

Negation in American Sign Language: The view from the Interface

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This paper provides an analysis for a phenomenon known as negative incorporation in American Sign Language. Negative incorporation is defined as a twisting outward or downward movement of the hand(s) at the end of a sign. See figure 1.

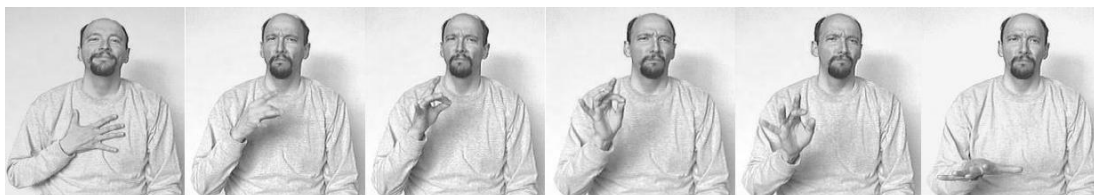


Figure 1: don't-LIKE

While there have been a few analyses of negation in ASL (Neidle et al. 1999; Pfau & Quer 2002; Lidell 1980), these analyses only account for some of the empirical facts. Notably absent is an analysis of the negative incorporation facts, save Sandler's (1999) analysis which addresses the issue from a phonological perspective.

I account for both the syntactic and phonological behaviour of negative incorporation in ASL by exploiting the link between syntax and phonology mediated by a distinct morphological component argued for in the Distributed Morphology framework. Specifically, negative incorporation can be treated rather straightforwardly as a case of affix hopping. That is, NEG° and V° do not form a constituent in the syntax, but they do form such a unit in the morphology and this process is assumed to be the result of Morphological Merger with respect to the class of verbs that can negatively incorporate. My proposed analysis of negative incorporation, on the phonological, side is contra Sandler (1999). That analysis proposed a process of truncation with concomitant epenthesis in order to adhere to a constraint on only having mono-syllabic outputs in ASL. I argue that these facts can be derived more simply and propose a process of total assimilation. This process can maintain the constraint on monosyllabic outputs without needing to propose any process of truncation or epenthesis. Therefore, this analysis is more economical than Sandler's (1999) and thus is favoured on theoretical grounds.

Harley & Noyer (1998a) suggest that morphemes come in two flavours: *f-morphemes* and *l-morphemes*, corresponding to a division between functional and lexical categories. This presents the following problem as it has been claimed that the sign NOT is a realization of Neg head (Neidle et al. 1999) and it has also been claimed that the sign NEVER is the realization of the Neg head of (Wood 1999; Pfau & Quer 2002) in ASL. If negation is truly an f-morpheme then there is a problem in that the trigger for insertion for different lexical items is identical in its syntactic representation. In this case, I argue that there is more at play with the licensing conditions that lead to the realization of NOT and NEVER and that through the morphological operation Fusion, the relationship between two syntactic terminal nodes or morphemes only constitutes a single site for insertion.

References

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