Iconically motivated subject drop in German Sign Language (DGS).

**Keywords.** Null arguments, body-anchored verbs, German Sign Language, iconicity

**Background.** Almost all sign languages (SLs) that we know of include verbs that have agreement properties (*agreement verbs*) and verbs that do not (*plain verbs*), which appears to be a modality-specific peculiarity (Padden 1988; Meir et al. 2007). Many SLs also allow null arguments that can occur with either verb type (see e.g. Lillo-Martin 1986 for American SL; Bos 1993 for SL of the Netherlands). Previous studies have investigated licensing conditions for null arguments in different SLs, although they have mostly focused on clauses with agreement verbs (e.g. Bos 1993).

**Objective.** This study investigates the licensing conditions for subject drop in clauses with plain verbs in German SL (DGS). I show that a distinction needs to be made between plain verbs that are articulated on or near the body (*body-anchored verbs*) and plain verbs that are articulated in neutral space in front of the signer (*neutral verbs*), arguing that iconic properties of body-anchored verbs affect the licensing conditions for subject drop with this verb type.

**Methods.** In 8.5 hours of annotated naturalistic corpus data from the DGS Corpus (www.sign-lang.uni-hamburg.de/dgs-korpus), 794 examples with 40 body-anchored verbs (594 tokens) and 25 neutral verbs (200) were identified. The verbs represent verb meanings from a list specifically designed by typologists to be representative of the verbal lexicon (www.valpal.info). For every example, I added annotations to indicate grammatical person and overtenss of the subject.

**Results.** Analysis of the data reveals that non-overt subject arguments are commonly permitted in both clauses with neutral verbs and body-anchored verbs. However, only for the latter type, there seems to be a restriction related to grammatical person of the subject. In clauses with neutral verbs, a null argument occurs in 43% of the examples with a first person subject, and in 25% of the examples with a non-first person subject. A comparable 36% of sentences with a body-anchored verb and a first person subject referent contain a non-overt subject, while crucially, only 7% of sentences with a non-first person referent do (the exceptions will be discussed in the presentation).

**Analysis.** Signers of DGS thus seem to disfavour a non-overt, non-first person subject in sentences with a body-anchored verb. Since (a) body-anchored verbs such as FEAR, EAT, or THINK iconically refer to a mental or physical location in or on the body by being articulated on the body (Meir et al. 2007), and (b) the signer's body is also the locus for first person pronouns, I argue that the articulation of a body-anchored verb automatically leads to a default first person interpretation of a null subject. Formally, I propose that body-anchored verbs introduce a variable that enters into a co-indexing relation with the subject. This variable receives a featural specification for first person when there is a lexical item in the numeration with (a) a first person feature, or (b) no person feature at all. When there is a lexical item with a non-first person feature, the variable is not specified for person. (In line with Chomsky 1995, many EPP analyses also rely on the assumption that elements can be affected by other elements in the numeration). With this analysis, I align myself with recent efforts to reconcile formalist and iconic views on sign language structure (e.g. Schlenker et al. 2013; Kuhn & Aristodemo 2015). Future research is necessary to determine whether there are (different) licensing conditions for neutral verbs in DGS.