

## THE PRAGMATICS OF PERSON AND IMPERATIVES IN SIGN LANGUAGE OF THE NETHERLANDS<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

We present new evidence against a grammatical distinction between second and third person in Sign Language of The Netherlands (NGT). More precisely, we show how pushing this distinction into the domain of pragmatics helps account for an otherwise puzzling fact about the NGT imperative: not only is it used to command your addressee, it can also express ‘non-addressee-oriented commands’.

**Keywords:** sign language; pragmatics; imperatives; pointing; person

### **1. Introduction**

Greenberg’s (1963: 96) Universal 42 reads: “All languages have pronominal categories involving at least three persons and two numbers”. Restricting ourselves to the singular, we take this to mean that all languages have at least the following three lexical items: one dedicated to referring to the speaker of the utterance (the “first” person), one dedicated to referring to the addressee (second person), and one dedicated to referring to entities that are neither speaker nor addressee (third person). For example, English has *I* for first person, *you* for second, and *he*, *she*, and *it* for third.

But what about signed languages? The closest equivalents of person pronouns are pointings, to the signer (first person), to the addressee (second person), or to (virtual representations of) other individuals (third person). Since similar pointings co-occur with spoken languages, there is considerable debate about the status of pointing in signed

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languages: does pointing constitute a genuine grammatical pronoun system in sign language? If so, how many grammatical persons are there? Three, two, one, infinitely many? Or is pointing 'merely' a matter of gesture and pragmatics?

In this paper we want to provide a new argument against a grammatical distinction between second and third person in signed languages. In order to make this point, we present new data on imperatives in Sign Language of the Netherlands (henceforth NGT – 'Nederlandse GebarenTaal'). We focus on imperatives because, in spoken languages, these appear to be grammatically restricted to the second person – a restriction that cannot be maintained for signed languages if they really don't have a second person category. We will show, first, that the notion of a 'non-addressee-oriented command' does make sense, and, second, that in NGT, unlike e.g. spoken Dutch or English, this type of speech act is marked in exactly the same way as regular addressee-oriented commands, i.e. as an imperative.

In Section 2, we sketch our position in the ongoing debate about person distinctions in signed languages. In Section 3 we make sense of the notion of non-addressee-oriented imperatives. Because there is surprisingly little research on the way imperatives are marked in NGT or other signed languages, we identify a number of markers of this speech act in Section 4. With all this background in place, we present the new data on non-addressee-oriented imperatives in Section 5, relating our findings to the status of person in NGT. In Section 6, finally, we conclude that NGT imperatives indeed support the claim that there is no distinction between second and third person in sign language.

## **2. Person in signed language**

### **2.1 The grammatical view of person in sign languages**

For a long time, signed language was considered a type of pantomime rather than a real language. But since sign language research in the 60's and 70's revealed full-fledged grammars and a well-established lexicons, sign languages are now readily accepted as natural, and often official, languages. However, the relation between the use of co-speech gestures and sign language signs is not yet completely clear. Some scholars still argue for a strong influence of co-speech gesture on the sign system. Others, intent on stressing the independence and equivalency of signed and spoken languages, seek to incorporate these apparent gestures into the grammar.

One of the most prominent and fundamental issues on which sign language researchers tend to disagree is that of pronominal pointing signs. The form and function of these pointing signs in sign languages resemble pointings that co-occur with spoken language. That is, the directionality of a pointing sign/gesture depends on the physical location of the referent in the space in front of the speaker's/signer's body. So, if we want to literally analyze pointing as pronouns, we would be forced to accept an infinite number of pronouns into the sign language grammar, one for each location that a signer can point to.

Alternatively, we might hold that there is no grammatical difference in referring to different referents at all. Liddell (2000) argues for such an analysis of pronominal

pointing signs. On this view there are no person distinctions in sign language grammar. Only a pointing's hand shape belongs to the grammar, its directionality is completely gestural.

Still, there is an apparent asymmetry between the different pointings. Reference to the addressee and other participants is performed in the signing space in front of the signer's body, but reference to the signer is always done by pointing towards the signer's body. Moreover, the place on the body that the self-pointing is directed at, seems to be determined by linguistic convention: in most sign languages, it's the chest, but in Japanese Sign Language, it may be the nose (McBurney 2002). In other words, first person reference can be distinguished from other pointing signs, in being expressed with a default, non-context-dependent location. This and other arguments<sup>2</sup> lead Meier (1990) to posit a grammatical distinction between first and non-first.

If the distinction between first and non-first person were the only distinction in the grammar of signed languages, we would have counterexamples to Greenberg's Universal 42. However, it has been suggested that eye-gaze can fill in the missing distinction between second and third person. Although the grammatical status of eye gaze in sign language is as controversial as the status of pronominal pointing signs, Berenz (2002) and Alibašić Ciciliani and Wilbur (2006) maintain that it is the crucial feature for distinguishing reference to the addressee from reference to others. More specifically, in the so-called body coordinates model, alignment of eye gaze and hand orientation indicates second person, while misalignment, i.e. hand pointing somewhere different from the direction of eye gaze, indicates third person. In the current paper we are concerned primarily with the status of this second distinction, between second and third person.

## 2.2 A pragmatic view of person in signed language

The alignment facts just described may well be explained in terms of a much more general conversational maxim: always look at the person you are addressing. The underlying idea is that to facilitate successful communication you should keep track of who you're talking/signing to, in order to see if they show signs of misunderstanding, or, indeed, if they are listening at all. Thus, the supposedly grammatical alignment facts can be straightforwardly derived and explained pragmatically, i.e. as behavior in accordance with Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle. Consequently, the same Gricean reasoning applies to spoken as to signed communication, but clearly visual contact is somewhat more important when the speaker is deaf, because unlike a hearing speaker, she cannot fall back on voiced objections or interruptions from her addressee.

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<sup>2</sup> Another (less convincing) argument involves role-play, a frequently used strategy in sign language whereby the signer 'becomes' another character, by breaking eye contact with his addressee, turning his head and body and/or mimicking facial expressions of that other individual. During role-play a signer can point at his chest, not to refer to himself, but to the signer of the reported discourse. The conclusion is that pointing to the chest cannot be a simple pointing gesture because then it would always just indicate self-reference.

Now, as a pragmatic principle, it should be possible to overrule this maxim in exceptional circumstances. To test this prediction, we presented our NGT informants with the following scenario:

- (1) A signer working at her computer is interrupted by her officemate. Unwilling to take her eyes off her screen she turns her body slightly to where she expects her colleague can see her hands and signs:

*IXsig* *BEZIG* *IXadd* *ZIEN* *TOCH*

I busy you see right

‘Can’t you see I’m busy?’



**Figure 1: Unaligned IXadd**

In NGT glosses, capitals indicate signs. IX represents an index sign directed to a certain location in the signing space. Traditionally, indexes directed to the signer are glossed as IX1 and indexes directed to the addressee as IX2. However, since this suggests the Greenberg-style 1-2-3 person system that we are arguing against, we use the more neutral IXsig to indicate an index directed to the signer and IXadd to indicate an index directed to the addressee.

Returning to the example, if NGT incorporated the alignment of hand and eye in the grammar of pronominal pointing to the addressee, this would be ungrammatical. However, our informants readily accepted this form of communication. Apparently, as in spoken language, one need not always look at one's addressee, the conversational maxim alluded to above is cancelable, under contextual pressure. It follows that alignment is not a matter of sign language grammar, but of general pragmatics (cf. also Meier 1990, Rutkowski 2010).

Summing up: there is an ongoing debate about the status of person and pointing in sign language. Researchers have proposed different ways of analyzing the sign language equivalents of grammatical person distinctions. The key positions are defended by (i) Liddell (2003), who argues that there are no grammatical person distinctions; (ii) Meier (1990), who distinguishes only first and non-first; and (iii) Berenz (2002), who claims a full paradigm, matching that of spoken languages. In this paper we remain agnostic with respect to the first vs. non-first distinction, but find the arguments for distinguishing

second and third person unconvincing. The crucial hand-eye alignment observation is better analyzed as a general pragmatic principle than as a grammatical feature.

In the following we show how the behavior of imperatives in NGT is fully in line with the idea that the grammar does not distinguish between addressees and non-addressees. Specifically, insofar as non-addressee-oriented commands make sense pragmatically, they look like regular addressee-oriented imperatives in NGT.

### 3. Imperatives in spoken language

Giving up the second versus third person distinction makes interesting predictions with respect to typically addressee-oriented phenomena, like imperatives. If there is no grammatical distinction between second and third person, then the imperative cannot be *grammatically* restricted to the second person, as it appears to be in many spoken languages.

We have to be careful, though, because, as we saw with alignment above, we might still encounter a *pragmatic* restriction. That is, it will be hard to argue against a grammatical restriction to the second person, if the speech acts expressed by imperatives are semantically/pragmatically tied to addressee-oriented contexts. Therefore, in this section we set out to show in what sense we can sensibly speak of non-addressee-oriented imperatives at all. In the end, the relative rarity/markedness of non-addressee-oriented command situations does lead our NGT informants to add various markers to bring out the intended readings. Crucially though, the various differences we find do not show a change of mood, but rather serve to raise the intended non-present third person to maximum salience.

#### 3.1 Imperatives as form–function pairs

First of all we need to settle on a definition of the term *imperative* itself. Following Schwager (2005) and Sadock and Zwicky (1985), we individuate imperatives in terms of both form and function. In other words, we do not define imperatives purely morphosyntactically, as e.g. a certain verbal inflection in combination with subject deletion; nor purely functionally, as e.g. an expression of the speech act of commanding. Instead we will talk about imperatives as a *clause type*, a class of sentence forms paired with a prototypical pragmatic function.

As a first illustration of the notion of a clause type, consider the declarative. The declarative clause type consists of the class of declarative sentences paired with the speech act of assertion. The first component is individuated in terms of features like mood and word order; the second in terms of semantics and pragmatics, in this case as expressing a proposition, a description of what the world is like. Likewise, the imperative clause type consists of a certain class of sentences (in English tentatively characterizable by, say, subject deletion and a root form of the verb), paired with the speech act of commanding, i.e. expressing what altered state of the world the speaker wants her addressee to bring about.

This means that not every sentence that is interpreted as a command or request is automatically an imperative, nor is every imperatival form necessarily interpretable as a command. We will not attempt a definitive description of either the syntactic or the semantic/pragmatic side of the imperative clause type, but we take it that, for example, (2a) belongs to the declarative clause type, but expresses a command (similar in meaning to the imperative *Clean up this mess right now!*), while (2b) contains the imperatival form *take the A train* but apparently without commanding or requesting anything.<sup>3</sup> On our definition, neither counts as an imperative.

- (2) a. *You will clean up this mess right now!*  
 b. *If you want to get to Harlem, take the A train*

Since our current interest is in person distinctions, the question arises whether an apparent restriction to the second person can reasonably be counted as part of the definition of the form component of the imperative. Some languages do indeed seem to extend the verbal morphology typically associated with commands to other persons. Evenki for example has an imperative paradigm for every person-number combination, see Table 1, from Nedjalkov (1997: 262).<sup>4</sup>

|               | Singular                              | Plural                                                                                |
|---------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| First person  | <i>baka-hta</i><br>'let me find'      | <i>baka-hta-vu</i> / <i>baka-gat</i><br>'let us (excl.) find' / 'let us (incl.) find' |
| Second person | <i>baka-kal</i><br>'find!'            | <i>baka-kallu</i><br>'(you pl.) find!'                                                |
| Third person  | <i>baka-gin</i><br>'let him/her find' | <i>baka-ktyn</i><br>'let them find'                                                   |

**Table 1: Evenki imperative paradigm**

As a matter of fact, the case of Evenki is not uncommon. Van der Auwera et al.'s (2005) cross-linguistic survey of imperative paradigms shows that of 375 languages investigated, 154 languages extended their morphological imperative to cover both third-person and inclusive hortative speech acts.<sup>5</sup> On a purely formal definition we would immediately conclude that all of these have first and third person imperatives. But on our clause-type definition the evidence is inconclusive until we consider also the interpretations.

<sup>3</sup> Schwager's proposed semantics for imperatives actually does extend to this and some other cases, so if her semantics is on the right track, we should perhaps classify this as a true imperative after all.

<sup>4</sup> This is the classical way of presenting a person paradigm; some recent analyses have the inclusive as a separate fourth person (Bobaljik 2008; Cysouw 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Van der Auwera et al. counted 201 'mixed' paradigms, i.e. languages that have less than a full paradigm, but more than just a second person singular form. This number thus includes languages with a plural imperative, but possibly also first or third person forms.

Nedjalkov (1997) glosses the meanings of non-second person forms with the auxiliary *let*. In English, constructions like *let me* or *let's* are usually called *hortative* rather than imperative, see van der Auwera et al. (2004, 2005). Based on the typological data, it seems that imperatives and hortatives must be conceptually related, and it may be worthwhile to explore a single uniform semantics of the two speech acts, which we might then take together under the header of “directive” or “intentional” speech acts. But for now, we stick with the narrow semantic characterization of commands as speech acts expressing that the speaker wants the imperative subject to bring about a certain altered state of affairs. In the remainder of this section our goal is to show that the *let* construction can in fact express commands in our strict semantic sense, and, moreover, that the speech acts so expressed amount to non-addressee-oriented commands. The insights gained will be applied to NGT in Section 5. Because we lack access to the somewhat subtle judgments involved for Evenki and other languages with full imperative paradigms, we will focus on *let* constructions in English and Dutch.

Summing up: based on pragmatic/semantic considerations, we distinguish the hortative clause-type from the imperative. For this reason, it *might* well be the case that Evenki expresses third person commands (or rather, non-addressee-oriented commands, as described in the next section) as imperatives, but glosses such as those in Table 1 simply don't allow us to conclude this. The aim of this paper is to show that in NGT non-addressee-oriented commands are included in the imperative paradigm, as predicted by the hypothesized absence of a grammatical distinction between second and third person.

### 3.2 Non-addressee-oriented commands?

At first sight it may not look like *let me* or *let him* forms involve genuine commands directed to the self or to a third person. But, as Mastop (2005) points out, there is an important ambiguity hidden in these constructions:

- [(3)] a. *Let me get my coat and I'll join you.*  
 b. *Let me know if you decide to join me.*

The difference between [(3a)] and [(3b)] (in their usual contexts) is that in the first case the speaker expresses an intention to perform some action, whereas in the second case the speaker asks the hearer to perform some action. (Mastop 2005: 86)

In other words, *let me* can be either an addressee-oriented imperative (“you must let me!”) or a different “intentional” speech act ( $\approx$  “I’m telling you what I intend to do”). In the plural, the ambiguity can be resolved in English with the contrast between *let's* (first person hortative/intention-announcement) and *let us* (second person directed command). Third person *let him/let them* exhibits a similar kind of ambiguity as first person. In (4a) we naturally interpret *let him* as a second person imperative: you must let him go. The speech act expressed by (4b) on the other hand can also be taken as directed toward the non-present third person *him*, not requesting anything from the current addressee.

- (4) a. *Let him go, you bullies!*  
 b. *Let him figure it out for himself.*

In the latter case the speaker does not intend for her addressee to ensure that the third person solves the issue; the addressee is merely informed of the imperative force directed at the non-present third person. To clarify this important distinction let's add some context:

- (5) [Hank lost all his money playing poker. He has fallen in debt. His ex-wife, Mary is discussing this with her boyfriend Jack. Jack: "Well, I never met the guy, but he's your ex, can't you lend him some money to pay off his debts?" Mary responds:]  
*No way! Let him figure it out for himself!*

In this context, the addressee, Jack, does not know the third person, Hank. Hence, the reading where the command is directed at Jack is unlikely. The remaining interpretation is still a kind of command, but targeted at the non-present Hank, *he* must figure it out for himself.

To substantiate the claim that there really are two distinct readings, Mastop argues that the Dutch equivalent of *let him* overtly marks this distinction between addressee- and other-directed commands by means of case. With a nominative third person pronoun, *laat hij* 'let he', the sentence only has the third person command reading.

- (6) *Laat hij het zelf oplossen!*  
 let he it self solve  
 'Let him solve it himself'

A sentence like (6) fits the context sketched in (5) above, but it does not fit in a context like (7a) where a command is clearly being directed toward the current addressee:

- (7) [Jack tells Mary that, if she won't, he will find Hank and help him pay his debts. Mary objects:]  
*No no no! Don't you go and give him money! I forbid you! For his own sake let him figure it out for himself!*  
 a. ...*laat hem het zelf oplossen!*  
 b. ?...*laat hij het zelf oplossen!*

In the earlier context, (5), both case forms are fine, but in (7a-b), the nominative is decidedly worse than the accusative. The explanation is that the nominative form grammaticalizes the third person directed "deferred command", while the unmarked accusative form can be used, in both Dutch and English, for both the second and third person.

But given our semantic definition of commanding, does this "third person imperative" reading really express a command, rather than, say, a complaint? To answer this question, note first that this reading only works when the third person is not around. Intuitively, this is because otherwise a second person imperative would be far more effective. Now, we propose to analyze the third person imperative reading as follows. The combination of the standard command semantics (speaker wants subject to bring about a change) and the fact that the subject is not present naturally leads to a weakening of the performative force associated with regular imperatives: the speaker wants subject



to bring about the change but in the current context this wish cannot be brought much closer to fulfillment because subject is not around to hear the command. For the addressee, the net effect of interpreting the speaker's futile command is a kind of complaint about the non-present third person subject. Naturally, such third person imperative interpretations have a severely restricted domain of application. We must keep this in mind when looking for equivalents in NGT in the next section.

#### 4. Imperatives in NGT

Before we can delve into our findings regarding third person imperatives in NGT we must find out what imperatives even look like in NGT. Given the ubiquity of imperatives in everyday communication, it is surprising how little research has been reported about the expression of commands in signed languages of the world. Textbooks offer only brief remarks, if that:

In ASL the [imperative] subject is often deleted or occurs after the verb [...] ASL imperatives also have particular nonmanual signals [...] possibly frowning. (Valli and Lucas 2001 [1992]: 131)

There is some relevant literature about the expression of politeness in sign language. For instance, Hoza (2007) and Roush (2011) address, among other things, politeness forms for requesting, a speech act that typically falls under our notion of an imperative. In our own data set we observe some additional ways in which imperatives can be marked, such as speed of signing, wrinkled nose and certain particles. To get an idea of the various types of marking we presented four deaf L1 signers of NGT with a written list of typical examples of imperatives, each preceded by a description of a context, ranging from very polite requests to commands proper. Example (8), pictured in Figure 2, illustrates such a context followed by an imperative. In the gloss, 'pu' stands for a 'palm up sign', a sign, or perhaps better: gesture, made with an open hand with the palm up. Gestures/signs like *pu* resemble the corresponding co-speech gestures, and sometimes function like discourse particles. In any case, even if we gloss them, they are not (easily) translatable.

- (8) [You see your daughter accidentally breaking a vase. You:]  
*Watch out!*  
 WATCH pu



**Figure 2: Watch out!**

As far as we can tell from the translations we collected, imperatives in NGT can be marked in different ways. In Table 2 we've classified a number of these features. Together, they constitute a cluster of syntactic and pragmatic, manual and non-manual clues that indicate, or at least co-occur with, imperative mood. None of them is obligatory for marking an imperative, but we hypothesize that at least one, and probably more, should be present in order for the utterance to count as imperative. Below, we'll discuss each individual feature in some detail.

|                       |                                                |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Syntax                | subject omission                               |
| Emphasis              | speed; heavy, accentuated signing              |
| Non-manual marking    | frowning; squint; wrinkled nose; inclined head |
| Particle              | COME-ON; GO-AHEAD; GO-ON                       |
| Explicit performative | REQUEST                                        |

**Table 2: Imperative marking in NGT**

In most of the signed imperatives the subject was omitted. That is, in these cases we did not observe any manual pointing at the addressee. Subject omission – the phenomenon referred to in the quote above as “deletion” – is a syntactic phenomenon that is actually common for imperatives cross-linguistically (Xrakovskij 2001). However, in some of the imperatives an index-like sign occurred, even when the written target in its context was a clear subjectless imperative. A case in point is (9). Recall that IXadd indicates an index sign directed to the addressee. ‘neg’ indicates a non-manual negation (shaking the head).

- (9) [Your wife is leaving for work. Before she opens the door, she turns her head and says:]  
*Don't forget to walk the dog!*  
*neg IXadd FORGET DOG WALK*

We might still hope that subject omission qualifies as a *sufficient* condition for marking imperatives. Note however that so-called agreement verbs in sign languages often leave out overt pronominal subjects, as they incorporate identifications of subject and/or objects in the signing of the verb itself. To illustrate the notion of an agreement verb, consider the verb GIVE in (10).

- (10) *BOY IXa GIRL IXb PRESENT aGIVEb*  
 ‘the boy gives the girl a present’

Typically, the signer first sets up some discourse referents in the signing space in front of her. In (10), *a* is a location in signing space representing the boy and *b* the girl. The sign GIVE then ‘moves’ from the location of the giver to the location of the receiver. When the discourse referents are already well established in previous discourse, or when the referents are given in the external context (e.g. signers and addressees), there is no setting up phase, and hence no overt pronouns at all. In an apparent command like (11) it is therefore unclear whether the subject and object pronouns are omitted on account of the imperative mood, or on account of the incorporation into the agreement verb:

- (11) [A teacher to his students:]  
*Next week, hand in the assignments!*  
*NEXT CLASS REQUEST ASSIGNMENT addGIVEsig*

In sum, subject omission may be helpful in deciding whether a clause is imperative, but (9) shows that it is not a necessary requirement, and (10) shows that with agreement verbs it is not sufficient either.

Beside subject deletion, we found several non-manual signals for commanding. It is unclear whether things like accentuated signing or frowning (figure 3) are part of the grammar of imperatives, or perhaps more generally gestural support of the speech act of commanding across modalities. We leave these matters for another occasion. Despite the fact that the exact status of these markings (grammar or gesture) remains unresolved, we will use their presence as support for deciding whether a signed utterance could be an imperative or not.



Figure 3: Frowning

Finally, imperatives often come embellished with certain gestures/signed particles, such as COME ON in (12).

- (12) [A girl to a boy who threatens to throw a giant water balloon:]  
*Throw it! I dare you!*  
*IXadd THROW SUPPOSE IXadd DARE THROW COME-ON*



**Figure 4: COME-ON**

We've glossed these particles as signs, e.g. COME-ON, GO-AHEAD and GO-ON, but note that they bear a striking resemblance to the familiar hand gestures accompanying spoken commands. Presumably, Hoza's (2007) politeness markers WELL (p.79) and HANDWAVE (p.101) could be grouped under this header as well. In any case, the presence of this type of marking in an utterance provides evidence that we're dealing with a command, and hence may be counted among the complex markings of the imperative in NGT.

A special case is the REQUEST sign that sometimes precedes a command, as in (11), illustrated in Figure 5 (cf. also Hoza 2007:99).



**Figure 5: REQUEST**

In the list in Table 2 above we set it apart as an explicit performative, meaning that we could gloss its occurrence in a command like (11) as *I request that you hand in the assignments*. If it really functions in this way, as a declarative first person main verb, we should not call such examples imperatives. An alternative explanation of the REQUEST sign is that in utterances like (11) it functions more as a discourse particle than as a verb that takes a clausal complement. In that case it would perhaps be more appropriately glossed PLEASE. This gloss (cf. Hoza 2007:99) is supported by the fact that, in the context surrounding this example and others that were signed with this marker, it seems plausible that its pragmatic function is that of signaling a more polite kind of command.

Explicit forms of the modal verb MUST, as in (13), we do not consider as markings of imperative mood.

- (13) [A husband and wife are fighting over cleaning the kitchen. The husband wants his wife to clean it first. The wife responds with:]

*You have to clean the kitchen first!*

*IXadd MUST FIRST KITCHEN CLEAN IXadd*

In this we follow standard practice for spoken language. Utterances expressing obligations with overt deontic ‘must’/ ‘have to’ are simply declaratives, expressing modalized assertions. Semantically, these modalized assertions have truth values, but imperatives do not. Even though their pragmatic functions in many contexts would be equivalent, they are formally distinct and hence, arguably, belong to distinct clause types. The case is parallel to the declarative (2a) (*You will clean up this mess right now*) that is likewise used to express a command, as discussed in Section 3.1.

In none of the examples all of the markings of Table 2 occurred. Future research will have to uncover which are grammatical, and which are gestural clues, and in what contexts signers choose which ones. For now, all we know is that the written sentences that we asked our informants to translate were real imperatives in Dutch, both

semantically and morphologically. So, at least we've identified a list of heuristics that can help us decide whether a signed utterance is an imperative. In other words, any combination of the characteristics listed in Table 2 provides strong evidence that we're dealing with an NGT imperative.

## 5. Non-addressee-oriented imperatives in NGT

Without a grammatical distinction between second and third person in sign language, we expect to find the same imperative morphology for commands directed toward addressees and non-addressees. In this section we present and discuss our data that shows that this prediction is borne out.

To prove the existence of non-addressee-oriented imperatives in NGT we presented our bilingual informants with a context like (14), introducing a Dutch "let he" form, and asked them to sign the story in their own words. We then presented a follow-up to the story that leads up to a second person imperative, with the same content, and asked them to sign that as well. Here is one of these extended contexts.

- (14) a. [Pete runs into John and says: "Hey, have you heard? Frank quit his job. He wants to make a trip around the world on a unicycle!" John sighs and says:]  
*'That's crazy, let him act normal!'*
- b. [Two days later, John meets Frank himself. Full of enthusiasm, Frank starts telling how he is planning to make a trip around the world. John interrupts him and says: "Yeah, I heard all about that.."]  
*'That's crazy, act normal!'*

The first half, (14a), forces the italicized utterance to express, what we argued to be, a third person command. The continuation in (14b) ends with a regular imperative. The second part was added as a control, to filter out idiosyncratic differences, ambiguities and other difficulties in marking imperative mood. Our prediction, concretely, is that signers will not use distinctive imperative marking for the second half only, as do English and Dutch. Note that, because of the controls, a precise specification of the morphology of the NGT imperative would be helpful, but not strictly necessary to make this point: the crucial observation is that there is no *significant difference* in marking in (14a) and (14b).

We presented four contexts to our informants. Each context follows the pattern of (14a-b): the first part sets up for a third person imperative, expressed with the Dutch *let he* construction; the continuation sets up the same imperative but with the intended addressee present. The complexity of the contexts (remembering who said or did what to whom), in combination with the request to re-tell the story "in your own words", led to a considerable amount of noise, i.e. creative deviations from the construction we were after, and seemingly inessential differences between the (a) and (b) parts that we could not relate to the marking of imperatives or person. Nonetheless, a number of responses clearly confirmed our hypothesis that there is a genuine non-addressee-oriented imperative construction in NGT.

The most convincing would be a case where the imperative is very clearly marked, say by subject omission, and where this marking is used in both the second and third person directed commands. Note that if the signer goes with subject omission (with a non-agreement verb), there may be no room to indicate who is the subject of the command, and hence no distinction at all between the translations of the (a) and (b) part. We found this pattern most clearly instantiated in one signer's version of the "unicycle" example we saw in (14a-b) (Recall that 'pu' stands for 'palm up', a pragmatic discourse particle sign/gesture discussed above in connection with example (8)):

- (15) a. *That's crazy, let him act normal!*  
CRAZY pu NORMAL DO pu  
b. *That's crazy, act normal!*  
CRAZY pu NORMAL DO pu<sup>6</sup>

In other examples, subjects were not fully or not consistently omitted and we can see differences between the (a) and (b) parts. These differences all involve how explicitly the imperative subject is being referred to.

In 16 we represent an example with an agreement verb. In this example, the imperative is marked mainly by an emphatic, accelerated signing. First we see the context, leading up to the relevant elicitation item, given in regular type. The gloss of the of the signer's version is in italics. IXa is an index sign referring to a point *a* in the signing space. This point corresponds neither to the addressee nor the speaker, but rather to the guy Kim met according to the story. As discussed in section 4, GIVE is an agreement verb. The person arguments of the verb SAY are relegated to the auxiliary OP.

- (16) a. [Kim is talking to her friend Ruby. Kim met a guy that she went out on a date with. The next day, he doesn't call her back. Ruby doesn't know the guy, but she tries to reassure Kim. She tells her maybe he just hasn't had a chance to call yet, and he probably feels bad about it. Kim rejects the consolation, saying, "Whatever! Let him come and apologize, with flowers!"]  
*whatever IXa FIRST aGIVEsig SORRY SAY aOPsig# IXa*  
*'Whatever! Let he first give flowers and apologize'*  
b. [Two days later, Kim runs into the guy at school. He asks, "How are you doing?", and Kim replies, "Whatever! First, apologize to me, with flowers!"]  
*whatever FIRST SORRY SAY addOPsig addGIVEsig*  
*'Whatever! First apologize and give me flowers'*

Apart from the difference in word order, the thing to note here is that the signer uses index signs (IXa) in the non-addressee-oriented command (16a) but not in the addressee-oriented version (16b). This lack of index signs in (16b) could be construed as a case of subject omission, and hence as an indication that perhaps (16b) is a more genuine

<sup>6</sup> Even though in both (14a) and (14b) the signer used palm up signs/gestures, it should be noted that the 'pu' in a is performed one-handed while in b it is two-handed. Moreover, the 'pu' in a seems to contain more directionality (to the non-addressee) than the 'pu' in b.

imperative than (16a). However, as discussed in section 4, the agreement verbs here don't really need overt indices anyway, since agreement is already expressed clearly in both examples. The use of pointing signs in (16a) therefore merely *emphasizes* agreement, but do not establish it.

In our data, there are a number of cases that follow this general pattern of placing more emphasis on the person at whom the command was directed in the non-addressee-oriented variant than in the addressee version. This pattern requires an explanation, because, as in (16), it could be interpreted as losing part of the evidence for the imperative status of such a non-addressee example. Now, in our examples, there are many independent reasons why the subject would be stressed more in the non-addressee case. The present addressee is unique, and highly salient (through eye fixation, for one thing), and thus need not be raised to salience with a manual pointing. The non-present individuals represented abstractly in the signing space are many and necessarily less salient. An entirely non-directional command, even in the context sketched by the story, may be strictly speaking grammatical (as evidenced by (15)), but it will often lead to ambiguity about who is being targeted. Grice's (1975) Manner Maxim "Avoid Ambiguity" alone would explain the tendency to emphasize the imperative subject (perhaps better analyzed as a vocative and/or "reference emphasize") more in non-addressee-oriented examples than in addressee-oriented ones. The existence of examples like (15), showing consistent subject omission, alongside these mixed cases, supports such a pragmatic explanation of the subtle differences in our data.

As far as we can tell on the basis of our list of clues in Table 2, the (a)–(b) differences never involved a clear change in clause type, e.g. from imperative in the second person to overtly modalized declarative in the third person, as hypothesized. Note that the inputs in Dutch *did* involve such a grammatical distinction, *Let he act normal* vs. *Act normal!*, and, moreover, NGT does have deontic modals to express command-like assertions, as shown in (13).

## 6. Conclusion

Let's take a step back and compare our NGT findings with the spoken languages discussed earlier. On the one hand, some spoken languages (Evenki) have imperative-like forms inflected for third person, but it's not clear if the meanings conform to the semantics of commanding. On the other hand, some other languages (Dutch) have auxiliary forms that can express something like a third person directed command, but now the forms are distinct from the regular imperative morphology.

What we have shown is that the NGT imperative fills the gap in between: (i) its imperative morphology does not change when we switch from addressee to third person, and (ii), when directed to a third person, it can indeed have the third person command reading identified in section 3. So, as predicted by a uniform treatment of addressees and others in the sign language grammar, imperatives are not restricted to targeting addressees. In NGT, non-addressee-oriented imperatives exist and look exactly like regular imperatives. This imperative pattern remains unexplained on a Berenz-style analysis of sign language as grammaticalizing all three persons of spoken languages. Thus, we take our findings as new evidence against this grammatical approach to person



reference, and in favor of a gestural/pragmatic explanation of the differences between reference to an addressee and to a third person.

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