Pluralization Strategies in German Sign Language *

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Abstract

Like many other spoken and sign languages, German Sign Language (Deutsche Gebärdensprache; DGS) makes use of multiple strategies for the plural marking of nominal signs. The plural marker is realized in three ways. The first default realization is lateral reduplication, in which the sign is reduplicated as the hands move laterally through the signing space. The second is simple reduplication in the same position in space. The third case is zero-marking, with no overt realization of the plural marker. The realization of the plural depends critically on the phonological properties of the base sign, making this phenomenon a case of phonologically triggered allomorphy.

However, as is the case for most sign languages, DGS can make use of classifier constructions in conjunction with these same nouns to express plurality. In the case of underspecified nouns, or the nouns that display zero-marking in the plural, a laterally reduplicated version of the classifier handshape is available. I argue that this type of classifier is more grammatically regular in its use than it is in other classifier constructions, which suggests that it is being used as an alternative pluralization strategy. I offer a detailed description of the criteria that divides nouns into phonological categories, which predict the realization of the plural marker, and how these nouns can be alternatively pluralized.

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