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Digging into buoys: their use across genres and their status in signed discourse

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Buoys
 "Signs produced with the weak hand that are held in a stationary configuration as the strong hand continues producing signs. Semantically they help guide the discourse by serving as conceptual landmarks as the discourse continues" (Liddell 2003:223)

Not so sure because many different forms are conflated under this label.

Types of buoys

- LIST:** Numeral signs held and used to make associations with from 1 to 5 entities (Liddell 2003)
- THEME:** A vertical index finger meaning that an important discourse topic is being discussed (Liddell 2003)
- FRAGMENT:** A part of the previous sign that is assigned a semantic significance (Liddell 2003)
- POINTER:** An extended finger pointing towards an important element in the discourse (Liddell 2003)
- DEPICTING:** A part of a depicting sign used to display spatial relationships (Liddell 2003)
- POINT:** A pointing sign that establishes a point in time or space (Vogt-Svendsen & Bergman 2007)
- DELIMIT:** All fingers relaxed gathered representing the delimitation between an inner and an outer element (Mesch & Wallin 2013)

Objectives

- To study the distribution of buoys across genres
- To analyze the extension of buoys (scope) across the discourse and their role for cohesion
- To investigate the role of buoys at the level of discourse: discourse markers (DMs)? Other discourse related devices?
- To find out the possible DM functions of buoys
- To establish a set of criteria to distinguish buoys with a DM status from the others

Data and method

- First corpus (C1)**
 1 LSFb signer (1h) in monologic setting
- Second corpus (C2)**
 6 signers from different age groups from the LSFb Corpus (Meurant forth.) in dialogic setting (1h30)
- Comparable in terms of genre**
 Argumentative, explicative, narrative and metalinguistic discourses with different degrees of preparedness
- Annotation of discourse markers (DMs)**
 Protocol for spoken corpora (Crible 2014)



Results

Role of buoys at the level of discourse

- 2 existing theories:
 - Information Structure (IS)** studies how information is packaged at the level of the sentence contrasting new vs old information within the same general topic (Vallduv 1992).
 - The **Question under Discussion (QUD)** presents the organisation of the discourse under the form of a tree. The discourse as a whole is on the top and has different moves which are the different questions under discussion. Each question under discussion in turn has different moves that are its sub-topics as in the figure beside (Büring 2003).

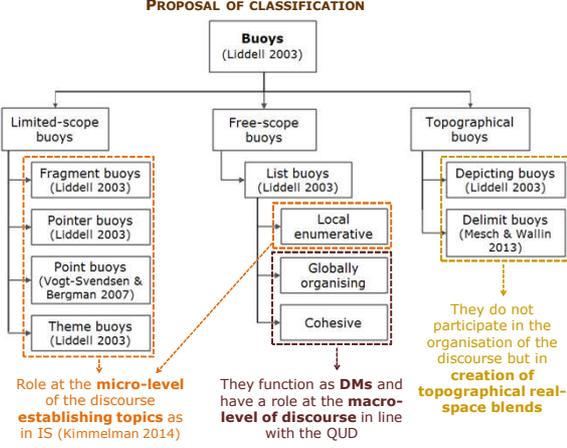
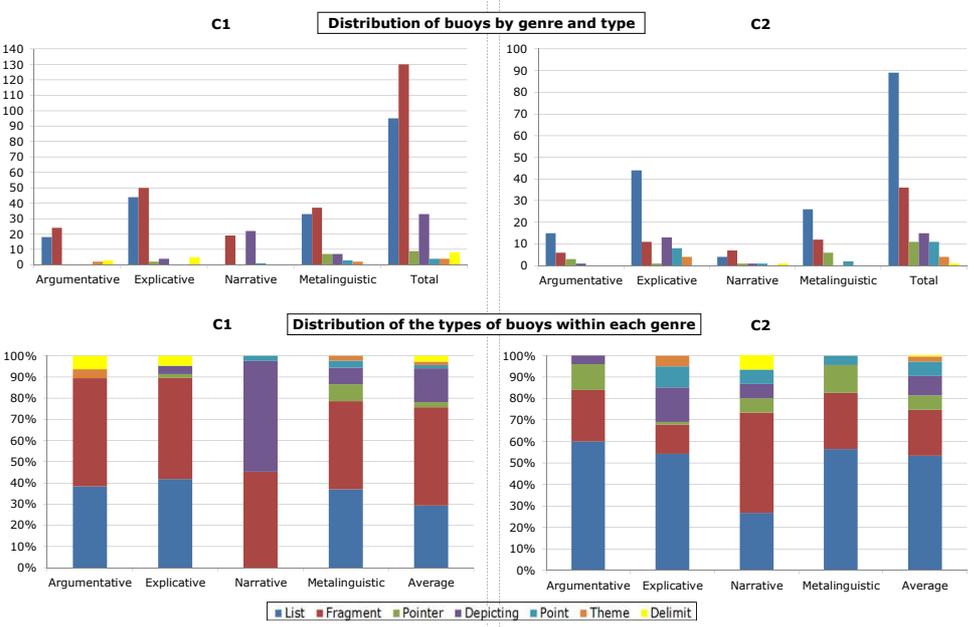
Scope and cohesive role of the most represented buoys

- FRAGMENT BUOYS:** Held while the other hand produces from 2 to 5 signs, i.e. **limited scope** + Ensure **semantic or syntactic cohesion** of a discourse portion by holding a referent.
- LIST BUOYS: variable scope**
 - Enumerative**
 - Local enumeration** of signs or short string of signs
 - Global organisation of the discourse** where large portions of discourse are given an order
 - Cohesive:** structures a full discourse and appears when anaphoric reference takes place

Are fragment and list buoys genre-related?

- FRAGMENT BUOYS:** not at all, they appear in all genres
- LIST BUOYS:** almost inexistent in narration. Globally organising and cohesive list buoys are more likely to appear in prepared or semi-prepared discourses, and enumerative list buoys in spontaneous productions.

Scale of relationality	Domain	Function
RDM (relational discourse marker) Signalling a connection between utterances	SEQ (sequential) Structuring the utterances of a discourse	ENU (enumeration) (12 cases) Indicating the sequential ordering of discourse events
	IDE (ideational) Signalling the relation between real world events	ADD (addition) (2 cases) Providing new elements to the same topic
		ALT (alternative) (2 cases) Signalling that two situations are alternative in an exclusive or non-exclusive way



Criteria for the identification of DMs in a signed language

- DMs are non-truth-conditional, so they do not affect the truth-conditional content of the clauses they connect but encode a specific type of relation (consequence, contrast, etc.)
- Necessary for the receiver of the message to understand the meaning that the signer wants to infer (cause, opposition, addition, etc.)
- DMs work at the level of the QUD underlining the switch from one move to another

List buoy changing the move of the QUD



Translation:
 Mum was a sign language guide. I was proud to see her signing (...) Dad always showed me (materials about deal culture) at the Robert Dresse Centre (...)

Conclusions

- List buoys present **variable scopes** whereas the other categories not. The **degree of preparedness** rather than the discourse genre makes list buoys with long scopes more likely to appear.
- Not all buoys have a role at the discourse level and **only some list buoys (globally organising and cohesive) behave as DMs**.
- The semantics of **list buoys** are not limited to ordering events or items (Liddell 2003) but they can **structure a sequence, add information and express a meaning of alternative**.
- Implementation of Liddell's definition: **buoys** are signs produced by the weak hand held in a stationary configuration while the strong hand continues signing. The configurations are diverse and sometimes the same one conflates different functions at the level of **iconic constructions** (participating in simultaneous constructions or backgrounding in locative constructions), **syntax** (in the different layers of the utterance) and **discourse** (either micro or macro).

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