
Prosodic alignment in word order and focus: Evidence from Ghanaian Sign Language

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Ghanaian Sign Language (GSL) critically remains understudied in syntactic domains, with prior claims about its structures largely impressionistic and lacking methodological transparency (see Hadjah 2016; Peprah 2021). This study bridges the gap further through an elicitation-based investigation of word order and focus constructions, using materials from Questionnaire on Information Structure (Skopeteas et al. 2006). To avoid the influence of signed English, the questions were translated into GSL with the help of two bilingual native signers.

Preliminary findings challenge the notion of free word order in GSL revealing a predominate SVO structure in (1). Clause-initial constituents are consistently accompanied by raised eyebrows (reb); a visual prosodic cue ignored in earlier accounts. This indicates that there is a left edge prosodic marking in GSL.

- (1) reb
MAN (IX) CARRY CHAIR
'The man is carrying a chair.'

Focus constructions—whether targeting arguments or predicates—narrowly (2) or broadly (3) also align with this left edge prosodic marking.

- (2) reb
MAN HOLD [SPOON]_{OBJ-FOC}
'The man is holding **a spoon.**'
- (3) a. reb
WOMAN (IX) [READ BOOK]_{VP-FOCUS}
 reb
 b. [BOOK READ]_{VP-FOCUS} IX WOMAN
 'The woman **is reading a book.**'

Verb-initial constructions, particularly in transitives, appears unpreferred in word order which maps onto focus. VP-focus maintains VO ordering when in situ (3a) but fronting the VP yields OV (3b), suggesting an underlying constraint against verb-initial structures. Notably, in (3b), only the object of the VP-focus bears the prosodic marker, reinforcing the pattern of left-edge prosodic marking in GSL.

References: • Hadjah, T. (2016). *Number marking in Ghanaian Sign Language*. M.Phil. thesis, University of Ghana. • Peprah, M. (2021). *A sociolinguistic analysis of lexical variation in Ghanaian Sign Language*. M.Phil. thesis, University of Ghana. • Skopeteas, S. et al. (2006). Questionnaire on information structure: Reference manual. In *Interdisciplinary studies on information structure (isis): Working papers of the sfb 632, vol. 4*. Potsdam: Universitätsverlag Potsdam.