# ISCH COST Action IS1006 SignGram



## Work plan for STSM to University of Göttingen
### Complex sentences at the syntax-semantics-prosody interfaces

**Sign action number:** IS 1006
**Title of the action:** Unraveling the grammars of European sign languages: pathways to full citizenship of deaf signers and to the protection of their linguistic heritage
**Action short name**: SignGram COST Action

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**Host Institution:**  University of Göttingen

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*Background*

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The project currently carried out by Josep Quer as Principal Investigator (*Clause combining in sign languages: the grammar of complex sentences in Catalan Sign Language in a crosslinguistic and crossmodal perspective1 & 2*, FFI2009-10492 and  FFI2012-36238) aims at exploring an area of sign language syntax and semantics that has received very little attention to date: clause combining into complex sentences, i.e. the mechanism for integrating clauses into bigger sentential units. By using these rather neutral terms, we intend to include the more traditional concepts of coordination and subordination, but also parataxis, as well as other types of complex constructions such as serial verb constructions or clause chaining that do not often appear in the grammatical repertory of the best described languages. The notions of coordination and subordination which are taken as the standard divide in clause combining stem from a

limited set of languages, mostly Indo-European, and are mainly based on the study and description of written texts, which do impose a bias on the register and the degree of elaboration in the strategies for clause combining specifically. Typological research has allowed linguists to significantly widen this empirical perspective and to eventually modify it by offering descriptions of languages that challenge the most run-off-the-mill generalizations and categories. Description of languages that are transmitted exclusively in a face-to-face fashion have shown to display different and richer means for combining clauses beyond the traditional coordination/subordination opposition. Sign languages clearly align with this group of lesser described languages lacking a written tradition and in this sense, as has often been the case in sign language linguistics, many insights are to be gained from this body of literature. Empirically, it focuses on Catalan Sign Language (LSC), but it takes a broad crosslinguistic perspective that encompasses sign and spoken languages.

It is clear that languages in the visual-gestural modality have availed themselves with specialized means to combine clauses into bigger units and that they display some of the typical means to do so like conjunctions. However, so far the only studies on clause combining in sign languages have concentrated on a few specific subordinating structures such as relative clauses, conditional clauses, temporal clauses or embedded argument clauses (declaratives, interrogatives). Beyond the intrinsic interest of the results yielded by these studies, it is remarkable how the perspective adopted is influenced by Western grammatical tradition. One should not forget that there are cases of languages like Diyari (Pama-Nyungan; South Australia) that use a general modifying construction that depending on context can be interpreted as either a subordinate temporal, conditional or relative clause (Comrie & Kuteva 2005). In this connection, it is important to note that in several sign languages such structures also share morphosyntactic properties. Moreover, other languages Tzutujil (Mayan; Guatemala), do not have any specific means to express the meaning of a temporal or reason clause, and it is simply linking by juxtaposition what allows for an interpretation of that kind (Cristofaro 2005). Sometimes "complement clauses" may be realized by asyndetic coordination (parataxis), as in Lango (Noonan 2007). Still, this project concentrates on the linguistic means that sign languages have in order to encode linking, be it morphological or prosodic, thus excluding cases such as those where only the pragmatic information is what permits to identify one clause as an instance of dependent clause interpretation: crucially we concentrate on the formal means the language has available in order to link clauses with each other.

## STSM project

The STSM to be carried out at the University of Göttingen is part of the project summarized above and it concentrates on the syntactic, semantic and prosodic properties of dependent clauses in the left- and right-periphery of the matrix clause. The results of this STSM are intended to inform the relevant parts of the Sign Gram Blueprint and eventually to reformulate specific details of the relevant sections that might be biased by the perspective of spoken language grammars.

The departure point is Quer (2014), which addresses the open question of the proper characterization of non-manual domain markers in a case study of brow raise in Catalan Sign Language (LSC). Like in several other sign languages, brow raise surfaces as marker of conditional antecedents, temporal clauses, relative clauses, yes/no questions, pseudo-clefts and

clausal arguments appearing in the left periphery of the sentence. Based on elicited judgments about felicity of use in the manipulated contexts provided, the study aims to determine whether potentially ambiguous structures at the manual level are disambiguated at the non-manual one. The factual/counterfactual distinction in conditionals is tested by the combination of brow raise with squint in LSC and tried upon other brow-raise marked structures. Further modification with affective/paralinguistic non-manuals is added, too, in order to ascertain whether it can override the basic syntactic-semantic interpretation of the componential non-manuals. The results suggest that brow raise is a portmanteau marker of syntactic (and prosodic) integration into the matrix clause that can be layered with other non-manuals and be overridden by other grammatical or affective articulations, as long as the prosodic constituency is preserved. At the same time, whenever the dependent clause can appear after the matrix one, brow raise occurs only on the alleged complementizer. Quer (2014) argues that preverbal cases are instances of complex NP constituents that are recruited (and eventually grammaticalized) for the composition of complex sentences, while some postposed correlates can be argued to display different syntactic and prosodic structure.

Since similar patterns have been attested in some other sign languages like ASL (Wilbur 2011), it is of paramount importance to understand the mechanisms underlying these structures. For this reason, comparative work between Catalan and German Sign Language can offer new insights into the questions raised about the interface between syntax, prosody and semantics in this particular domain of complex sentences.

## *Work plan*

Previous to the STSM
1. Review of the literature on complex sentences in DGS.
2. Preparation of the sets of structures to be elicited in DGS.

STSM proper
1. Elicitation of selected structures in DGS (with Göttingen team members).
2. Comparison with the LSC corpus and elicited data.
3. Comparative analysis and elaboration of the results.
4. Discussion of results with Göttingen team members and discussion of relevant *SignGram Blueprint* sections.

Dates: 3-13 December 2014.

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