

On the meaning(s) of reduplication in French Sign Language

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- 1 Introduction
- 2 The semantics of red
- 3 Deriving the plurality inference in LSF
- 4 Deriving infelicity of reduplication with numerals
- 5 Conclusion

Reduplication in LSF

- Like most sign languages, French Sign Language (LSF) makes a productive use of **reduplication**.
- In (1), the noun CHILD is repeated sideways to indicate a plurality of children:

(1) IX₁ HAVE MANY CHILD >+>+
'I have many children.'

6/7

Glossing conventions

- + reduplication of sign
- >+ sideward movement followed by reduplication
- IX_{a,b,c} individual *loci* associated with pointing gesture
- IX₁, IX₂ first person, second person

Morpho-phonological constraints on red

- Across SLs, reduplication is **morphologically constrained** (Pizzuto and Corazza 1996 for LIS; Sutton-Spence and Woll 1999 for BSL; Pfau and Steinbach 2006 for DGS; van Boven 2021,2024 for NGT).
- Although there is variation (c.f. van Boven 2024), reduplication is generally not available for **body-anchored** or **complex-movement** signs.

(2) red possible

- BOOK (M)
- CHILD (S)
- LEAF (S)
- PERSON (S)

(3) red not possible

- MOM (B)
- FISH (C)
- WATER (C)

The distribution of red in LSF

- In LSF, red can be observed across grammatical categories.

(4) Nouns	(5) Verbs	(6) Adjectives
a. BOOK	a. SEND	a. HARD
b. CHILD	b. ASK- QUESTION	b. TRUE
c. LEAF	c. GIVE	c. RIGHT
d. PERSON	d. PICK-OUT	
e. EVENT	e. ...	
f. ...		

- At this stage, we found no red-modified adverbs, but there might be.

Goals for today

- This talk will focus on the interpretation of nominal reduplication (red).
- We will present novel data from LSF and argue that the meaning of red is inclusive, adding to an ever increasing list of languages ([Sauerland, 2003](#); [Sauerland et al., 2005](#); [Renans et al., 2018](#); [Bylinina and Podobryaev, 2020](#); [Sağ, 2022](#); [Scontras, 2022](#); [Yatsushiro et al., 2023](#); [Toquero-Pérez, 2025](#))
- An inclusive-plural analysis of red helps us to account for otherwise puzzling data about **weak readings in downward-entailing contexts and restricted composition with numerals**.

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red as grammatical number

- It is standard in the literature to analyze red as an exponent of grammatical plural number (Wilbur 1987, 2005; Pizzuto and Corazza 1996; Pfau and Steinbach 2006; Steinbach 2012; Neidle and Nash 2012; Koulidobrova 2018, 2021; van Boven 2021, 2024; van Boven et al. 2023 i.a.)
- red is conceived as a form of **optional number inflection** (Pfau and Steinbach, 2006))

red and pluralities

- This is supported by the fact that, across SLs, unreduplicated (bare) nouns can denote pluralities.
- The two LSF sentences (7a) and (7b) can both be used to denote a plurality of children.

- (7) a. $PI_a SHOP_a CHILD_b LIKE.A.LOT_b .$ 5/6
'A child/children like this shop a lot.'
- b. $PI_a SHOP_a CHILD > + > + > +_b LIKE_b .$ 6/7
'Children-red like this shop a lot.'

red and pluralities

- In upward-entailing contexts, red-N cannot be used to denote non-plural entities:

(8) *Context: there is just one child in the school.*

TEACHER_a WELCOME CHILD_{>+_a} SCHOOL .

2/3

Intended: 'The teachers welcomed the child-red at school.'

- However, in downward-entailing contexts, red has a weak interpretation:

(9) PI_a SHOP_a ACCEPT CHILD_{>+>+} NOT .

7/7

'This shop does not accept child-red.'

- The inclusive reading surfaces in order antitone environments such as scope of negative quantifiers (10) and antecedents of conditionals, (11):

(10) PI_a $TREE_a$ $LEAF+$ $NONE$ 6/7

'This tree has no leaves-red.'

(11) IF ALL $STUDENT_a$ $READ$ $BOOK>+>+_a$, $TEACHER_b$ 6/6
 $HAPPY$

'If all the students read books-red, the teacher will be happy.'

\rightsquigarrow The teacher will be happy even if most of the students read only one book.

Deriving the plurality inference

- Deriving the plurality inference crucially relies on the availability of a competitor to be strengthened through negation of non-weaker alternatives:

- (13) a. The students read the books.
b. $\mathcal{A}(13a) = \{ \text{the students read a book, } \dots \}$

Deriving the plurality inference

- One way to create such an asymmetry between the alternatives is to locate it at the level of the semantics of number features ([Sauerland, 2003](#); [Sauerland et al., 2005](#); [Scontras, 2022](#)).
- Under this approach, plural number is compatible with both atoms and sums, while singular is only compatible with atom reference:

Semantics of grammatical number

- (14) a. $\llbracket \text{PL} \rrbracket = \lambda P. \lambda x. P(x)$
b. $\llbracket \text{SG} \rrbracket = \lambda P. \lambda x. P(x) \wedge \text{atom}(x)$.

Deriving the plurality inference

- Strengthening of the weak element is obtained in the grammar through application of exhaustivity operators (Chierchia, 2006; Spector, 2007; Magri, 2011; Chierchia et al., 2012), as in (15):

Propositional EXH

$$(15) \quad \llbracket \text{EXH} \rrbracket^w = \lambda \mathcal{A}. \lambda p. p(w) \wedge \forall q [q \in A_{IE}(p) \rightarrow \neg q(w)]$$

- (13a) a. The students read the books.
b. $\mathcal{A}(13a) = \{ \text{the students read a book, } \dots \}$
c. $\text{EXH}((13a)) = \text{The students read the books} \wedge$
 $\neg \text{the students read a book}$
 $\equiv \text{The students read more than one book}$

Puzzle #1: lack of competitor

- However, it is less obvious to determine what the competitor of red would be, since LSF has no articles and LSF bare nouns can equally denote atoms and pluralities. Recall our example above:

(16) $PI_a SHOP_a CHILD_b LIKE.A.LOT_b .$
'A child/children like this shop a lot.'

5/6

LSF

- (17) a. $[[CHILD]] = \{a, b, c, a \sqcup b, a \sqcup c, b \sqcup c, a \sqcup b \sqcup c\}$
b. $[[CHILD-red]] = \{a \sqcup b, a \sqcup c, b \sqcup c, a \sqcup b \sqcup c\}$

- Here, it seems that N-red entails the bare noun/singular N, being more restrictive.

Puzzle #2: reduplication and numerals

- red is degraded with numerals:

- (18) a. IX_1 HAVE 3 CHILD 6/7
'I have three children.'
- b. IX_1 HAVE 3 CHILD >+>+ 4/4
'I have three children-red.'

- Why is that? red should semantically be compatible with n -specified nouns, provided $|n| > 1$. But this is not the case.

Puzzle #2: reduplication and numerals

	Num + red	
LSF	✗	
ÖGS	✓	Skant et al. (2002)
LIS	✓	Pizzuto and Corazza (1996)
NGT	✓	Harder (2003), van Boven (2024)
Hausa SL	✓	Schmaling (2000)
DGS	✗	Pfau and Steinbach (2006)
ASL	✗	Wilbur (1987), Neidle and Nash (2012)
ISL	✗	Stavans (1996)

Table: Distribution of red and numerals across SLs

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Deriving the plurality inference in LSF

- It has been observed that other languages with plurals-compatible bare nouns also display plurality inferences (Bylinina and Podobryaev, 2020; Marty, 2020; Toquero-Pérez, 2025).

Numberless bare nouns in Turkish

(19) a. Ali kitap oku-du
Ali book read.PST
'Ali read one or more books.'

b. Oda-da fare var
Room-LOC mouse exist
'There are one or more mice in the room.'

[Turkish, Sağ 2022, 1a-b]

Deriving the plurality inference in LSF

- In case-marked argument positions, Turkish bare nouns are interpreted as definite and strictly singular, (20):

Case-marked bare nouns in Turkish

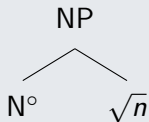
- (20) a. Ali kitab-ı oku-du
Ali book-ACC read.PST
'Ali read the book.'
- b. Ali çocuğ-a kitab-ı ver-di
Ali child-DAT book-ACC give-PST
'Ali gave the book to the child.'

[Turkish, [Sağ 2022](#), 2b-c

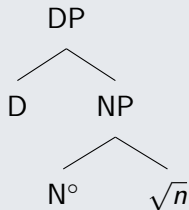
Deriving the plurality inference in LSF

- It is therefore safe to assume that bare nouns in Turkish (and other languages with general number, cf. [Martí 2020](#)) are ambiguous between two different structures:

(21) a.



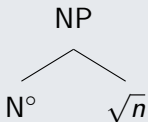
b.



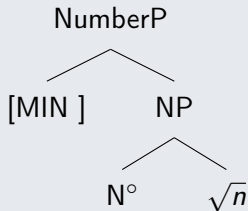
Deriving the plurality inference in LSF

- The same strategy can be applied to LSF bare nouns; they are ambiguous between a genuinely bare structure in (22a) and a more complex structure (22b):

(22) a.



b.



Deriving the plurality inference in LSF

- MIN is a number feature that restricts its argument to non-complex parts (in our case, atoms):

The feature MINIMAL (Harbour, 2011, 2014)

$$(23) \quad \llbracket \text{MINIMAL} \rrbracket = \lambda P. \lambda x. P(x) \wedge \neg \exists y [P(y) \wedge y \sqsubset x]$$

- So MIN-specified nouns will only denote singularities:

$$(24) \quad \begin{array}{l} \text{a.} \quad \llbracket \text{CHILD} \rrbracket = \{a, b, c, a \sqcup b, a \sqcup c, b \sqcup c, a \sqcup b \sqcup c\} \\ \text{b.} \quad \llbracket \text{CHILD-MIN} \rrbracket = \{a, b, c\} \end{array}$$

Deriving the plurality inference in LSF

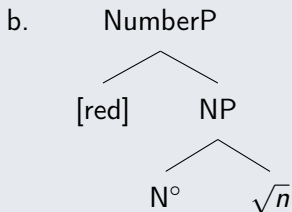
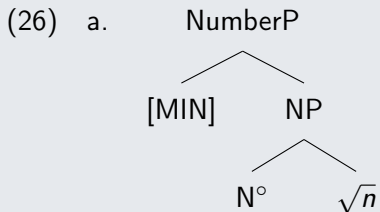
- By contrast, recall that we established that *red* has an inclusive semantics: we therefore take it to morphologically express plural number, (14a):

(25) a. $\llbracket \text{red} \rrbracket = \lambda P. \lambda x. P(x)$

b. $\llbracket \text{CHILD-red} \rrbracket = \{a, b, c, a \sqcup b, a \sqcup c, b \sqcup c, a \sqcup b \sqcup c\}$

Deriving the plurality inference in LSF

- The two structures are Katzirian alternatives ([Katzir, 2007](#); [Fox and Katzir, 2011](#)), being of equal complexity.



- Since the N-MIN alternative entails the N-red alternative, assertion of N-red is subject to strengthening via exhaustification.

Deriving the plurality inference in LSF

- Exhaustification can be obtained locally, at the predicate level by using the predicate-level EXH of [Mayr \(2015\)](#) (see also [Ahn 2019](#); [Sauerland and Bobaljik 2022](#)):

$$(27) \quad \begin{aligned} \text{a.} \quad & \llbracket \text{EXH-PRED} \rrbracket = \lambda P. \lambda X. P(x) = 1 \wedge \forall Q \in \text{Alt}(P) [P \not\subseteq \\ & \quad Q \rightarrow Q(X) = 0] \\ \text{b.} \quad & \text{Alt}(\text{rep}) = \{\text{MINIMAL}\} \\ \text{c.} \quad & \llbracket [N[\text{EXH-PRED}[\text{rep}]]] \rrbracket = \llbracket \text{rep} \wedge \neg \text{MINIMAL} \rrbracket = \\ & \lambda X. N(X) \wedge \exists y [P(y) \wedge y \sqsubset x] \end{aligned}$$

- In DE-contexts, EXH is not inserted because strengthening in that case would lead to overall weakening of the sentence ([Fox and Spector, 2018](#)).

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Deriving the restriction on numerals

- Recall that sign languages seem to differ as to whether they allow morphological plural on nouns together with numerals.
- LSF (just like ASL) does not allow plural with numerals:

- (28) a. IX₁ HAVE 3 CHILD 6/7
'I have three children.'
- b. IX₁ HAVE 3 CHILD >+>+ 4/4
'I have three children-red.'

Deriving the restriction on numerals

- Similar variation is attested for spoken languages ([Scontras, 2013, 2022](#); [Martí, 2020](#)); for instance, English requires plural marking with numerals, while the opposite holds for Turkish:

- (29) a. One boy
b. Two boys
c. *Two boy

- (30) a. Bir çocuk(*-lar)
One boy.SG-PL
'One boy'
b. İki çocuk(*-lar)
Two boy.SG-PL
'Two boys'
[[Martí 2020](#), (3)-(4)]

Deriving the restriction on numerals

- Martí (2020) argues that this difference is captured by the kind of number feature active in the language, $[\pm\text{ATOMIC}]$ vs $[\pm\text{MINIMAL}]$.
- $[\pm\text{ATOMIC}]$ restricts the denotation of the predicate it affixes to to atoms only:

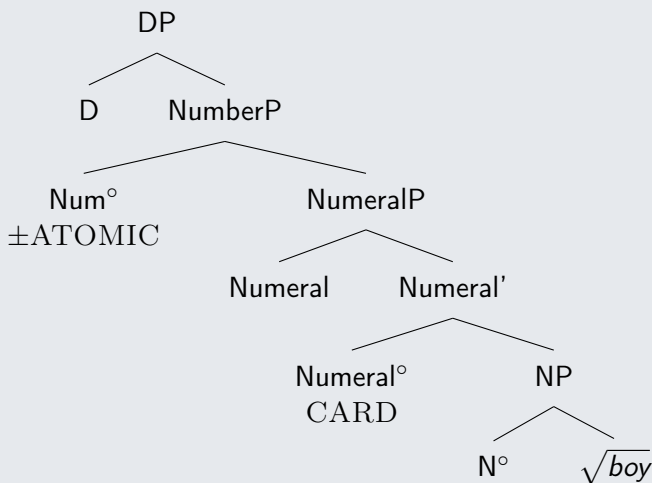
Number features

- (31) a. $[[\pm\text{ATOMIC}]] = \lambda P.\lambda x.P(x) \wedge (\neg)\text{atom}(x)$
b. $[[\pm\text{MINIMAL}]] = \lambda P.\lambda x.P(x) \wedge (\neg)\exists y[P(y) \wedge y \sqsubset x]$
[Harbour 2011, 2014]

- While $[\pm\text{MINIMAL}]$ and $[\pm\text{ATOMIC}]$ have the same effect on bare nouns, they come apart when composing with numerals.

Number composition with numerals

- Taking inspiration from [Martí \(2020\)](#) and [Scontras \(2022\)](#), we propose the following structure for Numeral DPs:



- The operator CARD is an atom-counting function: it takes a predicate P and a number n as its argument and returns the P -set of individuals containing exactly n -atoms ([Hackl, 2000](#)):

The CARD operator

$$(32) \quad \llbracket \text{CARD} \rrbracket = \lambda P. \lambda n. \lambda x. P(x) \wedge |x| = n$$

Number composition with numerals

- However, departing from systems using bivalent number features, we assume the following privative features, where PL has a weak semantics and is strengthened by the exhaustivity operator:

Number features (final)

- (33)
- a. $\llbracket \text{PL} \rrbracket = \lambda P. \lambda x. P(x)$
 - b. $\llbracket \text{ATOMIC} \rrbracket = \lambda P. \lambda x. P(x) \wedge \text{atom}(x)$
 - c. $\llbracket \text{MINIMAL} \rrbracket = \lambda P. \lambda x. P(x) \wedge \neg \exists y [P(y) \wedge y \sqsubset x]$

Number composition with numerals: English

- Assuming that English uses ATOMIC *cum* EXH in its number system, we derive the following when an NP associates with a numeral:

- (34) a. $\llbracket \llbracket \text{ATOMIC} \llbracket \llbracket \text{one CARD} \llbracket \text{boy} \rrbracket \rrbracket \rrbracket =$
 $\lambda x. \text{boy}(x) \wedge \text{atom}(x) \wedge |\text{boy}| = 1$
 $\equiv \text{one boy}$
- b. $* \llbracket \llbracket \text{EXH}[\text{PL}] \llbracket \llbracket \text{one CARD} \llbracket \text{boy} \rrbracket \rrbracket \rrbracket \equiv \text{one-boys}$
- c. $* \llbracket \llbracket \text{ATOMIC} \llbracket \llbracket \text{two CARD} \llbracket \text{boy} \rrbracket \rrbracket \rrbracket \equiv \text{two-boy}$
- d. $\llbracket \llbracket \text{EXH}[\text{PL}] \llbracket \llbracket \text{two CARD} \llbracket \text{boy} \rrbracket \rrbracket \rrbracket =$
 $\lambda x. \text{boy}(x) \wedge \neg \text{atom}(x) \wedge |\text{boy}| = 2$
 $\equiv \text{two boys}$

Number composition with numerals: Turkish

- By contrast, Turkish is a [MINIMAL]system: composition of non-minimal pluralities built out of exhaustification of the PL feature ([EXH [PL]]) will systematically fail with the CARD operator, because cardinalities do not have proper sub-parts (no matter what the measure of that cardinality is):

Turkish

- (35) a. $\llbracket \llbracket \text{MINIMAL} \rrbracket \llbracket \llbracket \text{bir CARD} \rrbracket \llbracket \text{cocuk} \rrbracket \rrbracket \rrbracket = \lambda x. [\text{boy}(x) \wedge |\text{boy}| = 1] \wedge \neg \exists y \llbracket \llbracket \text{boy}(x) \wedge |\text{boy}| = 1 \rrbracket (y) \wedge y \sqsubset x]$
 $\equiv \textit{bir cocuk}$
- b. $*\llbracket \llbracket \text{EXH}[\text{PL}] \rrbracket \llbracket \llbracket \text{bir CARD} \rrbracket \llbracket \text{cocuk} \rrbracket \rrbracket \rrbracket \equiv \textit{bir-cocuk-lar}$
- c. $\llbracket \llbracket \text{MINIMAL} \rrbracket \llbracket \llbracket \text{iki CARD} \rrbracket \llbracket \text{cocuk} \rrbracket \rrbracket \rrbracket = \lambda x. [\text{boy}(x) \wedge |\text{boy}| = 2] \wedge \neg \exists y \llbracket \llbracket \text{boy}(x) \wedge |\text{boy}| = 2 \rrbracket (y) \wedge y \sqsubset x]$
 $\equiv \textit{iki cocuk}$
- d. $*\llbracket \llbracket \text{EXH}[\text{PL}] \rrbracket \llbracket \llbracket \text{two CARD} \rrbracket \llbracket \text{cocuk} \rrbracket \rrbracket \rrbracket$
 $\equiv \textit{iki-cocuk-lar}$

Number composition with numerals: LSF

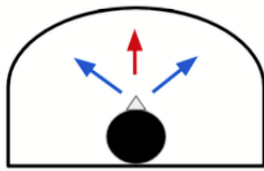
- The prediction is as follows: a language that has the feature MIN to create singularities (instead of ATOMIC) should behave like Turkish, and therefore not allow numerals to compose with pluralities.
- There is evidence that LSF, just like ASL, is such a language.
- The strongest piece of evidence comes from the pronominal paradigm of LSF which (like ASL, [Cormier 2008](#)) has exclusive first person forms.

Number composition with numerals: LSF

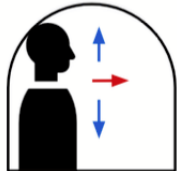
- Using [Berenz \(1996, 2002\)](#)' spatial features model, we can represent the LSF pronominal paradigm as in Table 2:



(a) [proximal]



(b) [central]



(c) [mid]

Minimal		Augmented
1.EXCL	IX_1 [+PROX, +CENT, +MID]	$CIRC_1$ [+PROX, -cent, +MID]
1.INCL	${}_1V+2$ [+PROX, +CENT, +MID]	$CIRC_1$ [+PROX, +cent, +MID]
2	IX_2 [-PROX, +CENT, +MID]	$CIRC_2$ [-PROX, +CENT, +MID]
3	$IX_{a,b,\dots}$ [-PROX, -CENT, \pm MID]	$CIRC_{a,b,\dots}$ [-PROX, -CENT, +MID]

Table: LSF pronominal paradigm

Number composition with numerals: LSF

- As a consequence, LSF and ASL pattern with Turkish and similar languages in not allowing exhausted plurals to combine with a numeral.
- The corollary of this prediction is that sign languages that allow for this kind of composition should be systems that do not make use of the MINIMAL feature, but rather ATOMIC - and therefore, allowing CARD to quantify over atoms rather than sub-parts.

	Num + red	
LSF	✗	
ÖGS	✓	Skant et al. (2002)
LIS	✓	Pizzuto and Corazza (1996)
NGT	✓	Harder (2003), van Boven (2024)
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ISL	✗	Stavans (1996)

Table: Table 1: Distribution of red and numerals across SLs

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Conclusion

- In this talk, I have tried to make a case that reduplication in LSF is an exponent of plural number, whose interpretation is **inclusive** (cp. [Schlenker and Lamberton 2019](#); [Koulidobrova 2021](#) on American Sign Language).
- I have argued that this is compatible with bare nouns in LSF being inclusive as well if the plural competitor is a **different, structurally equivalent structure** containing the MINIMAL feature.
- Treating bare N and N-MIN as different structures also allow us to account for the fact that LSF, like other languages such as Turkish, do not allow PL feature with numeral DPs.

Thank you!

Feedback/questions/comments much welcome!



- Please reach out!
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- Many thanks to my co-author and principal informant, Ludyvine Couteau. I take full responsibility for any error.

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