

# Discourse markers in French Belgian Sign Language (LSFB): their role in argumentative productions

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## French Belgian Sign Language (LSFB)

- Used in Wallonia (the Southern part of Belgium) and Brussels
- Recognized by the Parliament of the French Community of Belgium in 2003
- Minority and minorized language: 5000 – 6000 signers (Meurant 2008)
- Rare presence in the society
- No written tradition, oral transmission
- Research started in 2000



## Methodology

- A corpus of 10 minutes containing two deaf signers (S1 and S2) annotated with ELAN.



Screenshot of an annotation file



Hierarchy of tiers

- Two argumentative productions (3'13" and 6'55") of the LSFB Corpus elicited by the deaf moderator with a question in LSFB or with images.
- Videos segmented into discourse units following a segmentation protocol (Gabarró-López and Meurant 2014) in order to establish the position of DMs.

## Results on the sign MEME

43 occurrences in our corpus from which 23 fulfil the criteria to be considered DMs.

### FUNCTIONS OF MEME AS DM



- Condition (*cond*) (1)
- Consequence (*conseq*) (6)
- Conceptual structuration – new information (*concep-ni*) (4)
- Participant transition and conceptual structuration – new information (*part+concep-ni*) (1)
- Repetition – reformulation (*rep-ref*) (2)
- Repetition – explicitness (*rep-exp*) (2)
- Relation of topic-predicate (*tp-pred*) (3)
- Parenthetical (*parenth*) (3)
- Approximation (*approx*) (1)

### S1 = 15 MEME as DM

Functions	Cond	Conseq	Concep-ni	Part + concep-ni	Rep-exp	Parenth	Approx
Position	1	4	4	1	1	3	1
Position	Initial	Middle	2 initial and 2 middle	Initial	Middle	Middle	Middle

### S2 = 8 MEME as DM

Functions	Conseq	Rep-ref	Rep-exp	Tp-pred
Position	2	2	1	3
Position	Middle	Middle	Middle	Middle

As **rep-exp marker**, it is followed by a role shift.

As **parenth marker**, it is accompanied by other signs that refer to other parts of the discourse as in the example.



DEPENSER LIEN MEME DIRE OUI

"It is linked to consumerism as we said, yes..."

## Discourse markers (DMs) in sign languages

Research is scarce and mostly tackles isolated manual DMs whose role is well-defined within the discourse (Roy 1989, Locker McKee 1992, Johnston and Schembri 2006, Pérez 2006, Villameriel García 2008 and Hoza 2011)

**Our focus:** two linguistic elements whose role has not been explored in LSFB so far and that may fulfil different discourse functions.



### MEME ("same")

The indexes of both hands extended get in contact with an inward movement.



### LIST BUOYS

Numeral signs held in a stationary handshake used to make associations from one to five ordered or unordered entities with the other hand (Liddell 2003).

**Our questions:** are they really DMs? If so, what are their functions? In which position of the utterance do they appear?

## Criteria for the identification and classification of DMs

### Identification

- "[A]ny type of linguistic expression whose primary function lies at the discourse level, i.e. relating their host utterance to the discourse situation. As such, discourse markers can play a threefold role contributing to the discourse organization (textual coherence), to the speaker/hearer interaction (interpersonal meanings), and/or to speaker attitudes (epistemic meaning) [...]. Different grammatical classes may be used as discourse markers: connectives (coordinating and subordinating conjunctions, conjunctive adverbs), sentence adverbials, parentheticals, small clauses,..." (Degand forthc.)
- Syntactic and semantic properties: (i) connectivity, (ii) optionality, and (iii) non-truth-conditionality (Schourup 1999 cited in Degand 2009).

### Classification

- MEME:** no previous studies on this sign, so based on categories from DMs in spoken languages (Bolly and Degand 2009, Degand and Fagard 2011) and addition of new categories.
- LIST BUOYS:** categories from previous studies on these DMs (Gabarró-López 2014, Gabarró-López and Meurant in press).

## Results on LIST BUOYS

- A total of 6 list buoys (i.e. the unique sign that refers to all the entities at once) and 16 list-buoy markers (i.e. each entity of the list buoy the signer refers to) in our corpus fulfil the criteria to be considered DMs.
- Distribution per signer:

	No. of list buoys	No. of list-buoy markers	Position of the markers
S1	3	10	8 middle, 1 initial and 1 end position
S2	3	6	All in middle position

- All with an enumerative role (i.e. none with discourse cohesive or organizing role) and positioned in line with Gabarró-López (2014).

## Conclusions

- List buoys and MEME as DMs fulfil very different discourse functions. In this study:
  - List buoys** only show an enumerative role.
  - MEME** counts on different functions, being consequence marker, conceptual structuration marker (addition of new information), parenthetical marker, and marker of the relation between topic and predicate the most common. Such a variety of functions is not predictable from its lexical meaning ("resemblance", "similarity"), which is lost when it works as a DM.
- Both list buoys and MEME tend to appear in middle position, which is related to the DMs' feature of connectivity.

## Further research

- Are these functions the same for the other LSFB signers?
- Do non-manual signs play a role for the disambiguation of the functions of MEME when it is a DM?
- Are there other potential DMs with the same role as list buoys or the sign MEME?

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