

# Plural formation in Flemish Sign Language (VGT)

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## Abstract

Previous research The first publication in which aspects of plural formation in VGT were explored, was written by Van Herreweghe (1995). Vermeerbergen (1997) also discussed certain aspects of plural formation in VGT. These studies found certain mechanisms for plural formation, i.e.: (1) the repetition of (a movement of) a sign; (2) the use of numbers; (3) the use of quantifiers; (4) the use of classifiers and (5) double articulation. However, these studies do not present a detailed description of each mechanism and they do not discuss which (types of) signs get which plural form. Moreover, they are not based on an analysis of extensive corpus data. Research questions It was therefore considered necessary to set up a more detailed research project analysing a larger, but targeted, corpus. The following research questions were defined: 1. Which are the possible forms of plural formation of noun signs in VGT? 2. Is there a one-to-one relation between singular and plural forms of noun signs and/or do particular noun signs have different possible plurals? 3. If a singular noun can take various forms of pluralisation, which form is the preferred one in which context? 4. Are certain plural forms obligatory in certain contexts? Research methodology Plural formation has been dealt with in detail in a number of other sign languages, i.e. in German Sign Language (DGS) by Pfau & Steinbach (2006), in Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT) by Nijhoff & Zwitserlood (1999) and Harder, Koolhof & Schermer (2003) and in Turkish Sign Language (TID) by Kubuş (2008). Based on these studies we developed our methodology and decided to work with elicitation materials consisting of pictures and videos without any interference of a spoken or written language. In total, 39 objects were selected and for each object four pictures were shown to the informants, bringing the total to 156 pictures in which: - one object is displayed - two objects are displayed - a countable number of objects is displayed - an non-countable number of objects is displayed Three of the objects in the pictures were also elicited by means of films as we wanted to elicit data by means of both static and dynamic materials. The informants had to meet as many of the following criteria as possible: - early acquisition of VGT - education in a deaf school (at least at primary school level) - daily usage of VGT (e.g. with parents, with partner, in the family, at work) - active membership of the Flemish Deaf community. All data collection, i.e. the recordings, was conducted by a deaf researcher. Results and discussion At the moment, data of three signers from each of the five Flemish provinces have been analysed. This has yielded the following (preliminary) results. Plural formation can clearly be expressed in different ways: 1. The citation form of the sign is changed so as to express plurality: a. By changing the manual part of the sign i. by means of double articulation (i.e. a one-handed sign is produced with both hands) ii. by means of reduplication (i.e. the sign or the movement component of the sign is produced more than once) b. By changing the non-manual part of the sign (mostly the spoken component which then refers to the plural form of the corresponding spoken Dutch word); 2. A sign is added (in various possible orders to be discussed during the paper presentation), i.e. a. A lexical sign from the established VGT lexicon i. A number (TWO, THREE, etc.) e.g. TWO FLOWER IN VASE ii. Another quantifier (MANY, SOME, etc.) e.g. MANY BICYCLE STAY STATION TO-PARK IN STATION iii. A collective sign (e.g. GROUP, ROW, etc.) e.g. FAR GROUP BIRD FLY b. A non-established sign from the productive lexicon i. A classifier construction (entity and handling classifiers) e.g. ON TABLE PLATE "plates-in-a-mess-on-table" ii. A non-established collective sign e.g. STONE "pile" c. Pointing signs e.g. COW INDEX "there"++++ 3. Certain signs have plural meaning i. The default meaning is plural and morphologically the sign goes back to the repetition of the related singular sign. e.g. CHILDREN, PEOPLE, CLOTHES, FORREST etc. ii. The default meaning is plural e.g. CHIPS Besides these there also seem to be certain implicit mechanisms to express plurality. Moreover, usually the above-mentioned mechanisms were combined according to certain tendencies. Examples will be provided during the paper presentation.