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Affixes of nouns in Georgian Sign Language (GESL)

ABSTRACT

The Sign Languages mostly have simultaneous or synchronic morphology, which means that signs change their phonological features to display grammatical categories, although Georgian sign language (GESL) can be described as a language of a mixed morphology using both sequential and simultaneous means. The presented paper describes the derivational and flexional affixes of GESL nouns. It also gives the recommendations for teaching the nouns at Deaf schools in Georgia.

Keywords: *Georgian Sign Language, GESL, nouns, affix, sign languages, morphology.*

Introduction

Georgian sign language (GESL) is a language of Deaf and hard of hearing people in Georgia. Their number is about 2500 in total. GESL is an understudied language and lacks teaching methodology. There are three Deaf schools in the country – in Tbilisi, Kutaisi and Batumi. These schools have many different kinds of problems in teaching GESL. The presented paper offers the systemic teaching frame for GESL nouns.

The presented paper introduces the revealed derivational and inflectional affixes of GESL (Makharoblidze, 2012, 2015, 2019, 2023), including the frequency of the revealed nominal affix positions.

The paper begins with ‘Introduction’ describing the structure of the paper, followed by the Chapter 2 – ‘Method’. The next part is Chapter 3 – ‘Theory’ and then comes Chapter 4 ‘GESL nominal affixes’ introducing the revealed nominal affixes. This chapter has three subchapters: Derivational affixes, Inflectional affixes and Nominal affixes in free narratives. The Chapter 5 is ‘Teaching GESL nouns’ where one can find the general frames for teaching GESL nouns at Georgian Deaf school. The last, Chapter 6 is ‘Conclusion’. At the end of the presented paper there is ‘Acknowledgements’ followed by ‘References’ as well.

Methodology

The method of the research is analytical-descriptive and also didactic, as it concerns teaching GESL nouns at Deaf schools in Georgia.

Data-collecting methodology was performed with elicitation. I had five native signers, at least the third generation from the Deaf families, the members of Tbilisi Deaf community. I also used the free narrative data of GESL laboratory at Ilia State University. This data was collected during the different projects on GESL studies. I used random material to check the elicited data in free signing process.

Limitations of the research concerns the location limitations. The research is limited to Tbilisi community.

It worth noting, that the data-collection was carried out according to the standard of ethic norms of European Union. The Deaf GESL sources have signed informed consent forms granting us the rights to use the material for a variety of scholarly purposes.

Theoretical framework

The Sign Languages mostly have simultaneous or synchronic morphology, which means that signs change their phonological features to display grammatical categories. Affixes pass the way of grammaticalization (Mier, 2012; Zeshan, 2004; Wilcox, 2007; etc.). However, in some Sign languages, such as GESL, the share of sequential morphology is growing rapidly. One of the explanations of this circumstance can be the influence of spoken Georgian, but very often the sequential units of GESL do not match those of spoken Georgian (Makharoblidze, 2018). GESL can be described as a language of a mixed morphology using both sequential and simultaneous means (Makharoblidze, 2023).

Speaking of nouns, it should be noted that in sign languages, sometimes nouns and verbs may have common signs, and it is not always easy to distinguish which part of speech the sign belongs to, and nominal affixes can distinguish nouns from verbs. GESL shows very productive derivational affixes as well as inflectional affixes.

The processes of affixation in sign languages have been studied by number of linguists. Usually, Affixes pass the way of grammaticalization (Hopper and Traugott, 2003; Haspelmath, 2004; Bybee, 2003; Diwald, 2011; Brinton and Traugott, 2005; Janzen, 2012; Hopper, 1991). In my previous papers I described the criteria for morphological affix in sign languages:

- A sign must be delexicalized and grammaticalized as well, which means that lexical meaning is faded;
- A sign must be erosive, which means having changes in dynamics or maybe two-handed sign becomes one-handed;

- A sign must have a fixed position, which means being fixed before another sign or after another sign;
- A sign should have a clear morphosemantic meaning – adding this sign should add specific semantic to the word (Makharoblidze & Archvadze, 2022).

The nominal suffixes discussed in the presented paper meet the above-mentioned criteria – all affixal signs have clear semantics, all are delexicalized, most of them are erosive and have fixed positions.

GESL nominal affixes

Derivational affixes. Very frequent are the affixes of negation in GESL. The nominal negation in this language usually appears with two negative particles: NO/NOT – *ara/ar* and NO/NOT *vera/ver* less categorical with modal flavor. The latter comes from spoken Georgian, and operates the same way as in spoken Georgian.



Fig. 1. Negative particle ARA/AR

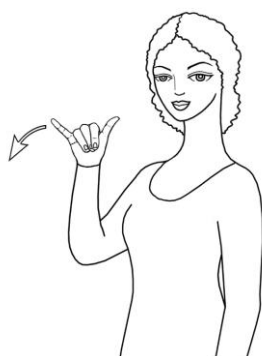


Fig. 2. Negative particle VERA/VER

These above-mentioned negative affixes usually appear after nouns, while the nominal negative affixes EMPTY and WITHOUT may also appear before nouns:

**Fig. 3.** Colorless

Figure 3 shows the adjective COLORLESS. Its first part is WITHOUT, and the second part is a noun COLOR. This negative affix has a synonymic form:

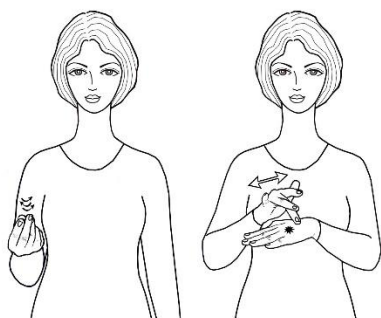
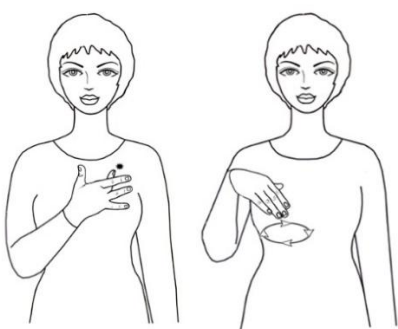
**Fig.4.** Penniles

Figure 4 presents a sign with two parts. Its first part is MONEY, the second part is WITHOUT. As we can see, in this example the negative affix follows the main lexical sign. This is more canonical, although the place-changing can happen, as GESL is not yet a standardized language.

**Fig. 5.** Heartless

The sign on Figure 5 consists of two parts: HEART and EMPTY. The negative affix here follows the main lexical sign.

The examples above produce negative adjectives from nouns, while the following examples show the derived nouns:

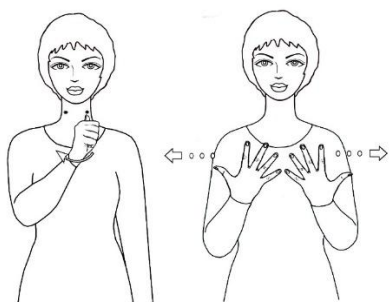


Fig. 6. Fruit

Figure 6 shows a sign with two parts. The first sign is FRUIT and the second sign is DIVERSITY. This latter is the nominal affix expressing the congregation/plurality/variability and/or diversity of a noun-form meaning. The next is the affix of destination on Figure 7:



Fig. 7. Agency

The first sign is the lexical AGENT and the second part is the affix of possessive-purpose destination/belonging (Makharoblidze & Archvadze, 2022). Literary it will sound as ‘Agent for’. The next figure shows the same affix:

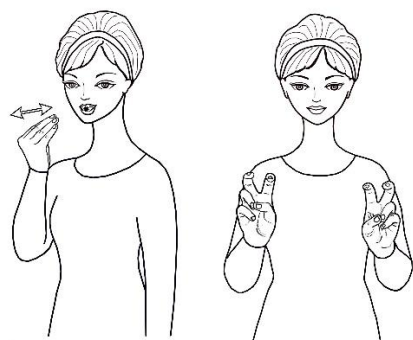


Fig. 8. Food

Figure 8 displays the two signs. The lexical EAT is followed by the affix of destination.

**Fig. 9.** Poet

Figure 9 shows widely accepted word production frame in sign languages. The first sign is the lexical sign POETRY and the second sign is the sign for HUMAN. This latter is known as a classifier in sign languages. It is usually used to produce the nouns denoting the profession and/or craft. Interestingly, the same suffix appears for Ergative case in GESL marking only human-class subjects.

Inflectional affixes. The above-discussed affixes are affixes of derivation. GESL also has the affixes of flexion, as we can see on Table 1:

Ergative	Dative	Genitive	Vocative

Table 1. Case markers in GESL

Ergative marker is fully influenced from spoken Georgian and only a very little number of Deaf signers in Tbilisi, use it. Unlike spoken Georgian, in GESL this marker appears rarely, and only with human-class subjects, as noted above.

Dative case marker is semantically influenced from spoken Georgian, but this is a diectic sign, and when the indirect object does not show malefactive or benefactive forms (Makharoblidze, 2015), this diectic sign can appear after nouns referring to indirect object. Just like the Ergative case marker, the marker of dative can appear only with human-class animate nouns.

Genitive case marker is the original affix for GESL. It is not influenced from spoken Georgian. It usually appears after the possessor, although it is greatly depending on the class category of the noun

(see the upcoming paper of Makharoblidze, Pfau, Steibach).

Vocative is also original for GESL. However, many linguists argue that vocative cannot be considered as a case even in spoken languages.

Indirect object markers (of benefactive and malefactive) also can be interpreted as case markers, since they appear at the nouns functioning as indirect object (Makharoblidze, 2015).

Nominal affixes in free narratives. I checked the elicited results with free narrative data, i.e free signing process. I took random material from GESL laboratory data at Ilia State University. Random 10 minutes from the different videos were taken for analysis. This was 40 minutes of free signing process in total. Chart 1 below presents the frequency of usage of derivational (DA)¹ and inflectional affixes (IA) before (BN) and after (AN) the nouns:

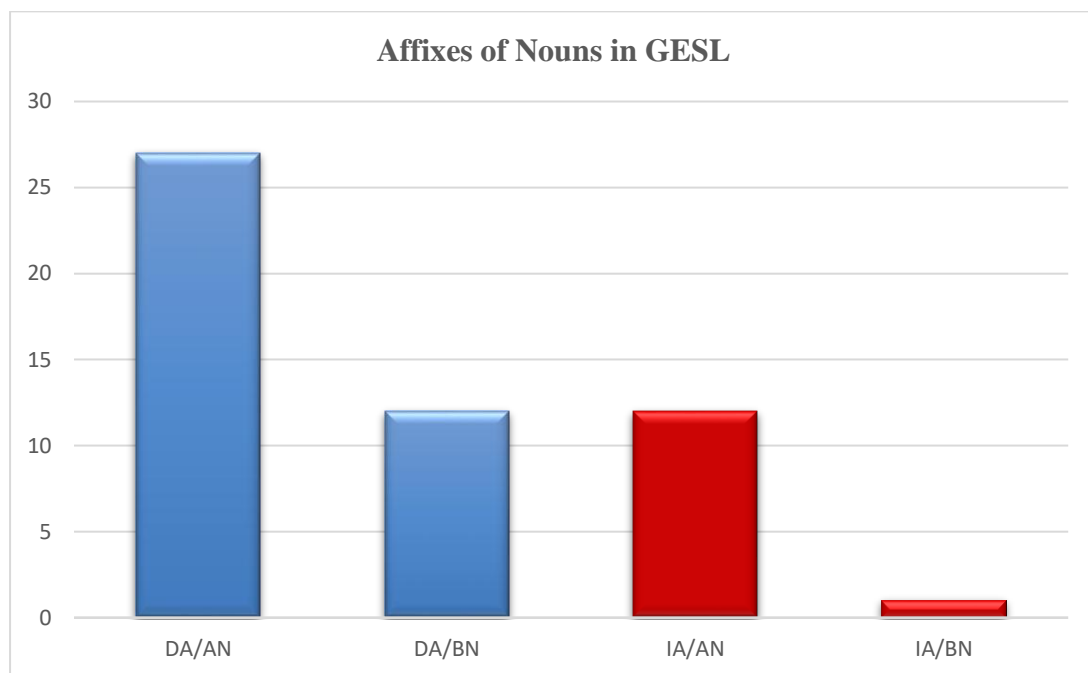


Chart 1. Nominal affixes in GESL

In this data – random 40 minutes of GESL free signing process, derivational affixes after nouns DA/AN appeared 27 times, before nouns (DA/BN) I met the 12 cases. Inflectional affixes after nouns IA/AN were 10 examples and only one was an example of inflectional affix before the noun IA/BN.

¹ DA – Derivation affixes, IA – Inflexional affixes, BN – Before nouns, AN – After nouns

As we can see from Chart 1, the derivational affixes are more frequent compared with inflexional suffixes. The inflexional affixes mostly are used after nouns, while derivational affixes may appear before nouns as well.

Teaching GESL nouns

As it is noted above, there are three Deaf schools in Georgia in Tbilisi, Kutaisi and Batumi. Teaching the GESL nouns is one of the most important issue in GESL teaching process. Nouns should be thought systemic, giving the full information about the derivational and inflexional affixes. This approach for teaching mixed-type morphology, can be considered the key to GESL nominal grammar. I recommend omitting the ergative case in teaching process, since it very much influenced case from spoken Georgian. In order to reduce this influence, dative as diectic and partly influenced case, also can be omitted. Thus, the teaching paradigm of GESL noun cases will be the following:

Nominative – with zero marker

Genitive – with marker / GC

Vocative – with marker / VC

Conclusion

Bilingual education is challenging, and it is very important to find the right points in teaching. In Deaf schools of Georgia, the mixed-type morphology of GESL must be explained in detail with the proper examples in comparation with spoken Georgian system. Nouns in GESL should be explained in a systemic way, explaining the form and meaning of the above-discussed derivational and inflectional affixes in GESL. It should be also noted that implementing the GESL research results in the teaching process must be absolutely mandatory for Deaf schools in Georgia.

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