

SignGram Blueprint

A Guide to Sign Language Grammar Writing

Edited by

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Here, we also subsume temporal adverbials under sentence adverbials (see the section on temporal adverbs [Syntax – Section 6.4.2.1] in the Syntax Part. This category includes adverbials like *yesterday*, *soon*, and *later*. It should be pointed out, however, that according to some authors, temporal adverbials cut across the two categories (Parsons 1990). If the grammar writer adopts the internal structure suggested here, it is up to her/him to decide where to treat these adverbials. If the section on adverbials is structured according to the semantic contribution of the adverbials (see the introduction to this section), then there will be a separate subsection on temporal adverbials. See also the section on sentential adverbs [Syntax – Section 6.4.1] in the Syntax Part.

3.6 Determiners

By “determiner”, we refer to a class of elements whose function is to provide information on referentiality (i.e. the relation between the noun and what the noun refers to). In grammar handbooks, determiners are often labeled “articles” (English *the/a*), and demonstratives (e.g. English *this/that*) are commonly subsumed under determiners. Traditionally, determiners are categorized into two groups: definite [Lexicon – Section 3.6.1] and indefinite [Lexicon – Section 3.6.2] determiners (see also the section on determiners [Syntax – Section 4.1] in the Syntax Part).

On the one hand, definite determiners (in English, prototypically *the*, but also demonstratives like *this*) are used when the speaker presupposes that the interlocutor can identify the referent(s) of the nominal expression. Definite determiners can be used for three different purposes (Lyons 1999): (i) to refer back to something or someone that has been previously mentioned in the discourse (e.g. ‘The cat was feeling hungry’, with the cat already introduced in the discourse); (ii) to refer to something or someone that is easily identifiable in the extra-linguistic context (e.g. ‘Could you pass me the pen?’, with the pen visible to the interlocutors); (iii) to refer to a referent that is unique in its genre (e.g. ‘the Earth’, or ‘the driver’ when talking about a bus trip).

On the other hand, indefinite determiners (prototypically *a/an*) are used when the speaker presupposes that the interlocutor cannot identify the referent(s) of the nominal expression. Indefinite determiners are used to introduce new information, specifically new referents, into the discourse (e.g. ‘Yesterday I saw a cat’, where the cat is a first-mention entity). See the section on definiteness [Semantics – Section 2.1.2] in the Semantics Part for more on this distinction.

In sign language linguistics, definite determiners are frequently identified as pointing [Lexicon – Section 1.2.2] signs, also referred to as “indexes” (e.g. Zimmer & Patschke (1990) for ASL). What the grammar writer should pay particular attention to is the linguistic function associated to indexes. As a matter of fact, in many sign languages, pointing signs are polyfunctional elements that can be used for various grammatical functions, not only as determiners, but also as demonstratives, personal

pronouns, and locatives. Therefore, there may be some confounders making it hard to pinpoint real determiners. Still, it might be the case that indexes functioning as determiners can be distinguished from the others by characteristics such as movement (single, repeated, tense), hand orientation (palm oriented down or sideways), or even eye gaze (Pfau 2011). The following list of properties may help the grammar writer in pinpointing indexes functioning as determiners (see Neidle & Nash 2012).

(i) *Isolation*

Within the noun phrase [Syntax – Chapter 4], determiners cannot be used in isolation. In other words, if the determiner does not co-occur with a noun, the output is ungrammatical, as shown for English and Italian in (a). Also, a determiner cannot appear in isolation as an answer to a question, as is illustrated in (b) (note that the Italian examples are translations of the English ones). The examples reveal that this test only works for “basic” determiners (like English *the*, Italian *il*), but not for demonstratives, as demonstratives can also function as demonstrative pronouns [Lexicon – Section 3.7.1].

- a. I saw *the / this / him (English)
 Ho visto *il / questo / lui (Italian)
- b. Q: What did you see? A: *the / this / him (English)
 Q: Che cosa hai visto? A: *il / questo / lui (Italian)

In some sign languages, there might be a slight phonological difference (e.g. hand orientation) between a pointing sign functioning as determiner and a pointing sign functioning as a demonstrative [Lexicon – Section 3.7.1] or personal pronoun [Lexicon – Section 3.7.2]. This test could be used to distinguish them: in isolation contexts, determiners are not acceptable, whereas demonstratives and pronouns are acceptable.

(ii) *Plural forms*

Determiners, demonstratives, and personal pronouns can include number information. In sign languages, to indicate plurality, they may be articulated as pointing signs accompanied by a circular or an arc-like movement in the neutral space. Conversely, locatives [Lexicon – Section 3.7.1] do not show this pattern. The test on plural forms may be used to distinguish determiners from locatives.

Noun phrases in ASL can include two co-occurring pointing signs, one in prenominal position and the other in postnominal position. The following examples show that the prenominal index can be articulated with an arc-like movement (a), but the postnominal one cannot (b).

- a. IX_{PL-ARC} MAN IX KNOW PRESIDENT
 ‘Those men over there know the president’ (ASL, MacLaughlin 1997: 117)
- b. *IX MAN IX_{PL-ARC} KNOW PRESIDENT

These examples provide evidence for claiming that the prenominal pointing sign is a determiner while the postnominal pointing sign is a locative (MacLaughlin 1997).


(iii) Articulatory restrictions

Determiners are articulated by moving the pointing sign in neutral space along a fixed path [Phonology – Section 1.3.1] length. This particular type of movement cannot undergo path variation (a). Conversely, pointing signs functioning as locatives can be directed to a point closer to the signer or towards a point farther away in space in order to iconically show proximity and distance (b).

- a. * IX_[+DISTAL] MAN IX_i KNOW PRESIDENT
- b. IX_i MAN IX_[+DISTAL] KNOW PRESIDENT
‘The/that man over there knows the president’

(ASL, Neidle & Nash 2012: 270)

3.6.1 Definite determiners

Definite determiners are typically realized by means of a pointing sign directed to the spatial location associated with the referent(s). A sequence like HOUSE INDEX₃ could thus be interpreted as ‘the house’. While the -handshape is most commonly used for pointing, other handshapes are also possible, such as an open hand and a handshape with thumb extended (Neidle & Nash 2012). Fenlon, Schembri, Rentelis & Cormier (2013) show that in BSL, the category of determiners is particularly subject to handshape variation. The grammar writer should consider the immediate phonological environment in order to detect possible assimilation [Phonology – Section 3.1.1] patterns.

We already pointed out that demonstratives are a type of definite determiner, and that they may be phonologically very similar, if not identical, to other definite determiners. In fact, depending on the sign language, the sequence HOUSE INDEX₃ could also mean ‘that house’ (or even ‘house there’; see the section on locative and demonstrative pronouns [Lexicon – Section 3.7.1]). We encourage the grammar writer to look for phonological features – be they manual or non-manual – that distinguish different uses of pointing signs within the noun phrase.

The non-manual markers that may accompany definite determiners are: eye gaze, head tilt, raised eyebrows, and slightly raised chin. Eye gaze and head tilt are usually directed toward the location to which the index points. See also the corresponding section [Syntax – 4.1.1.3] and the section on articles expressed by non-manual marking only [Syntax – Section 4.1.1.4] in the Syntax Part.

3.6.2 Indefinite determiners

Indefinite determiners usually differ from their definite counterparts [Lexicon – Section 3.6.1] in that the pointing sign is directed upward and moves toward a broader

area, rather than a specific point in space. In ASL and in LIS, indefinite determiners require a tremoring motion (MacLaughlin 1997; Bertone 2009). Things are different in HKSL, where the indefinite determiner and the cardinal ONE are articulated similarly. Some older signers avoid homophony by producing the cardinal ONE with a slight rotation of the forearm.

The non-manual markers that may accompany indefinite determiners are: furrowed eyebrows, wrinkled nose, lowered mouth corners, and raised shoulders. In sign languages, these non-manuals are generally used to denote uncertainty. See also the corresponding section [Syntax – 4.1.1.3] and the section on articles expressed by non-manual marking only [Syntax – Section 4.1.1.4] in the Syntax Part.

Indefinite nominal expressions can fall into two categories, namely specific or non-specific (see specificity [Pragmatics – Section 1.4] for more information). The former is associated with a particular referent that is known by the sender, but not by the addressee. The latter is associated with an unspecified referent that is unknown to both the sender and the addressee. The distinction between specific indefinites and non-specific indefinites may be conveyed in different ways. In ASL, specific indefinites are marked by eye gaze directed toward the spatial location of the referent (a), whereas non-specific indefinites involve roving eyes toward an upward location (b).

- eg_i
- a. SOMETHING/ONE WOMAN_i ARRIVE
‘Some/a (specific) woman arrives.’ (ASL, Bahan 1996: 274)
- wandering eyes
- b. SOMETHING/ONE WOMAN_i ARRIVE
‘Some/a woman arrives.’ (ASL, Bahan 1996: 273)

In LSC, the distinction between specific and non-specific is conveyed by spatial location. Specificity is marked in the lower part of the frontal plane (a), whereas non-specificity is marked in the upper part (b).

- eg:contralateral
- a. IX₁ CAT WANT BUY
‘I want to buy a cat (specific).’ (LSC, Barberà 2012: 259)
- eg:ipsi-up
- b. CAT IX_{3PL:ipsi-up} IX₁ WANT BUY
‘I want to buy a cat (non-specific).’ (LSC, Barberà 2012: 261)

Taken together, the grammar writer should investigate whether indefinite determiners (if attested at all) as a group differ formationally from definite determiners, and moreover, whether in the former group, specificity may be marked by non-manual features.

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