

# ICONIC VARIABLES AND NULL SUBJECTS IN GERMAN SIGN LANGUAGE (DGS)



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## BACKGROUND

**Null subjects (NSs)** in sign languages are common (see e.g. Lillo-Martin 1986 for American SL; Bos 1993, Oomen 2017 for SL of the Netherlands (NGT); Glück & Pfau 1998 for DGS).

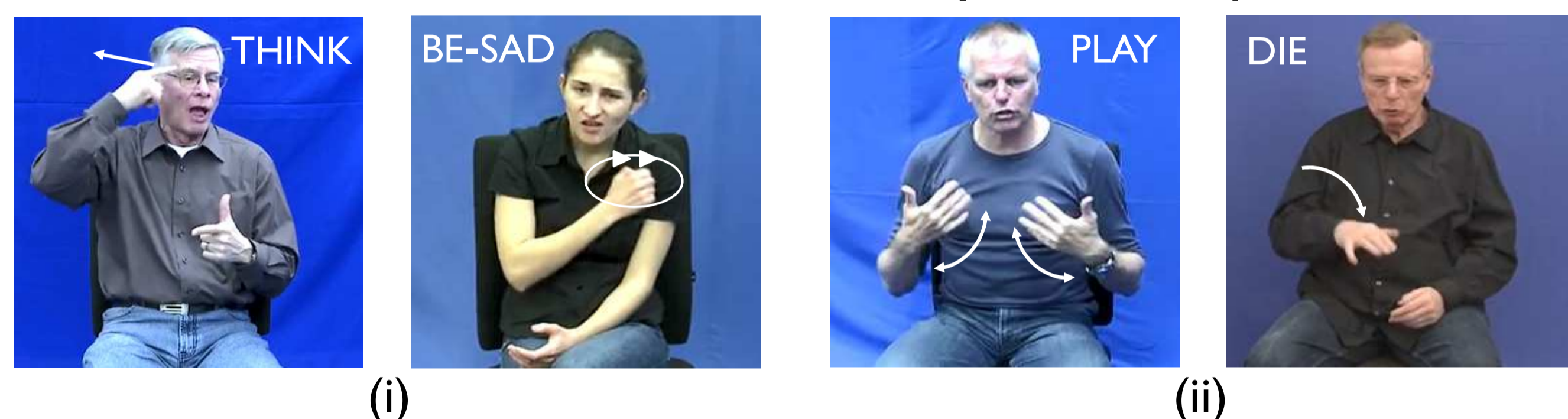
Oomen 2017 (NGT):

- **Psych-verbs:** NS = first person (but not third person) → iconically motivated place of articulation on the **body** (see also Meir et al. 2007): default **first person interpretation**

BE-ANGRY  
"I am angry"  
# "S/he is angry"

## HYPOTHESIS

In DGS, **body-anchored verbs** (i) – but not **neutral verbs** (ii) – limit subject drop to first person arguments as a result of an **iconic association** between the body and first person.



## DATA

DGS Corpus (Blanck et al. 2010): subset of 58 dialogues (~8h:30)

1. Identified **verb tokens** representing verb meanings from the 'ValPaL' list (Hartmann et al. 2013):
  - 48 body-anchored (BA) forms; 523 tokens
  - 24 neutral (Neut) forms; 164 tokens
2. Annotated information about the **subject**:
  - Person: 1st / 2nd (excluded) / 3rd
  - Overtness: overt / non-overt
  - Role shift in clause: no / yes
 → No restriction on third person NSs expected in clauses with role shift, due to shifted reference

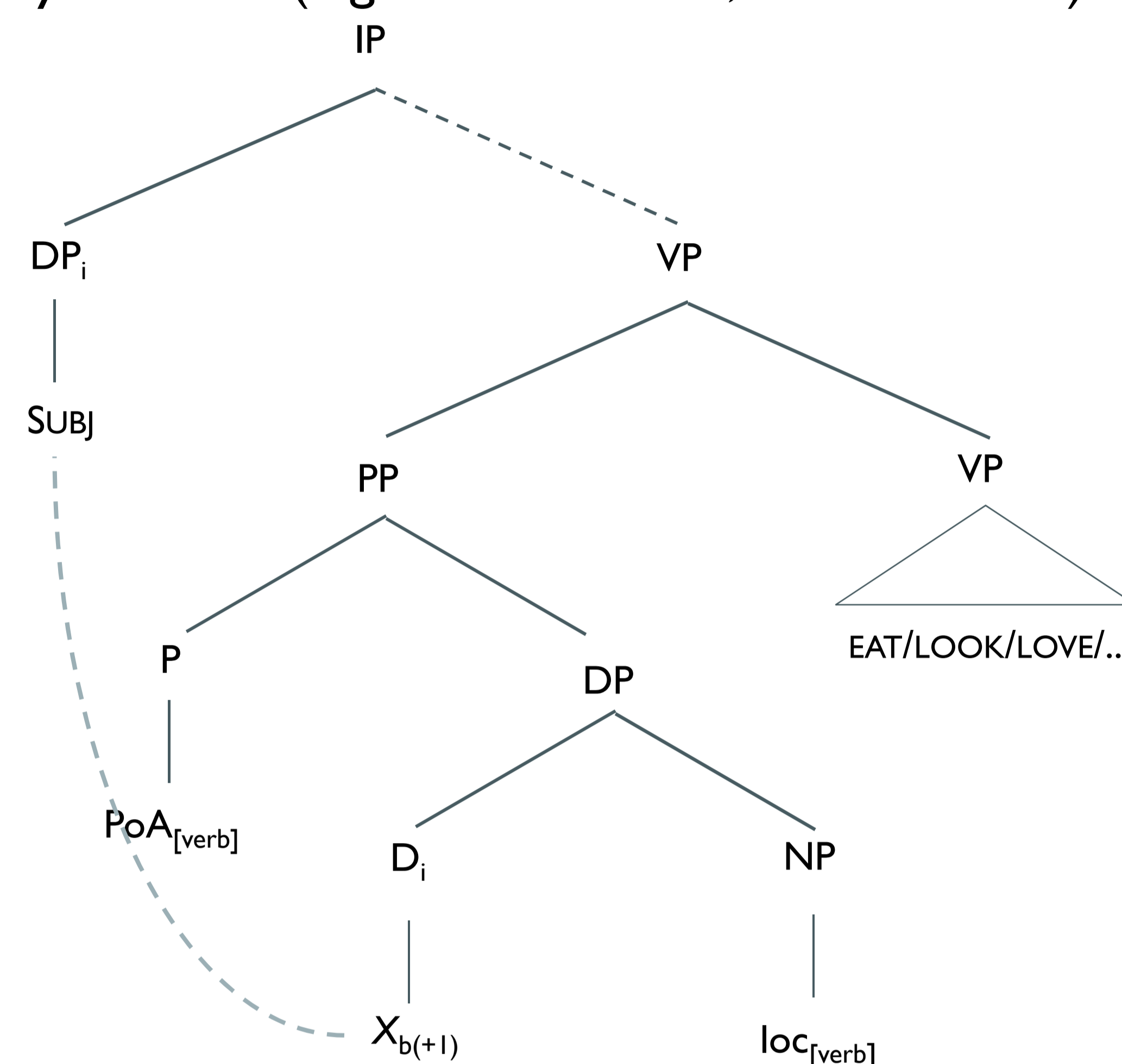
## RESULTS

EXAMPLES WITHOUT ROLE SHIFT			EXAMPLES WITH ROLE SHIFT		
BA (N=426)	Overt	Non-overt	BA (N=97)	Overt	Non-overt
1st	174 (41%)	101 (24%)	1st	41 (42%)	15 (15%)
3rd	141 (33%)	<b>10 (2%)</b>	3rd	16 (17%)	25 (26%)
Neut (N=151)	Overt	Non-overt	Neut (N=13)	Overt	Non-overt
1st	41 (27%)	30 (20%)	1st	5 (39%)	2 (15%)
3rd	60 (40%)	20 (13%)	3rd	2 (15%)	4 (31%)

- With the exception of just 10 examples, third person NSs do not occur with body-anchored verbs.

## ANALYSIS

- Body-anchored verbs introduce a **locative adjunct** with 3 components, whose meaning can be paraphrased as e.g. "[love] in the signer's body's heart":
  - Preposition: place of articulation<sub>[verb]</sub>
  - Possessive determiner: **variable x** (signer's body)
  - NP: metaphoric/physical location of the event denoted by the verb (e.g. *heart* for LOVE; *mouth* for EAT)



- The variable  $x$  is endowed with a feature  $b$ , specifying that  $x$  represents the body as the container of the state/action
- $x$  also receives a **first person** specification, *unless* the numeration includes a lexical item with a non-first person feature
- $x$  is **co-indexed** with the subject, yielding the pattern:
  - $x_{b(+1)} \rightarrow$  subject = INDEX<sub>1</sub> /  $\emptyset$
  - $x_b \rightarrow$  subject = INDEX<sub>3</sub> / NP; \* $\emptyset$
- Neutral verbs lack a locative adjunct

## CONCLUSION

- The DGS data provide support for the hypothesis that body-anchoring constrains the drop of non-first person subjects, suggesting iconic factors are at play
- This is captured in the analysis with a variable, co-indexed with the subject, that licenses a first person NS (only)

## ALTERNATIVE ANALYSIS

(IN COLLABORATION WITH VADIM KIMMELMAN)

Body-anchored verbs are in an **agreement** relation with the subject:

- Overt subjects have a **non-inherent** person feature and an interpretable speaker/non-speaker feature;
- Verbs come equipped with an **inherent** first person feature;
- Interpretable speaker-feature is introduced on the verb as a last resort in case of a NS, which does not have any features
- Analysis mirrors Matushansky's (2015) analysis of **gender mismatch** in Russian

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