Meaning at the feature level: Name signs in Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT)

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1. Introduction
Consider the following name signs of two Dutch people involved in sign language research:

(1)a. Wim Zonneveld  b. Wim Emmerik

Both signs combine a lexeme from Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT) and an element from the Dutch manual alphabet (i.e. a system of representation of the Dutch alphabet articulated by using the hands rather than the conventional written forms), in particular the letter ‘W’; the initial of their first name. This is one of several ways of assigning a name to a person, and it has the characteristic that it involves motivated, morphological complex forms. In this paper, I will illustrate this complexity in two ways: (i) such combinations can involve combining one or more fingerspelled initials of a person with one or more morphemes, thus forming a new,
complex sign; (ii) a morpheme expressed by a hand configuration in a conventional lexical item can be substituted by a person’s (fingerspelled) initial. Furthermore, I will show that this process is strongly restricted: it is subject to a meaning preservation constraint: a fingerspelled element can only be used in this way if it does not significantly affect the meaning contribution of the replaced element to the whole sign.

In the next section, I will provide information about name sign assignment in the Netherlands. This is followed by a brief overview of the structure of NGT lexemes in Section 3. Sections 4 and 5 will contain an analysis of name signs as morphological complex units. The summary and conclusions will be in Section 6.

2. The assignment of a name sign in the Dutch deaf community

Naming a child has been conventionalised in the western hearing world to giving it the surname of one or both of its parents, and one or more first names. These first names are nowadays by and large arbitrary: parents choose a name that they like, although still sometimes a name of an ancestor is chosen, for example of a grandparent. While children of Deaf parents are also named according to this convention, they also receive a name sign. The assignment of name signs may differ across Deaf communities. In the Deaf communities in the United States, they usually consist of the first name initial and an arbitrary but family-related location and/or movement (see Supalla 1992). People who are not born into the Deaf community usually do not receive a name sign but their (first and/or family) name is fingerspelled, unless they are often referred to (such as the president of the US). However, people who become much involved in the Deaf community at a later age may have an abbreviated fingerspelled combination. For example, the American Sign Language researcher Karen Emmorey is referred to as fingerspelled ‘KE’. In Asian countries, for example Korea, a person’s name sign is always combined with a marker indicating the person’s sex, i.e. extended thumb for males and extended pinky finger for females.

In the Netherlands, a name sign, be it of a child born into the Deaf community or of someone who becomes involved in that community, is usually based on a personal characteristic. This means that naming may take place only after this characteristic has been observed and considered typical of the child or person. A small child can thus be named with respect to an early facial expression that is typical to the child, such as a recurring frown, or to a character trait, such as zappiness. Throughout their lives, their name signs may change to reflect different characteristics they develop. Name signs may also be a translation of a person’s ‘spoken language’ name, or of a Dutch word that resembles it. For example, the name signs of two deaf NGT teachers and research assistants at the university of Amsterdam and the Radboud University are literal translations of their first name, Ma-rijke ‘mother - rich’ and last name, Ros ‘horse’, respectively (see (2a-b). Finally,
in some cases, as described in Section 1, a name sign may involve one or two initials of a person’s ‘spoken language’ name.

(2)a. b.

Marijke Scheffener  Johan Ros  

Hearing people who come into contact with the deaf community (including people who take an NGT course) and prominent people in society may be assigned a name sign in a similar way. A name sign is only valid as such if it is assigned or approved of by a member of the Deaf community. A self-chosen name sign may thus be ignored and a person may be referred to by Deaf community members by a completely different name sign, and sometimes this may not be a very flattering one.

3. The structure of NGT lexemes

The first linguistic publication on a sign language, American Sign Language (Stokoe 1960), focused on the form of signs, claiming that signs, like words, had a phonological level at which smaller, meaning distinctive elements are combined to form an unlimited set of lexemes. Several studies to follow (Battison 1978; Liddell and Johnson 1989; Sandler 1989; Brentari 1998; Crasborn 2001; Van der Kooij 2002) have extended and refined the study of sign language phonology, although our knowledge is still quite limited in the sense that the phonology of only few sign languages has been studied in depth, and as a result, little is known to date about sign languages’ phonotactics.

Another issue is that the morphological structure of lexemes in sign languages has been ignored for a long time: it is usually assumed that they consist of form features only (e.g. Sandler and Lillo-Martin 2006; Brentari et al. 2013; Meir et al. 2012). This holds even for signs in which clearly elements can be recognised that are accepted as morphemes in signs that are generally accepted as morphologically complex (classifier predicates). Thus, in this view, the lexemes for ‘sun’ and ‘dance’ in NGT, illustrated in (3a-b), have a formal phonological representation conform Van der Kooij’s (2002) model, as in (4a-b), but no morphological structure
for these signs is acknowledged, even though the handshapes with two respectively all extended fingers, for example, are accepted in other signs (i.e. classifier predicates) as morphemes. In this, many researchers follow Supalla (1980)’s claim that lexemes as the one in (3a) have originated as classifier predicates, and have become ‘frozen’, i.e. have undergone a synchronic process of semantic bleaching and have become non-compositional.

(3)a. b.

(4)a. Phonological representation of the NGT sign for ‘sun’:

Place:
- Major location: [high]
- Setting: [high > low], [far > near]

Active articulator:
- Finger selection: [4]
- Thumb: [out]
- Finger configuration: [close > open]
- Width: [wide]
- Orientation: [tips]

b. Phonological representation of the NGT sign for ‘dance’:

Place:
- Major location: [hand]
- Setting: [ipsi > contra]

Manner:
- [repeat]

Active articulator:
- Finger selection: [2]
- Orientation: [tips]

Passive articulator:
- Finger selection: [all]
Sign language researchers realise increasingly that in lexemes, too, a level of morphological complexity is needed, since sign components can be meaningful in themselves (e.g. Brennan 1990). Morphological interpretations of sub-sign form units are for instance provided in research concerning the quality of the movement in lexical signs: they may express event telicity in predicates (e.g. Johnston 2001, Wilbur 2008). Thus, a change in orientation, setting, or hand aperture can mark punctual events, whereas a movement of the hand(s) through space can mark atelic events. Metaphoric meanings are also possible, for example positive signs usually have an upward motion and negative signs a downward motion (Taub 2001; Wilcox 2001). Signs expressing emotions are often articulated near the chest area and signs indicating mental states and activities near the forehead (Brennan 1990; Johnston and Schembri 1999; Fisher and Gough 2000; Fernald and Napoli 2000; Wilcox 2001; Van der Kooij 2002). Finally, handshapes can be meaningful in many lexemes in a variety of signed languages (e.g. Brennan 1990 for BSL; Supalla 1980 for ASL, Van der Kooij 2002 and Zwitserlood 2003 for NGT). And whereas many of the morphemes are self-representing or iconic, this is not necessarily the case, as is shown by Fernald and Napoli (2000). For example, in ASL, the upper part of the face is, in a set of signs, connected with masculinity and the lower part of the face with femininity.

Combining all these analyses, one to several form components of a lexeme can apparently be meaningful and the lexeme itself, thus, be morphologically complex, even though the meaning of the whole is not necessarily the sum of the meaning of its morphemes. Thus, the NGT sign for ‘dance’ combines, at the morphological level, a morpheme ‘2 extended elongated objects (legs)’, a morpheme ‘move swaying repeatedly (dance)’ and a morpheme ‘flat surface (dance floor)’. Similarly, the hand configuration with all fingers and thumb closed changing to extended and spread is systematically used to express emission of multiple elongated entities, such as rays or beams. Movements in lexemes often reflect the direction of a movement of an entity; in this case, it indicates the downward movement of sunbeams as they are perceived by humans. Finally, the location above the head reflects a typical position of the sun as high above us. At the morphological level, then, this lexeme combines four morphemes. Literally, it means “downward emission of many rays from a lofty entity”, but it has the specialised meaning of ‘sun’. So far, however, it has not been possible to analyze complex lexemes as hierarchical structures: they appear to be morphologically and semantically exocentric. Also, in general, they do not have a specific grammatical category but can be used referentially and predicatively (Zwitserlood 2003).

In the following section, I will pursue morphological complexity of lexemes in NGT from the somewhat unconventional perspective of name signs, based on these views that morphemes in this language may consist of as little material as phonological features.
4. The structure of initialised name signs
In the first place, we will focus on name signs in which a morpheme (combination) is substituted with a fingerspelled initial. The name signs in (5a-b) are both formed from conventional NGT lexemes, i.e. the signs for ‘sun’, obviously related to the person in question’s surname, and ‘dance’, referring to the one-time, much beloved profession of this person. These are in (5c-d).

(5)a. b.

[Images of Wim Zonneveld and Wim Emmerik]

c. d.

[Images of hands signing ‘sun’ and ‘dance’]

As described in Section 2, in the hand configuration in (5c) all fingers and the thumb are selected, moving down, with a closed configuration opening into one in which thumb and fingers are extended and spread, with the meaning of emission of many rays moving downwards. Substitution of the hand configuration in the lexeme by a fingerspelled element is possible provided that this construction is preserved, and this is possible with the fingerspelled letter ‘W’, as, even though only two fingers and the thumb are selected, the extension and spreading are retained. Substitution of the lexeme’s meaningful hand configuration by any other fingerspelled element, for example the ‘V’ or ‘L’ would be rather awkward, although these still may reflect
elongated elements and may spread, but other fingerspelled forms, such as ‘S’ or ‘P’ are simply not possible.

The same holds for the sign for ‘dance’: substitution of the two selected, extended and spread fingers representing a person’s legs is possible with another handshape when the finger selection and spreading features are retained, in particular if all other parts of the lexeme, such as the repeated swaying movement that expresses dancing and the non-dominant hand, representing a surface (dance floor), are kept constant. All this does not, however, alter the fact that, in language play, these names may not cause funny associations: Wim Zonneveld’s name may, in such circumstances, be jokingly referred to as causing only a dreary bit of sunlight, while that of Wim Emmerik may be interpreted as hilarious: of a dancer with an awkward, sideways pointing extra leg.

In some lexemes, one or more components may be morphemic but not the handshape. Since it is impossible to articulate a sign without the hand being in a particular configuration, in such signs a default hand configuration is spelled out, i.e. one that has the least possible number of features and is, moreover, easy to articulate: a flat hand. (This is, unsurprisingly, the hand configuration that is the least marked in and across sign languages.) This hand configuration, thus, can be easily substituted by other hand configurations, as long as the other, morphemic components, such as the morphemic movements and/or locations, are kept constant. Thus, the original default hand configuration in the lexemes for ‘hair lock’, where the location is that of the hairline and the movement traces the shape of a lock of hair, similar as those in the lexeme for ‘girl’ or ‘curl’, and the movement outlining the typical shape of a mountain could be substituted with the fingerspelled initials ‘K’ and ‘I’ to form the name signs for the sign language linguists Els van der Kooij, Connie de Vos, and Ingeborg van Gijn. These are illustrated along with the lexemes from which they are derived in (6).³

(6)a. 
b. 
c. 

Els van der Kooij

Connie de Vos

Ingeborg van Gijn
The impossibility to initialise the lexeme for ‘spectacles’ to form a name sign for Inge Zwitserlood (7) further illustrates the constraint on substitution: mere retention of the location near the eye allows for a too wide interpretation: in the lexeme for ‘spectacles’, the one finger and thumb selection combined with the curvedness are necessary.

Finally, the initials ‘J’, X, and ‘Z’ never appear in name signs. The reason for this is that they themselves have an inherent movement, tracing the shape of the written letter. Combination of a lexeme with ‘J’, ’X’ or ‘Z’ is blocked by the presence of an inherent movement in the lexeme or by the fact that the movement of the fingerspelled element might be interpreted as meaningful. In the latter case, there would not only be substitution of the meaningful hand configuration but also of the movement. As such, the lexeme would become uninterpretable and the effect of the name sign would be lost. Although ‘H’ and ‘U’ in the manual alphabet also have an inherent movement, they are recogniseable as fingerspelled elements without their movement. Therefore, they may be used to substitute a hand configuration of a lexeme to form a name sign.
5. Name signs combining fingerspelled elements and morphemes

So far, this paper focused on existing lexemes the hand configuration of which is substituted by a fingerspelled element. However, there is another possibility to combine fingerspelled initials with morphemes from the lexicon in a name sign. We will focus here in the movement. In Section 3 it was stated that sub-sign morphemes can be metaphoric and that an upwards or downwards movement can indicate positiveness (‘up is good’) or negativeness (‘down is bad’) (see Lakoff and Johnson 1980). But movements can also be used to indicate shape, as we have already seen in Section 4. Besides these, movement can also indicate size. This size-indicating meaning of a movement was used in the creation of the name signs of two colleague sign language researchers at the University of Amsterdam, Heleen Bos and Beppie van den Bogaerde. The former being rather tall while her colleague was quite short inspired their deaf colleague to come up with a combination of the morphemes for ‘tall’ and ‘short’ in combination with their first and family name initials. The family name initial is also used in the name sign of Anne Baker, professor of sign linguistics at the same university, combined with the NGT sign for ‘dry nurse/to be born’, articulated with the ‘N’ handshape instead of the default ‘B’ handshape (short for ‘Anne’; use of the ‘A’ hand would have resulted in a different meaning, i.e. ‘to follow’). These name signs are illustrated in (8).

(8)a.  
(8)b.  
(8)c.

Heleen Bos  
Beppie van den Bogaerde  
Anne Baker

Thus, apparently it is possible to combine one or two motivated, fingerspelled elements with at least a meaningful movement to form a name sign. Although this has not been observed yet, the possibility of addition of other morphemes, for example a morpheme expressing a location is, excluded. This is an interesting issue for future study.

6. Summary, conclusions

This paper discussed the several ways in which name signs can be assigned, i.e. as lexemes for typical characteristics of persons, initialised characterizing lexemes or
fingerspelled forms combined with one or more sub-sign morphemes. Only iconic, morphologically complex lexemes in NGT are observed to undergo initialisation. It has been shown that combination of a fingerspelled initial with a lexeme is subject to form and meaning preserving restrictions: a substituting hand configuration must not substantially differ in form and meaning from the substituted one, and/or the remaining morphemic construction should be preserved to the extent that the lexeme is still recognizable and interpretable. All this provides independent evidence for the status of the lexemes that are used as the basis of name signs in NGT as morphologically complex. Support for the analysis of sub-sign components as morphemes as in the literature is provided by the fact that morphemes below the level of the sign can be combined with motivated, fingerspelled elements in the construction of new name signs. Further study is necessary to learn to what extent other sub-sign components, too, can be used for this.

Appendix: The Dutch manual alphabet

Notes
1 In many (western) countries, manual alphabets have been developed in the past to help deaf people acquire or even use the spoken language. Nowadays, these are used to spell words and names from the surrounding spoken language when no sign or name is available. See Janssen (1986) for an overview, with focus on the Dutch manual alphabet. The Dutch manual alphabet is illustrated in the Appendix.
2 Classifier predicates are complex signs, expressing of (path) motion, location, and (change of) posture of referents. The classifiers in these predicates group referents according to salient characteristics, e.g. animacy or shape (see Zwitserlood 2012).
3 The part ‘borg’ in the name ‘Ingeborg’ was accidentally interpreted as ‘berg’ (mountain) when a name was assigned to her.
References


