“Describing the grammar of a language consists primarily of describing its constructions” (Langacker 2008:183). Following from this, to understand the grammar of any language its constructions must be identified and analyzed in detail. This study identifies and analyzes two noun phrase structures in American Sign Language (ASL) that include (at least) a noun and a sign resembling a pronoun. These pronoun-like signs have often been treated as variants of a single sign. This paper investigates the following research questions regarding these noun phrases. Have distinct pronoun-like signs with distinct meanings been incorrectly grouped together as variants of a single sign? What are these signs and what constructions can they participate in? I identify and analyze two distinct signs that resemble pronouns and are uttered in two noun phrase constructions. I show that these noun phrases may be associated with two instances of their referent: the traditional conceptual entity designated by the phrase and a spatially blended entity (a token or surrogate (Liddell 2003)) identified by the directionality of the signs. I argue that the traditional instance of any referent may be definite while the spatial instance of the same referent could be (spatially) indefinite.

I analyzed 30 videos of naturally occurring ASL discourses and looked for signs that resemble pronouns uttered as the final sign in a noun phrase. Figure 1 shows the pronoun PRO\(^{5x}\) (gloss consistent with Liddell (2003)). I analyzed 50 instances of this sign uttered as part of what I call the [[Noun] PRO\(^{5x}\)] construction. This sign is articulated with an extended index finger moving along a short path in the direction the index finger is pointing. In the analyzed examples, PRO\(^{5x}\) refers to a schematic thing that is elaborated by the preceding noun. This traditional instance of the referent is definite because it is highly accessible to the addressee. However, the directionality of this sign introduces a second instance of its referent: a token that can be considered indefinite because it has not been previously identified (or located in space) in the immediately preceding discourse. Thus, when uttered as part of [[Noun] PRO\(^{5x}\)], PRO\(^{5x}\) functions as a spatially indefinite determiner, and means something like “the X, located here.”

Figure 2 shows a different pronoun-like sign, which I gloss SP-DEF-DET\(^{5x}\). I analyzed 40 instances of this sign uttered as part of what I refer to as the [[Noun] SP-DEF-DET\(^{5x}\)] construction. This sign is also articulated with an extended index finger, but exhibits minimal or no path movement. In all the analyzed examples SP-DEF-DET\(^{5x}\) refers to a schematic thing that is elaborated by the preceding noun. Like the previous construction, the traditional instance of the referent is definite. However, the signer’s index finger points toward a token that was previously introduced. Thus, this second instance of the referent can be considered definite because it too is highly accessible to the addressee. Therefore, when uttered as part of [[Noun] SP-DEF-DET\(^{5x}\)], SP-DEF-DET\(^{5x}\) functions as a spatially definite determiner, and means something like, “the X, known location.”

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1 One or both of the signs analyzed for this study may be the same as some pronoun-like signs discussed by other authors. (e.g., POINT (Hoffmeister 1977); DET or PRO.3 (Zimmer & Patschke 1990); PRO (Wilbur 1979); PRONOUN (Lillo-Martin & Klima 1990); INDEX (Kegl 1976, 1977; Meier 1990; Emmorey et al. 1991; Cormier 2002); IX (Bahan et al. 1995; MacLaughlin 1997)). However, none of these authors describe the form of the pronoun-like signs in enough detail for me to determine the specific sign or signs they analyzed. Certainly none of these authors comment on a distinction in form based on the presence or absence of movement along a path.

2 This instance of the referent is highly accessible and therefore definite because it was either introduced in the immediately preceding discourse, or it is an instance of a type for which there is only one eligible candidate (Langacker 2008:494).
Sample ASL data:

**POSS-1 | GRANDMOTHER | PRO*grandmother**

Figure 1: ([Noun] PRO*[^x]|grandmother|) A noun phrase ending with the pronoun PRO*[^x]|

**C-A-B-E-R | SP-DEF-DET | CAEBER**

Figure 2: ([Noun] SP-DEF-DET*[^x]|CAEBER|) A noun phrase ending with a sign resembling PRO*[^x], articulated without movement along a path

References


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The vertical lines superimposed over the two images of PRO*grandmother| in Figure 1 (and SP-DEF-DET*[^x]|CAEBER| in Figure 2) are intended to make the signs’ path movement (or lack of path movement) easier to perceive in the still images.

