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Discourse markers in French Belgian Sign Language (LSFB): their role in argumentative productions

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French Belgian Sign Language (LSFB)

- Used in Wallonia (the Southern part of Belgium) and Brussels
- Recognized by the Parliament of the French Community of Belgium in 2003
- Minority and minorized language: 5000 – 6000 signers (Meurant 2008)
- Rare presence in the society
- No written tradition, oral transmission
- Research started in 2000



Methodology

- A corpus of 10 minutes containing two deaf signers (S1 and S2) annotated with ELAN.



Screenshot of an annotation file

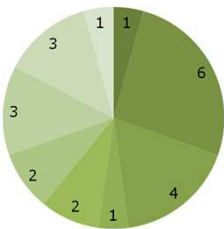
Hierarchy of tiers

- Two argumentative productions (3'13" and 6'55") of the LSFB Corpus elicited by the deaf moderator with a question in LSFB or with images.
- Videos segmented into discourse units following a segmentation protocol (Gabarró-López and Meurant 2014) in order to establish the position of DMs.

Results on the sign MEME

43 occurrences in our corpus from which 23 fulfil the criteria to be considered DMs.

FUNCTIONS OF MEME AS DM



- Condition (*cond*) (1)
- Consequence (*conseq*) (6)
- Conceptual structuration – new information (*concep-ni*) (4)
- Participant transition and conceptual structuration – new information (*part+concep-ni*) (1)
- Repetition – reformulation (*rep-ref*) (2)
- Repetition – explicitness (*rep-exp*) (2)
- Relation of topic-predicate (*tp-pred*) (3)
- Parenthetical (*parenth*) (3)
- Approximation (*approx*) (1)

S1 = 15 MEME as DM

Functions	Cond	Conseq	Concep-ni	Part + concep-ni	Rep-exp	Parenth	Approx
	1	4	4	1	1	3	1
Position	Initial	Middle	2 initial and 2 middle	Initial	Middle	Middle	Middle

S2 = 8 MEME as DM

Functions	Conseq	Rep-ref	Rep-exp	Tp-pred
	2	2	1	3
Position	Middle	Middle	Middle	Middle

As **rep-exp** marker, it is followed by a role shift.

As **parenth** marker, it is accompanied by other signs that refer to other parts of the discourse as in the example.



DEPENSER LIEN MEME DIRE OUI
"It is linked to consumerism as we said, yes..."

Discourse markers (DMs) in sign languages

Research is scarce and mostly tackles isolated manual DMs whose role is well-defined within the discourse (Roy 1989, Locker McKee 1992, Johnston and Schembri 2006, Pérez 2006, Villameriel García 2008 and Hoza 2011)

Our focus: two linguistic elements whose role has not been explored in LSFB so far and that may fulfil different discourse functions.



MEME ("same")
The indexes of both hands extended get in contact with an inward movement.



LIST BUOYS
Numerical signs held in a stationary handshape used to make associations from one to five ordered or unordered entities with the other hand (Liddell 2003).

Our questions: are they really DMs? If so, what are their functions? In which position of the utterance do they appear?

Criteria for the identification and classification of DMs

Identification

1. "[A]ny type of linguistic expression whose primary function lies at the discourse level, i.e. relating their host utterance to the discourse situation. As such, discourse markers can play a threefold role contributing to the discourse organization (textual coherence), to the speaker/hearer interaction (interpersonal meanings), and/or to speaker attitudes (epistemic meaning) [...]. Different grammatical classes may be used as discourse markers: connectives (coordinating and subordinating conjunctions, conjunctive adverbs), sentence adverbials, parentheticals, small clauses,..." (Degand forthc.)
2. Syntactic and semantic properties: (i) connectivity, (ii) optionality, and (iii) non-truth-conditionality (Schourup 1999 cited in Degand 2009).

Classification

- ✓ **MEME:** no previous studies on this sign, so based on categories from DMs in spoken languages (Bolly and Degand 2009, Degand and Fagard 2011) and addition of new categories.
- ✓ **LIST BUOYS:** categories from previous studies on these DMs (Gabarró-López 2014, Gabarró-López and Meurant in press).

Results on LIST BUOYS

- A total of 6 list buoys (i.e. the unique sign that refers to all the entities at once) and 16 list-buoy markers (i.e. each entity of the list buoy the signer refers to) in our corpus fulfil the criteria to be considered DMs.
- Distribution per signer:

	No. of list buoys	No. of list-buoy markers	Position of the markers
S1	3	10	8 middle, 1 initial and 1 end position
S2	3	6	All in middle position

- All with an enumerative role (i.e. none with discourse cohesive or organizing role) and positioned in line with Gabarró-López (2014).

Conclusions

- List buoys and MEME as DMs fulfil very different discourse functions. In this study:
 - ✓ **List buoys** only show an enumerative role.
 - ✓ **MEME** counts on different functions, being consequence marker, conceptual structuration marker (addition of new information), parenthetical marker, and marker of the relation between topic and predicate the most common. Such a variety of functions is not predictable from its lexical meaning ("resemblance", "similarity"), which is lost when it works as a DM.
- Both list buoys and MEME tend to appear in middle position, which is related to the DMs' feature of connectivity.

Further research

- Are these functions the same for the other LSFB signers?
- Do non-manual signs play a role for the disambiguation of the functions of MEME when it is a DM?
- Are there other potential DMs with the same role as list buoys or the sign MEME?

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