Contrastive focus marking and non-manual cues in French and LSFB (French Belgian Sign Language): A comparative study

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Research has demonstrated that the information status of referents, the type of information unit, and the way in which both are formally encoded are governed by analogous prosodic principles across spoken (SpLs) and signed languages (SLs) (Kimmelman & Pfau 2021). However, a direct comparative examination of the role of prosody in SpLs and SLs remains absent. Moreover, comparisons between SpLs and SLs have frequently overlooked the role of gestures in SpLs despite their acknowledged correlations with prosody and information structure (IS).

The present study seeks to undertake a comparison of French and LSFB by focusing on the prosodic marking of an information unit named 'contrastive focus' (CF). In particular, the research aims to answer the following questions: How is CF prosodically encoded in French and LSFB? How are the resources of French and LSFB distributed? To answer these questions, we annotated and analysed data extracted from two comparable corpora: the LSFB Corpus (Meurant 2015) and the FRAPé Corpus (Meurant et al. Under Construction).

The presentation focuses primarily on the comparison of the prosodic non-manual cues used to encode CF in LSFB and French. Preliminary findings highlighted that non-manual elements were more frequent on CF compared to non-contrastive items in both languages. Furthermore, they tended to be longer in duration when produced on CF and shorter in the surrounding context. However, noteworthy disparities were observed between the two languages. First, signers and speakers relied on different strategies to encode CF: head or body movements produced alone in French and combinations of head, body, and eyebrow movements in LSFB. Second, non-manual markers exhibited less systematicity in French than in LSFB, particularly in terms of scope.

To sum up, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how CF is encoded in LSFB and French and provides new insights into language typology.

References: Kimmelman, V., & Pfau, R. (2021). Information structure: Theoretical perspectives. In J. Quer, R. Pfau, & A. Herrmann (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Theoretical and Experimental Sign Language Research* (pp. 591–613). Routledge. • Meurant, L. (2015). *Corpus LSFB. Un corpus informatisé en libre accès de vidéos et d'annotations de la langue des signes de Belgique francophone (LSFB)*. • Meurant, L., Lepeut, A., Gabarró-López, S., Tavier, A., Vandenitte, S., Lombart, C., & Sinte, A. (Under Construction). *Corpus de français parlé: Vers la construction d'un corpus comparable LSFB - Français de Belgique.*