

Speaker (Un)certainty in Sign Languages

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ABSTRACT

As a term, *epistemic modality* covers all linguistic expressions that speakers may use to convey their certainty or, more often, uncertainty about the truth value of what they are saying. Data for this study are video-recordings of signers' discussions of what objects will best guarantee one's survival when you are in a decrepit lifeboat in the middle of the Pacific. Two sign languages are included, Japanese Sign Language and Danish Sign Language. They are unrelated, and they are minority languages in societies with two unrelated majority languages, Japanese and Danish.

Both sign languages are influenced by the majority languages surrounding them. Like the majority languages, they use cognition verbs with first person cognizers and complement clauses about what the signers are (un)certain about. The dominant order in each sign language reflects the order of verb and complement clause found in the majority spoken language, in Japanese Sign Language complement clause + cognition verb, in Danish Sign Language cognition verb + complement clause. But both sign languages also use the opposite order and the order cognition verb + complement clause + cognition verb, a structural type with final repetition found in many sign languages as the verb sandwich construction (Fischer and Janis 1990) and pronoun copies (Padden 1988).

Independently of the majority languages, the two sign languages have also developed expressions of epistemic modality which recruit different semantic fields. Japanese Sign Language uses words (YES (from SAME) and SENSE, cf. Akahori, Yano, Matsuoka and Oka 2013) as response words, tags, and as sentence final particles of epistemic modality integrated into the sentence. Danish Sign Language uses a gesture of metaphorically presenting or showing the contents of the discourse to the addressee (Engberg-Pedersen 2002) as a response word, a tag, and as a cognitive verb of epistemic uncertainty. Both types of markers of epistemic modality thus have discourse organizing functions besides their functions as epistemic markers. As epistemic markers, they occur in different structural positions in the two sign languages in accordance with the languages' dominant structural type. The discourse-organizing functions of the markers in the two unrelated sign languages show how expressions of uncertainty may originate in how interlocutors negotiate agreement besides expressing their uncertainty, and the markers of epistemic modality illuminate how sign languages are both influenced by the majority languages and develop independent means of expressing communicatively relevant meaning.