

Nonmanual marking of polar interrogatives in Catalan Sign Language (LSC): Approaching the puzzle through a feature-based theory of biases

Introduction. Cecchetto (2012) suggested that polar interrogatives (PIs) in sign languages (SLs) involve a combination of several of the following nonmanual markers (NMMs): eyebrow raise, eyes wide open, eye contact with the addressee, head forward position and forward body posture. Further, it has been shown that nonmanual features marking PIs “tend to be very similar across SLs” (Zeshan 2004¹). Despite these assumptions, it is quite common to find PIs in LSC marked with eyebrow furrowing, head upward position and backward body posture. Moreover, LSC optionally adds a question particle (YES-NO Q-sign). Therefore, this paper provides evidence from LSC showing an unexpected puzzle: different combinations of NMM can appear for PIs and, contrary to previous assumptions, eyebrow furrowing can be the most salient feature. I argue, based on Sudo’s (2013) feature-based theory of biases, that each combination of NMM features, as well as the appearance of the question particle, convey a different flavor of bias. Therefore, the NMMs, just as the YES-NO Q-sign, are shown to not only mark sentence type, but to encode pragmatic meaning.

Data. LSC uses a specific combination of NMMs, a characteristic device of gestural-visual modality languages, to perform a PI. It has been claimed that LSC most prominent feature for marking PIs is eyebrow raise (Quer et al. 2005). But further data examination shows that PIs in LSC can also be performed with a combination of features involving eyebrow furrowing as the most prominent feature. Thus, eyebrow position feature in PIs is not constant:

(1) _____ br
PARIS CAPITAL FRANCE
“Is Paris the capital city of France?”

(2) _____ bf
PARIS CAPITAL FRANCE
“Is Paris the capital city of France?”



PARIS CAPITAL FRANCE



PARIS CAPITAL FRANCE

In addition, other nonmanual features can be combined with eyebrow positions, such as head forward or upward position, and forward or backward body posture. LSC also seems to optionally add a question particle, namely the YES-NO Q-sign, at the very end of the utterance:

(3) _____ bf
IX-2 PARTY GO YES-NO
“Are you going to the party?”

This empirical picture draws a puzzle in LSC that falls far short from expectations and needs to be solved. According to Zeshan (2004), “it is common for the question particle to occur only in certain contexts that are often pragmatically constrained”, and, coincidentally, this applies to the YES-NO Q-sign. The question now is whether this statement can be extended to NMM combinations.

¹ This is supported by data from ASL (Wilbur & Patschke 1999; Neidle et al. 2000; Fischer 2006; Valli et al. 2011), AUSLAN (Johnston & Schembri 2007), BSL (Sutton-Spence & Woll 1999), FinSL (Savolainen 2006), HKSL (Tang 2006), HZJ (Šarac & Wilbur 2006), IPSL (Zeshan 2004), in ISL (Meir 2004), LIBRAS (de Quadros 2006), LSC (Quer et al. 2005), LSE (Herrero 2009), NS (Morgan 2006), NZSL (McKee 2006), ÖGS (Šarac et al. 2007), TÍD (Zeshan 2006) and VGT (Van Herreweghe & Vermeerbergen 2006).

Theoretical background. Sudo’s (2013) feature-based theory of biases, built up considering Buring and Gunlogson’s (2000) analysis, claims that PIs are associated with two major types of bias: one concerning the information available in the conversational context (evidential bias) and one concerning the speaker’s private beliefs or expectations (epistemic bias). Each bias can have positive or negative values and each resulting combination is performed by a different PI. Moreover, apart from being neither positive or negative, each bias can demand a specific value, gradually increasing the combinations that would end up triggering different PIs (positive PIs, outside-negation negative PIs, inside-negation negative PIs and a combination of these structures with question particles). Sudo’s (2013) theory successfully describes the inferences that affect the biases of at least the most basic kinds of PIs in English and Japanese.

Analysis. Given Sudo’s (2013) theory, I assume that NMMs, as well as the YES-NO Q-sign, can be a trigger for showing different kind of biases in LSC. The analysis relies on new elicited data obtained through different tasks that have been conscientiously designed to control the factors that can influence the consultants’ behavior. Slightly different contexts —regarding the knowledge of the participant about some fact and the evidence in the communicative context suggesting the negative or the positive answer— were proposed, and consultants were asked to perform a PI as an answer to the context. Here, I provide a table that shows how different NMM combinations are derived from the different variables (*positive, negative or required value*) applied to the two kinds of biases (*evidentiality and epistemicity*).

	Evidential Bias I’m watching it in-situ	(-) Incompatibility (+) Requirement	Epistemic Bias My ideas/beliefs
Eyebrow furrowing + Head and body forward position	What I’m watching (y): Requires contextual evidence for Answer “YES”	+ Positive	What I think (y): Expectation answer “YES” Positive
Eyebrow furrowing + Body backward position	What I’m watching (y): Requires contextual evidence for Answer “YES”	+ Positive	The opposite to what I think (n): Expectation answer “NO” Negative
Eyebrow furrowing + YES-NO Q-sign	No evidence (y/n): only felicitous in absence of contextual evidence for either answers	- Negative - Positive	Don’t expect a specific answer None
Eyebrow raise + Head and body forward position	The opposite to what I’m watching (n): Requires contextual evidence for “NO”	+ Negative	What I think (y): Expectation answer “YES” Positive
Eyebrow raise + Body backward position	No evidence (y/n): only felicitous in absence of contextual evidence for either answers	- Negative - Positive	The opposite to what I think (n): Expectation answer “NO” Negative

Figure (1). NMM combinations and the biases that triggers them.

Conclusions. This paper provides evidence from LSC showing that PIs can be performed with an unexpected combination of NMMs: eyebrow furrowing is also a common feature to signal this sentence type. Sudo’s (2013) novel feature-based description system can explain why LSC displays more than one combination of NMMs for PIs, and it predicts when to use some of the combinations. The same can be applied to the YES-NO Q-sign: far from being an optional question particle, it appears in very restricted contexts. Further data also points towards an analysis in which each combination of features in PIs conveys a different bias.

References. Buring & Gunlogson. 2000. Aren’t positive and negative questions the same? Unpublished manuscript, USCS. Cecchetto. 2012. “Sentences types”. In: Pfau, Steinbach & Bencie Woll (eds.), *Sign Language: an international handbook*, 292-315. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. Sudo. 2013. “Biased questions in English and Japanese”. In: Gutzmann & Gärtner (eds.). *Beyond expressives: Explorations in conventional non-truth-conditional meaning*, 275,296. Brill: Leiden. Zeshan. 2004. “Interrogative Constructions in Signed Languages: Cross-linguistic Perspectives”. In: *Language*, 80/1: 7-39. New York: Linguistic Society of America.