Manual prosodic cues: PALM-UP and pointing signs

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Where did we start?

Baker-Shenk 1977
A turntaking signal in ASL.
Engberg-Pedersen 2002
A presentation gesture in DSL; discourse regulation, back-channel information.

How about NGT?
• Can we find comparable functions for PALM-UP?
• What is the role of the sign within (smaller) discourse units or syntactic units?

Our data sources
• ECHO fable stories
• Elicited sentences in dialogue setting
• Elicited complex sentences in monologue setting

PALM-UP in Nederlandse Gebarentaal (NGT)

In teaching materials for NGT courses, PALM-UP is described as a sentence-final ‘General Question Sign’.

In our data
• PALM-UP not limited to end of turn, but also found in other sentence-final and clause-final position.
• Function: phrase-final PALM-UP may also function as an evaluative marker / auto-comment.

‘No news really PALM-UP my brother has gone to the movies, my sister is out to work.’

• Meaning: a semantically and pragmatically empty manual form, hosting non-manual signals with a specific meaning.

• Form: may assimilate to preceding sign.

‘I walked by this person I knew, and he just walked past me! PALM-UP’

• Form: may be used directionally

‘My sister [left side] bought a little dog recently. It was really scared of me PALM-UP; I’ll stay away for a while, give them some rest.’

Conclusions
• The boundary function of the PALM-UP sign is not limited to the discourse level in NGT.
• The PALM-UP sign itself has no semantic or pragmatic impact other than signalling a boundary; the accompanying non-manual expression carries the meaning.

Another frequent phrase-final element: INDEX

Other phonetically light elements at the end of domains: indexical signs.

Forms
Movement: sometimes absent; may be repeated
Handshapes: thumb, index finger, flat hand
Orientation: tip towards location, rotation variable

Function: different rotations are used for different functions.
1. Localisation: prone rotation
2. Indefinite reference: supine rotation

If no such function is expressed, orientation appears to be variable and is free to assimilate to neighbouring forms. Some supine phrase final indexes may be blends of index and PALM UP.

‘My mother has a new partner; I don’t think much of him.’

Meaning: repetition of INDEX at the end of a phrase domain is not needed for referent identification.

Conclusions
• At least two semantic categories use orientation-as-rotation. More?!
• In sentence-final position, indexes often are semantically empty. Do they have a prosodic function?

Can the prosodic context explain the occurrence of INDEX and PALM-UP?

Syntactic analyses of the occurrence of indexes are targeted at when they occur, not why they occur. Pronoun copy (Bos 1995), Copy theory (Nunes & Quadros 2004)
The use of INDEX and PALM-UP appears to depend in part on the prosodic context.

Hypothesis: NGT sentences aim to end in a full foot; light elements such as indexical signs and PALM-UP can be added to incomplete prosodic domains at the end of sentences. An NGT foot is formed by a combination of two syllables (mov. units) or one heavy syllable (complex mov.).

Evidence
• Phrase-final prosodically heavy predicates cannot be followed by an index.
• Phrase-final indexes can be left out if the preceding sign has enhanced movement and/or is accompanied by a head nod and/or strong facial expressions.

And now: how does non-manual information contribute to prosodic weight?!