Effects of modality on language structure: clauses in sign languages

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When linguists come across a new language, they pull out their toolbox of linguistic terminology. This happened also in the case of sign languages – in spite of the obvious differences between signed and spoken languages. The term *agreement* became the common way of describing the phenomenon that the orientation and the direction of movement of the hand(s) articulating certain verb signs indicate different constellations of who does what to whom (e.g. the verb SEND-MAIL in Danish Sign Language in the equivalents of ‘I sent him a letter’ and ‘He sent me a letter’). What is called agreement in sign languages has obvious functional parallels with verb agreement in spoken languages. But as a general analysis of clause structure in sign languages it runs into problems that have to do with the modality. Typologically, it is odd that all sign languages show great similarities in the area of agreement even though most of them are not genetically related. Moreover, the class of agreement verbs is restricted to verbs whose articulators – the hand(s) – depict directly or metaphorically human beings interacting, which means that many clauses are left out of the analysis simply because they do not include agreement. Because of the strong focus on agreement, we have both misrepresented essential features of the so-called agreement clauses and neglected other clause types as well as other aspects of the use of space.