
SUDDENLY4 and clause types in German Sign Language: a corpus-based case study of a multifunctional sign

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German Sign Language (DGS), like many other sign languages, exhibits a lot of multifunctional signs that show interesting restrictions on their distribution across clause types. Our collaborative work investigates such a sign using data from the Public DGS Corpus *MEINE DGS – annotiert* (cf. Konrad et al. 2020).

More than 400 tokens of SUDDENLY4 have been detected in the corpus data using the Public DGS Corpus. 144 participants used SUDDENLY4 in their signing. We analyzed a subset of 150 randomly picked examples based on the judgement of three deaf native and near-native signers. In group discussions, all tokens were categorized according to function, distribution within the clause, and occurrence within clause types, by taking semantics, phonology, and prosody into account.

We found evidence for three major context-dependent functional categories: (i) Lexically, SUDDENLY4 may function as a temporal adverbial. It is a two-handed sign with the O-handshape and a downward movement combined with a lexical facial expression usually involving a mouth pattern with the Action Units 10+25+33A (cf. FACS by Ekman et al. 2002; Pendzich 2022). The sign can mark a sudden event in a storyline and may be an indication of parallel events or scenes. The sign may also function as (ii) a conditional subjunction, which has been previously described for DGS (cf. Paulus 2021; Pendzich et al. 2022) and is now further confirmed by our corpus-study. SUDDENLY4 as (iii) a discourse marker has been found in our data to indicate a reference to a certain topic shift. SUDDENLY4 does not appear in questions or imperatives and seems to be clause-type sensitive.

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