulfillment or non-fulfillment is relevant to the degree of reality assigned to the proposition expressed by another clause (*the apodosis*) (Trask 1993: 55).

**Conditionals in sign languages** still remain poorly investigated. There are a number of special studies, narrowly focused on non-manual markers of conditional relationships<sup>1</sup>, however, thorough works, taking into account both formal and semantic features of conditionals are rare.

**Concessive constructions** are somehow the "contradictory counterpart of causal constructions" (König & Siemund 2000: 341). A prototypical concessive sentence 'although P, Q' consists of two clauses, one of which expresses a proposition which is unexpected in light of some other proposition expressed by another clause. Unexpectedness is based on a presupposition 'if/when P, then normally not-Q'.

**Concessives in sign languages** are hardly mentioned in the literature and remain virtually unexplored so far.

## Research questions and methods

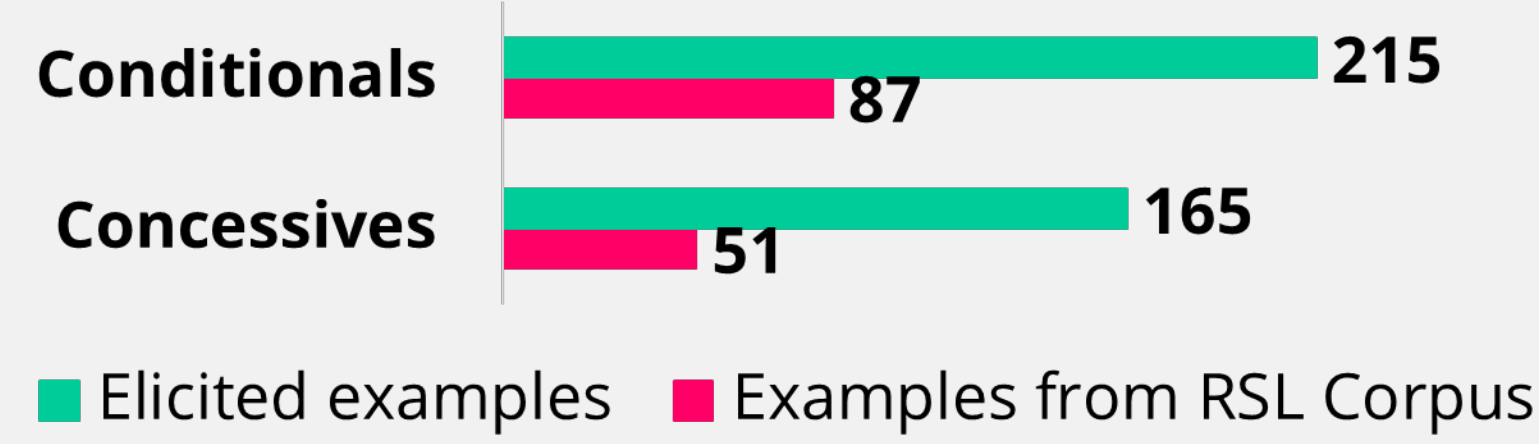
- How conditional and concessive relations are expressed in RSL?

- What are the typological implications of the RSL data?

### Annotated data

Sources (total examples: 518):

- RSL Corpus (<http://rsl.nstu.ru/>), 182 texts, 59 signers
- Elicitation



## Conditionals in RSL

### General features

- Clause order: the protasis always precedes the apodosis.
- Markers of conditionality are located in the protasis clause.

**Potential conditionals** (situation described in the protasis is represented as potentially realizable)

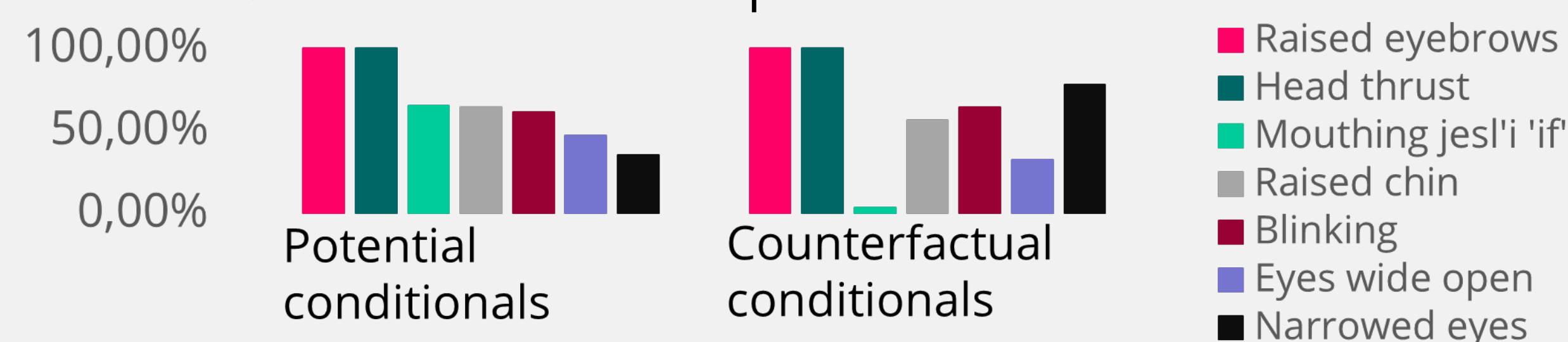
### Markers of conditionality

- **Lexical sign IF (optional)** always takes the initial position in the clause (Picture 1); a likely path of its grammaticalization: WEIGH > PROBABLY > IF ).
- **NMMs (obligatory):** "raised brows" (br) and "headthrust" (hth). The scope of (br) is typically the entire clause; (hth) accompanies the final sign of the clause (Picture 1). NMM (br) also regularly occurs in polar questions and marks some kinds of topics; NMM (hth) occurs at the end of the other types of dependent clauses.
- **Some other NMMs** (Picture 2) can additionally occur in the protasis, carrying emphatic, modal, or structuring functions.



Picture 1. 'If I let you in, I will be immediately fired.'

Picture 2. NMMs used in the protasis clause of conditionals



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**Counterfactual conditionals** (situation described in the protasis is represented as unreal/unrealizable)

- **Non-manual marking** in the protasis is similar to that in the potential conditionals (Picture 2).
- **Marker of counterfactuality** is **#B-Y** – a lexicalized borrowing from Russian of a counterfactual modal clitic *бы*. Typically, it occurs at the absolute beginning of both clauses (1), or, at least in the protasis (2).
  - (1) **#B-Y** COME EARLIER **#B-Y** MOVIE STARE  
'If you had come earlier, we would have watched a movie.'
  - (2) **#B-Y** CLF(round) CLF(round)-THROW.AT.HEAD DIE MAY  
'If I had thrown a stone at your head, you could have died.'

## Non-prototypical (peripheral) conditionals

- **Inferential conditionals** (*If P, therefore Q*) have in the apodosis a specific set of NMMs: the head slightly tilted aside + frowned brows + eye gaze directed away from the addressee. Optionally, lexical markers of inferentiality can be used: THINK^INSIDE 'therefore', KNOW 'therefore/so', CONCLUDE 'therefore' (Picture 3).



Picture 3. 'If the window is open, there is somebody at home.'

- **Habitual (iterative) conditionals** (*If/whenever P, Q*) employ reduplication of a predicate and/or adverbial signs ALWAYS, CONSTANTLY, etc. in the apodosis clause (3).
  - (3) IF NEED TRANSLATE ALWAYS FIND+ GIVE+  
'If/whenever (a person) needs the translation, they provide it.'

## Concessives in RSL

### General features

- **Clause order** seems to be rather rigid: the dependent clause (DC) in all the examples precedes the main clause (MC).
- **Non-manual marking of the DC** is similar to that in the conditionals.
- **A specific set of NMMs** regularly occurs in the MC (also typical for contexts of obstinacy or negation): raised and slightly frowned brows and lowered corners of the mouth.
- Optionally a lexical signs **YES** (in the meaning 'although') and **THE.SAME/USELESS** can be used in DC and MC correspondingly (4).

- (4) YES IX<sub>a</sub> LATE THE.SAME IX<sub>1</sub> ANGRY NEG  
'Although he is late, I'm not angry with him'.

### Non-prototypical concessives

- **"Conditional" concessives** 'even if P, Q' typically have in DC a combination of lexical markers **KNOW** and **HAPPEN** (5).
  - (5) KNOW HAPPEN HURT THE.SAME ENDURE  
'Even if it hurts, endure it'.
- **"Alternative" concessives** 'whatever/however/... P, Q' employ in DC a free-choice quantifier **ANY** and/or reduplication (6).
  - (6) IX<sub>a</sub> ANY ACT+ ALWAYS LOSE  
'Whatever he does, everything is bad'.

## Summary

- RSL formally distinguishes between different semantic types of conditionals and concessives.
- The grammaticalization paths for conditional and concessive markers in RSL are virtually the same as those in spoken languages<sup>2</sup>.
- Manual markers of conditionality and concessivity in RSL are optional. A key role in building conditional and concessive sentences is played by NMMs.
- None of the NMMs used in conditionals and concessives in RSL is specialized to express the conditional or concessive relationships, the latter rather result from a combination of several NMMs, each of which contributes in its own way to the structural and semantic frame of the construction.

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Baker & Padden 1978; Baker-Shenk & Cokely 1981: 141-145; Liddell 1986; Engberg-Pedersen 1990; Dachkovsky 2008; Pflau 2008.  
<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Traugott 1985; Heine & Kuteva 2002; König 1994.