

In some cases, syntactic constructions effectively constitute syntagmatic variants, where the same predicate can be – and often is – negated using different constructions, sometimes by the same individual (intra-individual variation). The distribution of these syntactic options suggests that Indonesian sign language varieties strongly favour manual over non-manual negation, in accordance with several other Asian sign languages such as Nihon Shuwa and Kata Kolok, and in contradistinction to Scandinavian sign language varieties that prefer non-manual negation (Zeshan 2004).

For completion, around 300 tokens have been annotated. The sign glossed as SUDAH (after the completive marker in Bahasa Indonesia) has four lexical variants, all of which may appear before or after the predicate – usually in clause final position – and sometimes in both slots (doubling). Analysis suggests a possible relationship between a variant’s phonological weight and its preferred syntactic slot: one of the ‘lighter’ lexical variants appears to favour a pre-predicate slot, while a comparatively ‘heavier’ variant favours a clause-final position.

Completive markers frequently co-occur with a mouthing, usually “sudah”, but this mouthing may also occur simultaneously with a predicate as the sole marker of completion (4). To my knowledge, this is not attested for other sign languages, although completive mouth gestures have been reported for Turkish Sign Language (Dikyuva 2011) and Kata Kolok (de Vos 2012). Interestingly, mouthings therefore have an unusually important functional role in both negation and completion (3, 4).

- (4) **mouthing:** sudah [Makassar]
Bhs Indo: BAWA-PAKAIAN MENARUH-PAKAIAN
English: CARRY-CLOTHES PUT-THEM-DOWN
translation: ‘I carried the clothes [upstairs] and put them down, and then...’

The existence of lexical variation in sign languages has long been noticed by sign language users and researchers alike, but grammatical variation has thus far received only scant attention (chiefly in studies of Auslan and NZSL, e.g. De Beuzeville, Johnston and Schembri 2009, McKee et al. 2011). Such lack of attention could conceivably lead an outsider to the field to question whether most sign languages exhibit grammatical variation at all. This paper responds directly to such questions, showing that Indonesian sign language varieties do vary grammatically, in interesting and unusual ways, intra-linguistically and cross-linguistically. Some tentative thoughts are discussed regarding possible sociolinguistic reasons for this variation.

References

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