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Authors' Afterword

Harry van der Hulst and Sotaro Kita

In virtually every publication on sign language phonology, the Symmetry Condition is mentioned as one of the few examples of a general phonological constraint. The research that is reported in our paper, however, strongly suggests that this condition does not belong to the specific domain of phonology since it is reflected in a very similar fashion in co-speech gesture. The continuous treatment of the Symmetry Condition as a phonological constraint may simply be a ritual echo of an earlier conviction that was generally held when it was deemed crucial to show that sign languages, just like spoken languages, are subject to well-formedness constraints. However, the last decade or so has shown an increase in recognizing modality-specific properties, i.e. significant ways in which sign language and spoken language might differ. After all, it is no longer in serious dispute that sign languages are human languages on a par with spoken languages, both being reflections of a species-specific language faculty. From this perspective, we do not need to expect that the phonology of spoken and signed languages are similar in all respects, which makes it less necessary to use the observation of symmetry as an example of a phonological constraint. This opens the way to finding constraints elsewhere, for example at the level of fine-grained analyses of large collections of signs. In addition, a broader recognition of the role of iconicity in sign language structure has been another important consequence of understanding sign language phonology in its own right (see van der Kooij 2002; van der Kooij & van der Hulst 2005; van der Hulst & van der Kooij 2006; Perniss, Thompson & Vigliocco 2010). This trend is not only a sign of the maturity of the field, it also squares with another trend which is to be open to the possibilities that many aspects of human languages are perhaps not to be attributed to a language-specific human capacity (the 'language organ') but may instead be a consequence of cognitive systems that are not specific to language. A defence of this position that has attracted a lot of attention is Hauser, Chomsky & Fitch (2002), although this viewpoint has previously been explicitly present in other approaches (such as Cognitive Grammar) which have long criticized Chomsky's earlier claims about the 'richly articulated

structure' of the language organ. In this context, we feel that our findings have only gained significance as they stand out as an empirically motivated result that, incidentally, immediately explains why the Symmetry Condition is observed in every sign language that has been studied to date.

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