Chomsky (1995) considers the interfaces to be the only conceptually necessary levels of linguistic structure. On the conceptual-intentional (C-I) side, it can be assumed that there would be no systematic difference between signed and spoken languages. However, it is clear that on the articulatory-perceptual (A-P) side, sign languages and spoken languages are distinct. The pressures contributed by the manual-visual modality versus the oral-aural modality result in many surface differences between signed and spoken languages. If the mapping between C-I and A-P interfaces is direct, then, it would seem that the structures of signed languages and spoken languages could diverge radically (1). However, it has been found that sign languages and spoken languages share many features in their grammars (see Sandler & Lillo-Martin in press for an overview), indicating that the divergence due to the A-P interface is much later (2).

In this talk, I discuss this issue using as an example a part of language whose status is debatable even within spoken languages, namely, prosody. In sign languages, there are various components which are arguably prosodic, including analogues to juncture, stress, intonation, and perhaps even tone (Nespor & Sandler 1999; Sandler 1999; Wilbur 1999). Several of these components have been argued to be of syntactic relevance. If they are prosody, are they not syntax? If they are syntax, what are the consequences for the architecture of the grammar?

One factor in this debate should be whether or not there is any independent evidence that a particular prosodic element is needed in the syntax. That is, if a purely prosodic element has effects within the syntax, then surely there must be a way to represent this element syntactically. The necessity of a syntactic representation of prosodic elements is not uniform, however. For example, the status of intonation-marked polarity questions is different across languages. In Russian – but not in English – such questions license polarity elements (3)-(4). The lesson is to examine each prosodic element for its syntactic consequences in order to determine its place in the grammar.

In the talk, several kinds of prosodic elements in sign languages will be discussed. The primary one is the analogue to intonational melodies: facial expressions. Although the most prominent analysis has been that facial expressions are, in some sense, syntactic, in recent years the clear intonational nature of facial expressions has been uncovered (e.g., Nespor & Sandler 1999). If they are intonational, does this mean they are not syntactic? Not necessarily – as just argued, this point should be determined on the basis of possible syntactic effects. However, although some researchers have assumed that facial expressions directly reflect syntactic structure (Neidle et al. 2000), there has been no argument for this on independent grounds.

On the other hand, there is clearly a syntactic effect of a different prosodic element in sign languages, namely prosodic prominence. Prominent constituents tend to appear in the sentence-final position (Wilbur 1991) (5). Various analyses have been proposed for the syntactic operations which result in sentence-final placement of prominent elements (Petronio 1993, Wilbur 1997, Quadros 1999, Lillo-Martin & Quadros 2004, Nunes & Quadros 2004). Whatever the analysis, it is clear that some kind of syntactic representation (e.g., a feature) underlies both the syntactic movement operation and the prosodic realization.

To conclude, the similarities between sign languages and spoken languages are strong enough to recognize that a common computational component serves them both. Even when it comes to parts of the languages which are quite close to the A-P interface, commonalities between languages in the two modalities require common explanation. This does not mean that there are no differences – true modality effects exist and have important ramifications for the structure of the grammar. But that is the topic of another talk.
on byl kogda-nibud' v Moskve? Russian
he was when-ever in Moscow
‘Was he ever in Moscow?’ (lit: ‘He was ever in Moscow?’)

* You have (/you’ve) ever been to Moscow?
Cf. Have you ever been to Moscow?

a. JOHN (CAN) READ CAN. ASL/LSB
b. (THREE) STUDENT PASS TEST THREE.
c. (WHAT) JOHN BUY WHAT?
d. JOHN BUY WHAT, PORSCHE.

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