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Looking for Determiners in ASL: Further Confusing the Issue

The search for determiners in American Sign Language (ASL) has yielded controversial results since the beginning of linguistic research of the language. Recently, MacLaughlin (1997) has provided some convincing evidence that ASL has elements in D, including definite-specific, indefinite-specific, and indefinite-non-specific determiners. While these are not the omnipresent articles we find in Germanic or modern Romance languages, their distribution indicates that they are distinct from adjectives.

To shed light on this question, we turn to work by Bošković (2006), where we find a number of syntactic phenomena related to the presence of determiners in a language. Bošković has found that certain phenomena, such as left-branch extraction, are limited to languages that lack English-like articles, such as Japanese; on the other hand, other phenomena are limited to languages that have English-like articles. Over several works, Bošković (2005, 2006, 2007) has found no less than 12 properties, some syntactic, some morphological, some semantic, which are limited to one type of language or the other. Logically, he has suggested that the difference between a language with articles and one without articles is not limited to phonological realization, but is a deep syntactic difference; languages without articles lack a DP layer, and the consequences of this deficiency are widespread.

Using Bošković's results as tests for determinerhood, we can gain a new insight into the structure of ASL's nominal domain. Unfortunately, it will come out that only two of his tests are informative for ASL, and these two tests yield opposing results; one set of facts requires us to say that ASL has a DP, and another set of facts requires us to say that ASL lacks it. Potential analyses of these two data sets will be given, as well as the consequences of integrated the data into the larger picture of determiners in ASL.

References:

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