The relation between morphology and phonology in spoken and signed languages; autosegmental morphemes.
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This presentation aims to explicate the influence of modality on the interaction between morphology and phonology. In both spoken and signed languages free and bound morphemes exist and in both modalities the morphological processes derivation, inflection, and compounding are reported on. In spoken languages, morphemes are typically forms that consist of at least one segment. Although autosegments that can be attributed morphological status are also observed, in the form of tone, nasality and/or voice quality or root-in-pattern morphology, these ‘autosegmental morphemes’ appear to be relatively rare in spoken languages (e.g. the featural affix [nasal] marking first person in Terena [1]). As such, words usually consist of a segmental string and complex words are generally sequential concatenations of morphemes.

The words of sign languages, on the other hand, typically consist of maximally one segment, and concatenation of morphemes to form complex words appears to be scarce. Sign compounds are often loan translations of spoken language compounds and tend to blend into a single segmental form (both diachronically and synchronically). Only few derivational and inflectional processes that use sequential affixation have been described. Some claim this to be an effect of the youth of sign languages, younger languages generally having fewer of these processes than older languages, and affixation may increase in the course of development [2].

In contrast, we argue that the lack of concatenative morphology in sign languages is a result of the high quantity of ‘autosegmental morphemes’ and consequently of the affordance of signed languages to combine morphemes simultaneously. Complex forms in which morphemes are expressed simultaneously have been reported for most sign languages. In the phonological representation of for instance predicates, the inflectional elements that consist of a specific location or hand configuration given by the discourse situation fill in the phonologically underspecified features nodes for location and articulator configuration. Other post-lexical morphological processes are expressed by prosodic elements, e.g. changes in length or tenseness of the articulation of a word.

What has hardly been recognized to date is the wealth of morphology within the lexicon, in particular the morphological complexity of many words and the productivity of new word formation. An important reason for this is the a priori assumption that frequent words for common concepts are in principle monomorphemic, in particular when they consist of a single segment. This assumption is specifically awkward in lexical words that formally and semantically resemble classifier predicates (a particular type of post-lexical complex word). Having different morphosyntactic characteristics, these words are considered diachronically lexicalized forms, i.e. forms that have lost their morphological complexity [3]. Historical data to corroborate a diachronic explanation is mostly lacking, however. We argue against the dichotomy of morphological status of their composing formal elements that is the consequence of this diachronic view. Alternatively, we argue that morphology below the level of the segmental unit is not only possible, but, even strongly favored by the modality. In this paper we will show how pervasive ‘autosegmental morphology’ is in the lexicon of Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT).
