

# SignGram Blueprint

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A Guide to Sign Language Grammar Writing

Edited by

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With the collaboration of Brendan Costello and Rannveig Sverrisdóttir



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## 4.1 Determiners

### 4.1.0 Definitions and challenges

#### 4.1.0.1 What is a determiner?

Determiners are a class of functional elements that modify the noun. Being functional, determiners lack descriptive content, represent a closed class, and sometimes can be unexpressed. In this section, determiners are categorized into two groups: articles and demonstratives.

Articles are elements whose function is to provide information on referentiality [Pragmatics – Chapter 2] (i.e. the relation between the noun and what the noun refers to). In traditional grammar books, articles are characterized as either definite or indefinite. Definite articles (prototypically *the* in English) are used when the interlocutors can identify the referent(s) of the nominal expression. Definite [Pragmatics – Section 1.2] articles 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 being 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 being 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). Indefinite [Pragmatics – Section 1.3] articles (prototypically *a/an*), on the other hand, are used when the interlocutor cannot identify the referent(s) of the nominal expression. Indefinite articles are used to introduce new information, specifically new referent in the discourse (e.g. ‘Yesterday I saw a cat,’ with the cat being a first-mention entity).

Similar to articles, demonstratives provide information on referentiality in that they are intrinsically definite. In addition to that, they convey a deictic [Pragmatics – Section 1.1] / deictic interpretation. This means that in order to interpret demonstratives, it is necessary to consider the spatio-temporal context in which they are expressed. Demonstratives encode the deictic features [ $\pm$  proximal] and [ $\pm$  distal] which help the interlocutor locate the corresponding referent(s) with respect to the speaker’s spatio-temporal coordinates. Roughly, [ $\pm$  proximal] means close to the speaker and [ $\pm$  distal] means far. This can be intended as a spatial relation (e.g. ‘this book’ is closer to the speaker than ‘that book’) or a temporal relation (e.g. ‘this month’ is closer to the utterance time than ‘that month’). Some languages distinguish between [ $\pm$  proximal] with respect to the speaker and [ $\pm$  proximal] with respect to the interlocutor, in addition to [ $\pm$  distal]. As for sign languages, the use of the spatial dimension as a gradient continuum allows sign languages to be extremely precise in conveying deictic specifications.

#### 4.1.0.2 Methodological challenges

In this section, we classify determiners as articles and demonstratives. Cross-linguistically, these two categories show an important distributional

difference: demonstratives are consistently found in all of the world's languages, whereas articles are not. Considering definite articles, there are several possibilities: they can constitute a distinct word class; they can be homophonous with demonstratives so that the two classes are not distinguishable; or they may be absent, leaving nouns unspecified for definiteness (Dryer 2013a). With respect to indefinite articles, the options are the following: they may constitute a distinct word class; they can be homophonous with cardinal 'one' so that the two types of elements are not distinguishable; or they may be absent, leaving nouns unspecified for indefiniteness (Dryer 2013b).

Importantly, demonstratives and articles should not be considered as being in complementary distribution since it might be the case that they may co-occur (Giusti 1997). In this respect, cross-linguistic variation is found, as shown below (Alexiadou, Haegeman & Stavrou 2007: 106).

- |     |                |   |
|-----|----------------|---|
| a.  | *This the book |   |
| a'. | *The this book | (English)                                 |
| b.  | Ez a haz       | (Hungarian)                               |
|     | this the house |   |
| c.  | Afto to vivlio | (Greek)                                   |
|     | this the book  | (Alexiadou, Haegeman & Stavrou 2007: 106) |

The grammar writer should investigate whether an article and a demonstrative can co-occur within the same noun phrase.

In sign language linguistics, determiners are frequently identified as part of pointing signs [Lexicon – Section 1.2.2] / pointing signs. What the grammar writer should pay particular attention to is the linguistic function associated with these signs. As a matter of fact, in many sign languages, pointing signs are multi-functional elements in that they can function not only as articles or demonstratives [Lexicon – Section 3.7.1], but also as personal pronouns [Lexicon – Section 3.7.2] and locatives [Lexicon – Section 3.7.1] (Pfau 2011). In some cases, they might be used as possessive [Lexicon – Section 3.7.3] modifiers, too. Therefore, it may be hard to identify real determiners.

Another analytical challenge of studying determiners in sign languages is that both manual and non-manual components must be taken into consideration. As similarly noticed for negation [Syntax – Section 1.5], in some cases, a determiner's function can be conveyed even though no corresponding manual sign is produced. In such cases, determiners can be detected by looking at specific non-manual markers, such as eye gaze and head tilt (Neidle & Nash 2012).

#### 4.1.1 Articles

Unlike demonstratives, articles are determiners that cannot be used in isolation or occur as an answer to a question. This is shown in the examples below (Alexiadou, Haegeman & Stavrou 2007: 106).

- a. I like the \*(book). (English)
- b. I like that. (English)
- c. Ho visto il \*(ragazzo). (Italian)  
 have.1SG see.PTCP the boy  
 ‘I have seen the (boy).’
- d. Ho visto quello. (Italian)  
 have.1SG see.PTCP that  
 ‘I have seen that.’

In order to study the syntactic behavior of articles, the grammar writer should consider word order issues (i.e. the distribution of the article with respect to the noun), simultaneous manual articulation (i.e. the use of both manual articulators), and the role of non-manual marking.

#### 4.1.1.1 The position of the article

Considering word order within the noun phrase, some different distributional patterns may emerge in the sign language under investigation.

The article may appear at the beginning of the noun phrase, as shown in the example in ASL below.

IX<sub>3a</sub> BOY LIKE CHOCOLATE  
 ‘The boy likes chocolate.’

(ASL, Neidle et al. 2000: 89)

Another option is to produce the article in postnominal position. This happens, for example, in LIS.

FURNITURE<sub>a</sub> ANTIQUE IX<sub>3a</sub> BROKE  
 ‘The antique furniture is broken.’

(LIS, Bertone 2009: 8)

We also expect the possibility to find two co-indexed pointing signs, one before and one after the noun, even if this does not seem to be a common option. Although no example from a sign language is available yet to the best of our knowledge, the following illustrates a potential example:

IX<sub>3a</sub> TEACHER IX<sub>3a</sub> ARRIVE  
 ‘The teacher arrived.’

The grammar writer should verify the nature of both elements in order to assess whether they both function as articles.

#### 4.1.1.2 Simultaneous manual articulation

Another aspect that the grammar writer should bear in mind is the case of simultaneous articulation in which the noun and its modifiers (e.g. adjective, cardinal number,

etc.) are expressed by the dominant hand (d.h.) and the article by the non-dominant hand (n.h.). In the LIS example below, the noun and the article are articulated simultaneously.

d.h. FURNITURE<sub>a</sub> ANTIQUE

n.h. IX<sub>3a</sub>----

‘The furniture is antique.’

(LIS, Bertone 2009: 8)

#### 4.1.1.3 Non-manual marking

Definite and indefinite articles may be accompanied by eye gaze (eg) and wandering eye gaze in some sign languages. These non-manual markers accompanying the definite article may spread solely over this item, or over the entire noun phrase.

a. eg<sub>3a</sub>

IX<sub>3a</sub> MAN<sub>a</sub>

‘the/that man’

(ASL, Bahan 1996: 268)

b. eg<sub>3a</sub>

IX<sub>3a</sub> MAN<sub>a</sub>

‘the/that man’

(ASL, Bahan 1996: 269)

Similarly to what happens with definite articles, the markers co-occurring with indefinite articles may spread solely over this item, or over the entire noun phrase.

a. wandering gaze

SOMETHING/ONE WOMAN

‘some/a woman’

(ASL, Bahan 1996: 273)

b. wandering gaze

SOMETHING/ONE WOMAN

‘some/a woman’

(ASL, Bahan 1996: 273)

#### 4.1.1.4 Articles expressed by non-manual marking only

In some cases, there may be no manual sign expressing the article but the function of an article may be expressed by non-manual markers *in lieu* of the corresponding manual sign. This is possible both with the definite and indefinite interpretation, as illustrated in the two HKSL examples below.

a. eg<sub>3a</sub>  
FEMALE-KID COME

‘that/the girl is coming’

(HKSL, Tang & Sze 2002: 300)

b. eg<sub>3a</sub>  
MALE CYCLE

‘a man is cycling’

(HKSL, Tang & Sze 2002: 302)

In HKSL, the definite and the indefinite interpretations are associated with different eye gaze patterns. When the noun has a definite reading, the eye gaze must point toward the locus of the referent. When the noun has an indefinite reading, the eye gaze points toward the addressee, so that the signer keeps eye contact with him or her. The grammar writer should verify whether articles can be expressed non-manually in the language under investigation.

#### 4.1.2 Demonstratives

##### 4.1.2.0 Definitions and challenges

In many sign languages, demonstratives and articles are phonologically very similar. They are both realized as pointing signs and it is not easy to draw a clear line between the two categories. This is not an accident since it probably reflects a diachronic process in which demonstratives gradually lose their deictic features and undergo phonological weakening resulting in the emergence of definite articles. This is well-attested in spoken languages: Latin demonstrative *ille*, for example, led to definite articles in Italian (*il*), French (*le*), and Spanish (*el*). The grammar writer is referred to Pfau (2011) for a discussion on the diachronic evolution of pointing signs.

Demonstratives do not display the same distributional restrictions as articles. In fact, a demonstrative can be combined with a noun (transitive usage) or can be used on its own (intransitive usage). These two distributional patterns are shown in the examples below (Alexiadou, Haegeman & Stavrou 2007: 95).

- |                            |           |
|----------------------------|-----------|
| a. This                    | (English) |
| b. This book               | (English) |
| c. Dat<br>‘that’           | (Dutch)   |
| d. Dat boek<br>‘that book’ | (Dutch)   |

##### 4.1.2.1 The position of the demonstrative

Considering the distribution of demonstratives vis-à-vis the noun, we expect in principle three different options. The demonstrative may precede the noun (a), follow it (b), or it can be doubled (c), so that it appears both before and after the noun. The three patterns are exemplified below.

- |   |                          |
|---|--------------------------|
| a. IX-DEM BOOK EXPENSIVE<br>‘That book is/was expensive.’                                       | (NGT, Brunelli 2011: 56) |
| b. IX <sub>1</sub> DECIDE BOOK IX-DEM BUY<br>‘I decided to buy that book.’                      | (DGS, Pfau 2011: 149)    |
| c. IX-DEM <sub>1</sub> BOOK NEW TWO IX-DEM <sub>1</sub> MINE<br>‘These two new books are mine.’ | (LIS, Bertone 2009: 23)  |



The grammar writer should check the position of the demonstrative with respect to the noun. As for doubling, caution should be used in order to distinguish it from the reinforcer construction.

#### 4.1.2.2 Demonstrative reinforcer construction

Some languages allow for the demonstrative reinforcer construction. This construction contains three items: a noun, a demonstrative, and a reinforcer, which is a locative element added to provide additional information about distance such as ‘here’ and ‘there’. This construction has been observed in a number of spoken languages (Alexiadou, Haegeman & Stavrou 2007: 117–118).

- a. Den här mannen  
‘the here man’ (Swedish)
- b. Ce livre-là  
‘that book there’ (French)
- c. This guy here (non-standard English)

The demonstrative reinforcer construction has also been observed in some sign languages. In the ASL example below, the first pointing sign functions as a demonstrative, whereas the second one functions as a locative adverb (Bahan et al. 1995).

top

IX WOMAN IX ARRIVE EARLY  
‘That woman (there), (she) arrived early.’ (ASL, Bahan et al. 1995: 3)

The second pointing sign is analyzed as the reinforcer because the path length of this sign can be modified to iconically show proximity and distance. Crucially, this articulatory modification is not possible with the first pointing sign of the construction, which is analysed as the demonstrative, as shown below.

- a. IX<sub>i</sub> MAN IX<sub>[+DISTAL]</sub> KNOW PRESIDENT  
‘The/that man over there knows the president.’ (ASL, Neidle & Nash 2012: 270)
- b. \*IX<sub>[+DISTAL]</sub> MAN IX<sub>i</sub> KNOW PRESIDENT

#### 4.1.2.3 Non-manual marking

The ostensive nature of demonstratives may correlate with eye gaze directed in the same direction of the pointing sign. Typically, eye gaze, head posture, and eyebrows may provide additional information on how far the referent is with respect to the signer. The non-manual markers accompanying the demonstrative may spread solely over this item, or over the entire noun phrase.

#### 4.1.2.4 Anaphoric usage

Demonstratives are not always deictic [Pragmatics – Section 1.1], and hence do not always need to rely on the extra-linguistic context. In some cases, they refer to an entity previously mentioned in the linguistic context. This entity functions as an antecedent and demonstratives are used anaphorically [Pragmatics – Chapter 2]. In some languages, the deictic and anaphoric function of demonstratives may be conveyed by different items and may display different distributional patterns.

This is the case in ASL, where the deictic demonstrative is a pointing sign and the anaphoric demonstrative is realized as a Y-shaped sign (THAT). Differently from its deictic counterpart, ASL anaphoric demonstrative does not often occur before the noun (Neidle & Nash 2012).

- a. IX MAN  
‘the/that man’ (deictic use) (ASL, Neidle & Nash 2012: 270)
- b. ??THAT MAN  
‘that man’ (anaphoric use) (ASL, Neidle & Nash 2012: 271)

Due to possible distributional differences, deictic and anaphoric demonstratives should be investigated separately.

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## 4.2 Possessive phrases

### 4.2.0 Definitions and challenges

The crucial components of a possessive noun phrase are the *possessor* [Semantics – Chapter 11], (someone who possesses something) and the *possessed* (often referred to as *possessum* or *possessee* as well) as in the following example from English:

<u>John's</u>	<u>car</u>
possessor	possessed

The most obvious interpretation of the noun phrase *John's car* is the car that John owns but other interpretations that do not involve ownership are also possible (the car that John picked for his daughter, the car that John wants to buy, the car that John rented etc.).

All languages distinguish syntactically between attributive and predicative possession constructions (Heine 1997). An NP like *John's car* exemplifies attributive possession, that is, a relationship between the possessor and the possessed within an NP. By contrast, predicative possession is expressed by a full clause (e.g. *This car is John's / his, John has a car, The car belongs to John*). This section only describes attributive possessive phrases.

Many languages mark the relation between the possessor and the possessed in some way, for example, by possessive markers, agreement markers or case suffixes. Languages may mark the possessor, the possessed, or both (Croft 2002).

### 4.2.1 Ways of expressing the possessive relation in the noun phrase

The following ways of expressing the possessive relation [Semantics – Section 11.1] in a possessive noun phrase have been observed in the sign languages studied so far:

- (i) with attributive possessive pronouns
- (ii) with a possessive marker/linker
- (iii) with juxtaposition of the possessor and the possessed

These means are described in detail in the following sections. The grammar writer should investigate which of these means are attested in the sign language studied.