Possession in the visual-gestural modality: How possession is expressed in British Sign Language

Kearsy Cormier and Jordan Fenlon

1. Introduction

All known languages have some way of expressing possession, and signed languages are no exception. The primary question we pose in this chapter is: Is possession expressed differently in signed languages due to the use of the visual-gestural (rather than the aural-oral) modality, or are patterns relating to possession essentially the same for signed and spoken languages?

Our chapter begins with background about British Sign Language (BSL), followed by an overview of the pronominal system of BSL. We then move on to look at attributive and predicative possession in BSL and finally an adjectival predicate of predisposition in BSL closely related to the possessive pronoun. Although this chapter is primarily an overview of possession in BSL, we will also include observations on other signed languages, such as American Sign Language (ASL), where applicable.

2. British Sign Language

BSL is the natural signed language used by the deaf community in the United Kingdom. BSL has its own phonological, morphological and syntactic structure. Phonologically, lexical signs in BSL are made up of four primary parameters: handshape, movement, location (i.e. place of articulation) and palm/finger orientation. Every sign is specified for each of these parameters, which are phonologically contrastive (i.e. minimal pairs can be identified with each parameter).

Clearly, BSL is neither simply an elaborated gestural system nor a manual code based on English. Nonetheless, because BSL is a minority language within the United Kingdom, there is strong and constant contact between BSL and English and thus BSL does borrow elements from English. Having said that, we will point out instances where there are posses-
sive constructions within signed languages which are known borrowings from the surrounding spoken language.

The examples in this chapter come from a variety of sources. Some are from or based on elicited data, some are from broadcast television programmes, some are from an annotated corpus of BSL stories and fables (Woll, Sutton-Spence, & Waters, 2004), and some are from naturalistic video-recorded conversation. In all cases, examples are from or based on signing from both native and non-native signers. To be representative of the community, it is important to include data from both native and non-native signers, since only a very small percentage of the British Deaf community, generally considered to be 5-10%, are native signers born to deaf parents, and thus non-native signers (deaf with hearing and usually non-signing parents) make up the vast majority of the typical deaf population.¹

3. **Overview of pronouns and determiners**

One of the striking characteristics about signed languages is the way that signers use the space around them for referential purposes. Signers refer to a person/object physically present within a discourse situation simply by pointing to him/her/it. For referents who are not present, the signer establishes a location in space for the referent by pointing to that location. These pointing signs acts as pronouns and are glossed here as PRO-1 (first person) or PRO-non1 (for non-first person) - see Figures 1a and 1b.² The first person singular pronoun consists of a point to the signer’s own chest.

![Figure 1a. PRO-1 ‘me’](image1) ![Figure 1b. PRO-non1 ‘him/her/it’](image2)
3.1. Person

There has been a fair amount of debate within the sign language literature regarding the issue of person marking on pronouns in signed languages. In the early days of sign language research, researchers assumed a three-person system analogous to those found in spoken languages (Friedman, 1975; Klima & Bellugi, 1979; Padden, 1983, 1990). A three-person system is problematic, however, because there is no listable set of location values in the signing space to which a non-first person pronoun may point, for addressee or non-addressed participants. That is, there is no single location that may act as a morpheme to indicate second or third person. To address this issue, some researchers have taken the view that sign language pronouns do not exhibit person marking at all and that locations associated with pronouns instead act as variables (‘loci’) whose content comes from discourse (Cormier, Wechsler, & Meier, 1999; Lillo-Martin & Klima, 1990). More recently, most sign linguists subscribe to a two-person system as proposed by Meier (1990) for ASL. Such an analysis recognises the ‘listability problem’ (Rathmann & Mathur, 2002) of multiple second/third person location values while at the same time recognising the special status of first person, for which there is only one location (the signer’s chest). This two-person system has been assumed by other researchers for ASL and other signed languages (Engberg-Pedersen, 1993; Farris, 1994, 1998; Liddell, 2003), including BSL (Cormier, 2007), and will be assumed in this chapter as well. 3

3.2. Number

In terms of number marking, BSL has singular, dual, number-incorporated and plural pronouns, as shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First person</th>
<th>Non-first person</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Singular</strong></td>
<td>PRO-1 (‘I’)</td>
<td>PRO-non1 (‘you/he/she/it’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dual</strong></td>
<td>TWO-OF-US</td>
<td>TWO-OF-YOU/THEM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>**Number-</td>
<td>3/4/5-OF-US</td>
<td>3/4/5-OF-YOU/THEM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>incorporated (3/4/5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Plural</strong></td>
<td>PRO-1pl (‘we’)</td>
<td>PRO-non1pl (‘they’)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Personal pronouns in BSL
The primary reason to distinguish dual pronouns from number-incorporated pronouns that represent three, four or five referents in BSL is the way these pronouns index their referents. The dual pronoun behaves as a singular pronoun by indexing the location associated with each referent. Specifically, the dual pronoun moves between the two locations associated with each referent. If one of the indexed locations is the location of the signer’s own body, then this form may be glossed as TWO-OF-US (shown in Figure 2); if not then it may be glossed as TWO-OF-YOU (if the location of the addressee is included) or TWO-OF-THEM. The number-incorporated pronouns (e.g. THREE-OF-US shown in Figure 3), on the other hand, only index a single general location for all three, four or five referents; these pronouns have a circular movement which may or may not encompass the locations associated with each individual referent.

Figure 2. TWO-OF-US
The non-first person plural pronoun (PRO-non1pl) is similar to the number-incorporated pronouns in that it only generally indexes the locations of its referents. This pronoun is a pointing sign which has a sweeping movement across a span of space associated with the referents.

To index the locations associated with each of more than two referents, signers use a sequence of singular and/or dual (indexing) pronouns, as in (1).

(1) PRO-a PRO-b PRO-c ALL LIKE CAT
‘That person, that one and that one all like cats.’

The first person plural pronoun PRO-1pl is produced with an index handshape at the signer’s chest but, instead of pointing directly at the signer’s chest, in the plural form the index finger traces a small circular movement just in front of the chest. This form is the least indexic of all the pronouns - i.e. the other pronouns point to the location(s) associated with their referents. The first person plural pronoun only indexes (points to) the signer’s chest and does not index the other referents.

3.3. Exclusive pronouns

Cormier (2007) has investigated whether BSL has an inclusive/exclusive distinction within first person plural pronouns. The findings indicated that within first person plurals in BSL, the citation forms of these pronouns can be used in either inclusive or exclusive contexts. The citation form for the
first person plural pronoun as shown in Figure 4a is produced at the centre of the signer’s chest (though the location can change to the right or left of the signers chest to index location of the group, as described above). BSL also has variants of plurals which are exclusive forms. When a referent is excluded, the signer displaces the plural pronoun to the right or left side of his/her chest as shown in Figure 4b. The excluded referent(s) may be the addressee(s) or any other non-first person referent(s) which is/are salient in the discourse. The location of the pronoun gives no information about the perceived location of the excluded referents, only that they are be in a location other than that of the included referents.

![Figure 4a. PRO-1pl (citation form) 'we'](image-url)
Exclusive forms were identified with first person plurals (PRO-1pl) and with first person number-incorporated plurals (3/4/5-OF-US). Because the first-person dual pronoun indexes the location of each referent, no grammatical exclusive form is proposed for the dual pronoun, only plurals and number-incorporated forms.

3.4. Word order and pro-drop

Syntactically pronouns in BSL occur in situ in the position of the subject or the object, as in (2) and (3). Morphological case systems have not been identified for any known signed languages (Alibasic Ciciliani & Wilbur, 2006), so pronouns do not vary in form based on whether they occur in subject or object position.

(2) PRO-1 LIKE ICE-CREAM
   ‘I like ice-cream.’

(3) BOSS LIKE PRO-1
   ‘The boss likes me.’

Pro-drop (with either the subject or object pronoun) is common in BSL and other signed languages, particularly with singular pronouns, when the
referent is retrievable from context, as in (4). With plural pronouns, studies on ASL and Australian Sign Language (Auslan) have shown that first person plural pronouns are dropped more often than first person singular pronouns (Schembri & Johnston, 2006; Wulf, Dudis, Bayley, & Lucas, 2002). With double agreement verbs (a type of verb in which the start and end location of the verb or the direction in which the verb is facing reflects the subject/source and object/goal of the verb, respectively), pro-drop is usually the rule rather then the exception, particularly with objects, as in (5).

(4) LIKE ICE-CREAM
‘I like ice-cream.’

(5) BEEN a-HELP-1
‘He helped me.’

Pronoun copy is also common, whereby the pronoun in situ is then copied and produced again at the end of the clause as in (6).

(6) PRO-1 LIKE ICE-CREAM PRO-1
‘I like ice cream.’

This section has provided an overview of the pronominal system of BSL, specifically personal pronouns. This is relevant for considering possessive pronouns in BSL, to which we turn next.

4. Possession in BSL

As in spoken languages, signed languages exhibit both attributive and predicative possession. We first look at attributive possession, expressed primarily by possessive pronouns.

4.1. Attributive possession

The singular and plural possessive pronouns in BSL behave very similarly to the singular and plural personal pronouns, respectively. The primary difference is the handshape. While the personal pronoun PRO uses an ‘index’ handshape (extended index finger similar to the handshape used in a pointing gesture), the possessive pronoun POSS use a fist handshape with
the thumb alongside the index finger rather than wrapped across the other fingers. For the first person form, the back of the fingers contact the signer’s chest, and for the non-first person form the back of the fingers face outward away from the signer, toward the location associated with the referent.

4.1.1. Number

Table 2 shows the BSL possessive pronouns by person and number.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First person</th>
<th>Non-first person</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Singular or</strong></td>
<td>POSS-1 ‘my’</td>
<td>POSS-non1 ‘your/his/her/its’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collective plural</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Plural</strong></td>
<td>POSS-1pl ‘our’</td>
<td>POSS-non1pl ‘their’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Possessive pronouns in BSL

The singular forms are shown in Figures 5 and 6. Singular possessive pronouns representing the possessor (PR) may occur on their own with the possessum (PM) noun (e.g. POSS-a CAR ‘his car’) or in apposition with a personal pronoun (e.g. PRO-a POSS-a CAR ‘his car’). (See §4.1.2 for the use of POSS with nominal PRs.)

![Figure 5. POSS-1 'my'](image-url)
Plural possessive pronouns use the same handshape as the singular possessive forms. The non-first person plural possessive pronoun POSS-non1pl ‘their’ is very similar to the pronoun PRO-non1pl ‘them’ (with a sweeping motion across the locations associated with the referents) but uses a fist handshape, as shown in Figure 8. The first person plural possessive pronoun POSS-1pl ‘our’ as shown in Figure 7 is the same as the first person plural pronoun (PRO-1pl ‘we’: circular motion at the chest) but has a fist handshape; the back of the fingers remain facing the signer during the production of the sign.
With plurals, signers may use a combination of possessive pronoun(s) with multiple singular pronouns, in which case the personal pronouns typically precede the possessive pronoun(s) as in (7).

(7) PRO-a PRO-b PRO-1 POSS-1pl PARTY TONIGHT

‘Our party (the party of him, her and me) will be tonight.’

To specify distribution of possession, signers may use a sequence of singular possessive pronouns as in (8) — cf. collective possession as in (12a).

(8) POSS-a POSS-b POSS-1 TELEVISION BUY SAME SHOP

‘We (he, she and I) bought our televisions from the same shop.’

Although these plural forms do exist and are used, it is also possible (and quite common) for BSL signers to use the singular possessive instead of the plural with plural referents, both in first and non-first person, for collective plurals, as shown in (9a). If the number of referents is not already known or not clear in context, then a plural personal pronoun or other quantifier may accompany the singular possessive; in this case, again, the pronoun/quantifier generally precedes the possessive but can occur afterwards. In (9b) and (9c), the non-first person possessive is directed towards the same general location as the quantifier/pronoun which occurs in the same utterance. In (9d) and (9e), the singular first person possessive is, as always, directed towards the signer’s chest. If a plural pronoun or quantifier is used in combination with a possessive, the data and intuitions from deaf
informants indicate that the possessive must be singular and cannot be plural, as shown in (9f).

(9) a. WHAT ABOUT PARENTS MAKE POSS-non1-emp DECISION?
   ‘What about parents making their own decision?’

b. THERE PEOPLE ALL-OF-THEM POSS-non1 BELIEF DIFFERENT
   ‘There, people have different beliefs.’

c. NOW WANT FOCUS POSS-non1 PERSONALITY TWO-OF-YOU
   ‘Now I want to focus on your (both of your) personalities.’

d. THREE-OF-US POSS-1 HOUSE SELL
   ‘The house belonging to the three of us is for sale.’

e. TWO-OF-US HOUSE POSS-1 SELL
   ‘The house belonging to the two of us is for sale.’

f. *THREE-OF-US POSS-1pl HOUSE SELL
   ‘The house belonging to the three of us is for sale.’

The use of singular possessive pronouns as a way of marking plural possession in a collective context should not be surprising, as the nature of collective plurals crosslinguistically is that they act as singulars. However, these singulars used as collectives are more interesting when considering their indexicality (i.e. the extent to which they point to or index the locations associated with their referents). While the personal pronouns in these combinations may be providing indexic information (e.g. the dual and plural forms which point to more than one location), the collective plural possessive forms in these constructions have lost much of their indexicality (compared to truly plural possessives) in that they only index a single location. As noted above, the first person plural personal pronoun PRO-1pl (as well as the first person plural possessive pronoun POSS-1pl) are already less indexic than their singular counterparts. Because the collective plural form is the same as the singular form with the same degree of indexicality, these collective plurals are in fact not marking number at all but only person (first or non-first). Thus when a plural personal pronoun occurs which
marks number, as in (9f), an additional plural possessive form is not ac-
ceptable.

For distributive readings (e.g. multiple objects that are each possessed
separately by different people, as opposed to the default collective reading
the single object that is possessed together by more than one person), sign-
ers use multiple possessive pronouns directed to the location of each refer-
ent, either juxtaposed (10a) or with multiple PM nouns (10b).

(10) a. POSS-2 POSS-1 LAND CONTINUE SELL
    ‘Your land and my land are still for sale.’

b. POSS-2 LAND POSS-a LAND POSS-1 LAND CONTINUE SELL
    ‘Your land, his land and my land are still for sale.’

Personal pronouns may also be used in addition to the possessives as in
(11). These lists are not necessarily exhaustive, so that (11) may indicate
either precisely three land owners or it may indicate a number larger than
three.

(11) POSS-a POSS-b POSS-1 LAND PRO-a PRO-b PRO-1 WILL
    SELL
    ‘His land, her land and my land/The land that each of us owns will be
sold.’

4.1.2. Word order and pro-drop

As seen in the examples above, possessive pronouns in BSL occur before
the noun they modify (12a), and optionally may be copied immediately
after the noun as well, as in (12b). Possessive pronouns may also occur
only after the nouns they modify (e.g. TELEVISION POSS-1pl NEW),
though the patterns in (12a) and (12b) appear to be preferred.

(12) a. POSS-1pl TELEVISION NEW
    ‘Our television is new.’

b. POSS-1pl TELEVISION POSS-1pl NEW
    ‘Our television is new.’
With a nominal PR, the PR, possessive pronoun and PM are placed in apposition as in (13). The possessive pronoun usually follows the PR, such that the typical order is PR POSS PM. This same ordering is identified for nominal PRs in ASL, Croatian Sign Language, and Austrian Sign Language (Pichler et al., 2008).

(13) JOHN POSS-non1 CAR NICE
‘John’s car is nice’

Similarly to pro-drop with personal pronouns, possessive pronouns are not required if the PR can be inferred from context as shown in (14).

(14) NAME WHAT?
‘What is your/his/her name?’

4.1.3. Abstract PMs

Attributive possessive pronouns can be used with either concrete entities as in many of the examples above, or with abstract concepts, such as ‘time’, ‘view’, or ‘fault’, as in (15) below.

(15) a. COMPARE POSS-1 TIME NOTHING
‘Compared to my time there was nothing.’

b. POSS-1 VIEW
‘That’s my view.’

c. BUT POSS-non1 FAULT
‘But it was her fault.’

4.1.4. Exclusive possessive pronouns

First person plural possessive pronouns in BSL also have an exclusive form, similar to the exclusive personal pronouns described in §3.3. The exclusive form for BSL shown in Figure 9 below is the same as the citation form as in Figure 7 above but is displaced to the signer’s left or right side, and this form may exclude any salient referent.
4.1.5. **Emphatic possessive pronouns**

Possessive pronouns may be made emphatic by producing the possessive with a sharp sweeping movement towards the location associated with the referent, with either one or two hands, as shown in Figures 10a and 10b and in (16).
Figure 10b. POSS-non1-emp(two hands)

(16) a. BUY CAR YESTERDAY. NICE POSS-1-emp CAR. FREE DRIVE
   ‘I bought a car yesterday. It’s nice to have my own car. I’m free to drive anywhere.’

   b. WHAT ABOUT PARENTS MAKE POSS-non1-emp DECISION
      ‘What about parents making their own decision?’

   c. POSS-non1-emp BUSINESS MEDIA, WOW
      ‘Your own business in media - wow!’

   d. PRO-1 POSS-1-emp ROOM
      ‘I had my own room.’

4.1.6. Morphological marking of possession

Possession in signed languages that have been documented to date is generally marked using possessive pronouns rather than morphologically. BSL does not have an equivalent to the English ‘s possessive marker in widespread usage today. However, it is reported that older BSL signers used (and some still use) a form which consists of a modified form of the fingerspelled letter -S- cliticised to the end of the noun PR. Auslan, a language historically related to BSL, has retained this form in both older and younger signers, shown below in Figure 11 (Branson, Toms, Bernal, & Miller, 1995; Johnston & Schembri, 2007).
ASL also has a similar affixal -’S possessive marker. Pichler et al. (2008) note that although this form was likely borrowed from Signed English systems (sign systems which are not natural signed languages but are based on English morphology and syntax), it is judged acceptable by ASL signers, particularly in utterances with multiple possessors, as in FATHER ’S BROTHER ’S WIFE. This marker (glossed by Pichler et al. as APOSTROPHE-S) consists of a modified form of the letter -S from the finger-spelling system used by ASL signers.

Unlike English, these affixal possessive markers are not obligatory for expressing possession with nominal PRs in Auslan and ASL, and are used along with other types of possession marking as described in this chapter.

4.1.7. Inalienable possession

It has been suggested that BSL systematically encodes inalienable possession (Fenlon & Cormier, 2006; Sutton-Spence & Woll, 1999). Inalienable possession refers to nouns that are inherently linked to the PR (such as kinship terms and body-part nouns) as opposed to alienable nouns which are separable from the PR (e.g., a book). This distinction is encoded in BSL by
using a form identical to the personal pronoun PRO in place of the possessive pronoun POSS with inalienable nouns; see (17).

(17) a. PRO-1 MOTHER
   ‘my mother’

b. PRO-1 LEG
   ‘my leg’

c. POSS-non1 BOOK
   ‘your book’

Inalienable possession in spoken languages is strongly associated with two semantic categories: kinship terms and body-part nouns. However, this feature is not exclusive to these categories and has been shown in some languages to extend to personal possessions, clothing and physical and mental characteristics (Cooper, 2002). In keeping with this pattern, BSL uses a form identical to the personal pronoun PRO in place of the possessive pronoun POSS with kinship terms and body part nouns as well as NAME as in (18a) and other personal possessions such as HOUSE as in (18b).

(18) a. PRO-1 NAME J-O-E
   ‘My name is Joe.’

b. FRIEND STAY PRO-1 HOUSE PRO-1
   ‘Friends stay at my house.’

However, the issue of whether BSL encodes inalienable possession grammatically can be called into question. Firstly, although personal pronouns are used with inalienable phenomena such as body-part nouns, kinship terms and NAME, it appears that signers show a preference for the possessive pronoun POSS (rather than the personal pronoun PRO) with kinship terms. Secondly, it is unclear in examples such as (18a) whether NAME can be classed as a noun or a verb. If it is a verb, then the PRO is functioning as a personal pronoun (e.g. I am called Joe) as opposed to a possessive pronoun (e.g. My name is Joe).

Despite problems with claiming that BSL grammaticises inalienability, patterns of inalienability in BSL are consistent with patterns across spoken
languages. Specifically, BSL fits the crosslinguistic pattern in which kinship terms and body-part nouns are inalienable in languages that have the distinction. It has also been shown crosslinguistically that the existence of other semantic categories marked as inalienable in a given language (beyond kinship and body part terms) implies that body parts and/or kinship terms will also be marked as inalienable (Kliffer, 1996; Nichols, 1988, 1992); this generalisation fits BSL as well. Finally, in some spoken languages (such as Navajo) the alienable/inalienable distinction is optional as it appears to be in BSL as well (Nichols, 1992).

In addition, our BSL data indicates that it is possible to express inalienable possession with overt nominal PRs through the juxtaposition of the PR and PM, as in (19). Similar observations have been made for ASL, Croatian Sign Language, and Austrian Sign Language in Pichler et al. (2008) where the construction PR PM is strongly preferred over PR POSS PM for inalienable constructions.

(19) a. BABY EAR
    ‘the baby’s ear’

    b. WOMAN SON
    ‘the woman’s son’

To our knowledge, the use of two distinct forms marking possession (where one encodes inalienable possession and the other marks alienable possession, as in (17) above) has not been identified in any other signed language in a possessive construction without an overt nominal PR. Use of the personal pronoun instead of the possessive pronoun has been noted for some other signed languages - specifically, ASL, Croatian Sign Language, and Austrian Sign Language - but the claim with these signed languages is that the personal pronoun PRO may optionally be used instead of POSS in any possessive construction, not just with inalienable nouns (Pichler et al., 2008).

4.1.8. Spatial marking

In addition to the use of possessive pronouns, BSL can also associate PMs with PRs by changing the location of some noun signs directly within the signing space. The primary criterion for such spatial marking of noun signs is that the place of articulation of the sign must be the neutral space in front of the signer, not a location on the body; the sign may then be located at a
particular location in space associated with some referent. It is not entirely clear if this spatially marks PMs only for possession (‘my house’, ‘your house’) or if the marking is at particular locations which just so happen to correspond to locations associated with PRs (‘the house here/associated with me’, ‘the house there/associated with you’). In (20a) and (20b), the sign HOUSE is produced at two different locations. Note the first person pronoun PRO-1 is used as a possessive in (20a), as in (18b) above, and thus the spatial marking of HOUSE at the first person locus is redundant, while in (20b) both tokens of the pronoun PRO-1 refer to the subject of the clause, not to the PR, so the only indication of the PR here is the non-first person spatial marking of the noun HOUSE.

(20) a. FRIEND STAY PRO-1 HOUSE PRO-1 …
   ‘Friends would stay at my house…’
   (HOUSE is signed close to the signer chest.)

b. INVITE SAME CHANGE STAY PRO-1 GO HOUSE PRO-1 GO
   ‘Then they would invite me to go to their house.’
   (HOUSE is signed away from the signer chest)

The grammaticisation of locative markers into possession markers is well established for many spoken languages (Heine, 1997), and it may be that this same process is occurring/has occurred in BSL. Further evidence for the strong connection between locatives and possession comes from Pichler and colleagues (2008), who have found that the predicative possessive in Austrian Sign Language is expressed by using a sign which appears to be derived from the sign DA meaning ‘here’. We now turn to predicative possession in BSL.

4.2. Predicative possession

There are two primary ways to mark predicative possession in BSL — HAVE and BELONG. These two types are attested crosslinguistically amongst spoken languages and as in other languages differ in whether the PR (as with HAVE) or the PM (as with BELONG) is the subject or topic of the sentence (Heine, 1997; Herslund & Baron, 2001).
4.2.1. Predicative expression of possession and existence

The lexical verb HAVE in BSL (shown below in Figure 12) can be used to indicate possession. The PR, if overtly expressed, acts as subject of the sentence. HAVE (glossed here as HAVE\textsubscript{poss}) can be used with any type of alienable possession, as in (21).

(21) a. JOHN HAVE\textsubscript{poss} CAR
   ‘John has a car.’

b. BOOK HAVE\textsubscript{poss}
   ‘I have a book.’

As with many other languages, the same lexical item HAVE which is used for possession can also be used for existence (Heine, 1997), glossed in (22) as HAVE\textsubscript{ex}.

(22) a. GOD HAVE\textsubscript{ex}
   ‘There is a God.’

b. HAVE\textsubscript{ex} GOSSIP
   ‘There was gossip.’
BSL also has signs for negative possession and negative existence. For negation of possession, the sign $\text{HAVE-NEG}_{\text{poss}}$ is phonologically related to the sign $\text{HAVE}$, with what Brennan (1992) described as a negative affix occurring on some BSL signs (forearm rotation accompanied by an opening of the hand; see Figure 13). This sign is used for possession only (23a), not existence (23b). There are other variants of this sign also meaning ‘not have’, including one which begins with two 5-hands palm down and ends with both hands pronated so that the palms are facing upwards.

![Figure 13. HAVE-NEG\text{poss}](image)

(23) a. CAR $\text{HAVE-NEG}_{\text{poss}}$
'I/someone doesn’t have a car.'

b. *GOD $\text{HAVE-NEG}_{\text{poss}}$
'There is no God.'

The sign $\text{NOT-HAVE}$, a sign formationally unrelated to $\text{HAVE}$ (shown in Figure 14) can be used to negate either possession (24a & 24b) or existence (24b & 24c). A more general negation sign $\text{NOTHING}$ (as shown in Figure 15) can also be used predicatively to negate either possession (25a) or existence (25b), in addition to its (pro)nominal usage (25c).
Figure 14. NOT-HAVE$_{\text{poss/ex}}$

(24) a. PRO-1 CAR NOT-HAVE$_{\text{poss}}$
   ‘I don’t have a car.’

b. CAR NOT-HAVE$_{\text{poss/ex}}$
   ‘There is no car.’/‘I/someone doesn’t have a car.’

c. GOD NOT-HAVE$_{\text{ex}}$
   ‘There is no God.’

Figure 15. NOTHING

(25) a. WILLIAM NOTHING HUSBAND
   ‘William didn’t have a husband.’
b. BISCUIT NOTHING
‘There are no biscuits’

c. OPEN-CUPBOARD BUT NOTHING
‘(I) opened the cupboard but there was nothing there.’

Interestingly, according to Pichler et al. (2008), in ASL, Croatian Sign Language, and Austrian Sign Language, the lexical sign which is used for predicative possession is the same as the lexical sign used for existence (HAVE, IMATI, and DA, respectively), and the same is true for negative possession and negative existence (NONE, NEMATI, and KEIN (DA), respectively). Kristoffersen (2003) and Arik (2008) note the same for Danish Sign Language and Turkish Sign Language respectively - i.e. that the same lexical items are used both for possession and existence. The fact that expression of possession and existence patterns differently in BSL from these other signed languages reminds us that, although there may be an underlying and historical relationship between possession, existence, and locatives (Freeze, 1992), these constructions do surface differently in some languages. We return to the relationship between possession and locatives in §6.

4.2.2. BELONG

BSL has another predicative possessive form which foregrounds the PM rather than the PR. The sign BELONG makes reference to the location of not only the PR (as possessive pronouns do) but also the PM. This form uses the same fist handshape as the possessive pronouns. But rather than simply directing the hand towards the PR referent, BELONG begins at the location associated with the PM noun (the person or object being possessed, L1 in Figure 16) and ends with the location associated with the PR (L2 in Figure 16). Thus whether the PM is named before BELONG as in (26a) or after BELONG as in (26b), in each case, the location of BELONG begins at the location associated with the PM. It is not acceptable for BELONG to begin with the location of the PR and end with the location of the PM, as in (26d).
In (26), the referents ‘book’, ‘teacher’, and ‘bedroom’ may have been set up in space already within the discourse, or they may not have been. If they have not, the sign BELONG establishes the loci for each. In example (26c), either the location of the box has already been established in space previously in the discourse, or the box is physically present during the utterance.

The verb BELONG falls into the category of verbs in BSL known as agreement verbs, described in §3.4 above, in which the verb begins at the location associated with the subject and ends at the location associated with the object. Agreement verbs exist in all known signed languages. However, a predicative possession form like BELONG in BSL which acts as an agreement verb has not to our knowledge been identified in any other sign language outside of the British Sign Language family.
4.2.3. Possessive pronouns

In addition to attributive possession, possessive pronouns may also be used predicatively as below in (27a) and (27b). The short, sharp movement of predicative possessive pronouns towards the PR is often reiterated, possibly due to its phrase final position toward the location associated with the referent (cf. Nespor & Sandler, 1999). This form may be one-handed or two-handed, as shown in Figures 17a and 17b.

(27) a. SAW SOMEONE TAKE CUP. BEEN TOLD POSS-1++
   ‘I saw someone take my cup. I had told him it was mine.’

   b. CAR POSS-non1++
   ‘The car is yours.’

5. Adjectival predicate of predisposition

The predicative possessive pronoun has also evolved into an adjectival predicate indicating that the ‘possessor’ has a predisposition to act a certain way, or that a certain characteristic is typical of the ‘possessor’. The term ‘predispositional’ follows the use of the term predispositional aspect coined by Klima & Bellugi (1979) to describe aspectual modulation on some ASL adjectival predicates to indicate a predisposition to a certain characteristic (e.g. ASL MISCHEVIOUS vs. MISCHIEF-PRONE, where the sign MISCHIEF-PRONE is the same as MISCHEVIOUS but is two-
handed and has a reduplicated circular path movement instead of only the hand-internal movement of MISCHEVIOUS). Examples of the BSL adjectival predicate of predisposition BE-TYPICAL-OF, identical in form to the predicative possessive pronouns shown above in Figure 17, are given in (28a) and (28b).

(28) a. RABBIT BOUNCE-ALONG LAUGH, SLOW IS-TYPICAL-OF-non1++ PRO-1 FAST
   ‘The rabbit bounced along laughing and said “It’s your way to be slow, I am fast.”’

   b. WHY IS-TYPICAL-OF-non1(2hands)++ ALWAYS FAR STILL CRAWL
   ‘Why is it always your way, even though it is far, to still crawl along?’

BSL also has a compound sign which has combined the adjectival predicate of predisposition with the sign ALWAYS to resulting in an adverbial form meaning ‘typically’, glossed in (29) as ALWAYS-TYPICAL and shown in Figure 18. In ALWAYS-TYPICAL, the repeated movement of the predispositional marker is lost. This pattern of phonological reduction of movement in the surface form is common in compound signs in signed languages (Klima & Bellugi, 1979; Sutton-Spence & Woll, 1999).

Figure 18. ALWAYS-TYPICAL
The predicative possessive pronoun in ASL can also be used predispositionally, either alone (BE-TYPICAL-OF, formationally identical to POSS++) or compounded with the verb TEND (TEND-POSS). This form TEND-POSS, glossed by Klima & Bellugi (1979) as TEND'(HIS), is used with predicates to indicate predisposition to a certain activity or characteristic. As with BSL ALWAYS-TYPICAL, the repeated movement of the predispositional marker BE-TYPICAL-OF in the ASL compound TEND-POSS is lost.

These predispositional markers in both BSL and ASL are very likely examples of grammaticisation of a possessive pronoun to an aspectual marker denoting predisposition. Typologically grammaticisation of possession into aspect marking in spoken languages is very common (Heine, 1997). However, this grammaticisation path typically occurs with verbal markers of possession which then become verbal aspectual markers (e.g. English ‘have’). With BSL (and ASL), what we see instead is pronominal markers of possession (POSS ‘his/her/its’) becoming adjectival predicates of predisposition (BE-TYPICAL-OF). The BSL and ASL verbs HAVE do not have any aspectual function at all and only mark possession or existence (as described in §4.2.1).

6. Discussion and conclusion

In this chapter we have seen that British Sign Language exhibits many of the same patterns of possession as spoken languages and in similar ways. BSL has both attributive and predicative possession. BSL exhibits patterns consistent with those in spoken languages with inalienable possession. The lexical item HAVE is used for both possession and existence, which is another pattern seen in many spoken languages. BSL also has a split between HAVE and BELONG (foregrounded PR vs. foregrounded PM) shared by many spoken languages.

When we turn to looking at differences across signed languages regarding possession, these are generally the types of differences that we find across spoken languages - i.e. those features which are subject to parametric variation. Some languages like Australian Sign Language (Auslan), ASL and English have a possessive clitic which attaches to nouns; some
languages like Danish (and, it seems, present-day BSL) do not. Some spoken languages mark inalienability while others do not; there is evidence that BSL and some other signed languages mark inalienability (optionally at least) though it seems in different ways.

So it is clear there are many similarities between possession in signed languages and spoken languages. The differences seem to be strongest when considering the locative nature of many BSL signs. Across spoken languages, there is a strong link between possession, existentials and location (Freeze, 1992; Heine, 1997; Herslund & Baron, 2001). Specifically, in many spoken languages, the PM in a possessive construction is encoded as subject while the PR is encoded as a locative (e.g. dative) argument. In signed languages, signs such as pronouns, some nouns, agreement verbs, demonstratives, etc. are inherently locative. As we have seen in this chapter, many signs denoting (and/or grammaticised from) possession — e.g. possessive pronouns, nouns which can be spatially located, BELONG as an agreement verb, the predispositional markers BE-TYPICAL-OF and ALWAYS-TYPICAL — are spatially modified. This use of space is a natural product of the visual-gestural modality and is perhaps the most striking difference between signed and spoken languages when it comes to possession (and also pronominal/nominal reference and agreement in general), and is a good reason to consider signed languages when looking at the marking of possession across different languages.

Indeed, typological studies which aim to cover phenomena across a wide variety of languages often neglect to include signed languages. This oversight is unfortunate because signed languages have much to offer to language typologists. The features and categories that all known spoken and signed languages have in common are candidates for universal grammar, while those categories that differ across signed and spoken languages - particularly those which are thought to be universal amongst spoken languages - can help us tease apart those features which are truly inherent to human language versus those which may not be universal after all. In this chapter we have seen that while possession is likely a semantic category that is expressed in all human languages, language modality certainly does shape the way in which it is expressed.

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Notes

1. The proportion of native signers in the UK is generally considered to be approximately 5-10%, following statistics reported in Australia and the United States (Deaf Society of New South Wales, 1998; Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004).

2. Following conventions in the sign language literature, glosses are given for signs using all caps. Signs which require more than one English word for translation are glossed with English words separated by hyphens (e.g. ICE-CREAM). Fingerspelled words are indicated with hyphens in between letters (e.g. J-O-E) - see also footnote 8. Pronouns are glossed as PRO-1 for first person and PRO-non1 for non-first person. Possessive pronouns are glossed as POSS-1 for first person and POSS-non1 for non-first person. For ease of exposition, the dual and number-incorporated pronouns will be notated with a simple English gloss instead (e.g. TWO-OF-US, THREE-OF-THEM). Within examples, when indexing different non-first person locations, PRO-2/POSS-2 is used for forms which index the location of the addressee. Indices such as a, b, c (e.g. PRO-a, POSS-a) are used to index non-addressed participants. Unless otherwise noted, where indices occur with nouns (e.g. BOX-a), the noun sign may have been established in that locus previously in the discourse, or some sign within the example establishes the noun at that locus. Where repetitions of movement occur, the number of path movements is indicated with ‘+’ (e.g. POSS-non1++ has two movement paths). In English translations of examples, for ease of exposition, different gendered pronouns (e.g. he vs she) are used to distinguish different referents, though BSL pronouns do not mark gender.
3. Not all sign language researchers subscribe to a two-person analysis for signed languages - e.g. Berenz (2002) argues for a three-person system for Brazilian and American Sign Languages, as do Alibasic Ciciliani & Wilbur (2006) for Croatian Sign Language.

4. A similar system of exclusive pronouns has also been identified in ASL - for more see Cormier (2005, 2007).

5. Word order in BSL like other signed languages is quite variable on the surface. Grammatical processes like topic marking make many different word orders possible. There have been attempts by sign language researchers to posit a basic default order from which other orders are derived. Such researchers have claimed that the basic word order for ASL is SVO (Fischer, 1975; Neidle, Kegl, MacLaughlin, Bahan, & Lee, 2000). There has not been as much work on word order in BSL but it appears that BSL is also, underlyingly at least, SVO, although see Deuchar (1983) for a different perspective.

6. With non-first person forms, singular collective possessive pronouns are directed towards a location in space that appears approximately equidistant between the multiple locations associated with the referents (if dual or plural), or the same general location of the pronoun (if a number-incorporated pronoun).

7. This particular example is an emphatic use of the possessive, as described in §4.1.5.

8. It is possible for the possessive pronoun to precede the possessor in both BSL and ASL (e.g., POSS-non1 JOHN CAR NICE ‘John’s car is nice’). MacLaughlin (1997) shows that this construction (POSS PR PM) can only be used in ASL when the possessor in question has been established previously (i.e. it cannot be used with indefinite possessors) and that this construction is strongly preferred in topic position. According to Neidle, Kegl, MacLaughlin, Bahan & Lee (2000), “the proper analysis of this construction remains something of a mystery” (p. 182). We only identified one token of this ordering in our corpus of BSL data; by far the most frequent ordering was PR POSS PM.

9. Fingerspelling systems within signed languages are based on the written alphabet of the surrounding hearing community and are used for various purposes, including proper names and other concepts for which a native lexical sign may not exist. Auslan is historically related to BSL; Auslan, BSL and New Zealand Sign Language are generally considered to be dialects of the same language (Johnston, 2003; McKee & Kennedy, 2000), and all three languages share a common two-handed fingerspelling system.

10. Though see Payne (this volume) for arguments against the “possession is location” view.
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