Does verb type matter?
Investigating word order in German Sign Language
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Introduction
In sign languages, the order of subject (S), object (O) and verb (V) within an unmarked declarative sentence can be influenced by various morphosyntactic, semantic and pragmatic factors (Napoli et al. 2017, Pavlič 2016, Kimmelman 2012, Milković et al. 2006):
• Morphosyntactic: verb type, classifier constructions, aspectual marking, verb doubling, heaviness of the object
• Semantic: reversibility and animacy of the arguments, verb meaning, figure-ground principle
• Pragmatic: information structural categories like topic/comment and focus/background

Based on descriptive research, DGS has been described as an argument-configuration language and the basic word order has been identified as SOV (Happ & Vorköper 2006, Rathmann 2003, Glück & Pfau 1998). Factors influencing word order have not been investigated so far.

Research question: Does verb type affect word order in DGS?

Methodology
Sentence Reproduction Task
• Modified SRT (Pendzich et al. in prep.)

Conditions
• Order: verb-final vs. not verb-final
• Verb type: plain, forward and backward agreement, spatial, handling verbs
  1) IX₉ GIRL₄ POSSₑ₉ NICE DOLL LOVE
     (plain verb, SOV)
  2) IX₉ GIRL₄ LOVE POSSₑ₉ NICE DOLL
     (plain verb, SVO)

‘The girl loves her nice doll.’

Design
• Programmed questionnaire with OnExp (Onea 2011)
• 80 sentences (N = 2x5x10)
  — 10 Conditions
  — 8 sentences per condition
• 8 filler content questions
• Two pseudorandomized lists

Participants: 22 (13 female, 9 male) native or near-native signers from different regions of Germany (19-48 years, mean: 31.7)

Results
• Produced utterances were divided in clauses
• S: most agent-like argument; O: most patient-like argument; V: predicate

Word order in general (812 clauses)

Plain verbs (178 clauses)

Spatial verbs (127 clauses)

Forward agreement verbs (169 clauses)

Backward agreement verbs (162 clauses)

Handling verbs (154 clauses)

In the majority of cases, subjects are placed pre-verbally. Object position is usually verb-final, but
• Plain verbs allow for OV and VO order. Does animacy of the arguments matter?
• Spatial verbs prefer OV order but OOV order is found as well. Is OOV realized due to different strategies (syntactic or spatial; Kimmelman 2012)? Or is OOV an instance of topical marking (Pavlič 2016)?
• Agreement and handling verbs show a preference for OV order. Are these verbs placed sentence-finally because their phonological shape is affected (Napoli & Sutton-Spence 2014)?

References