

## Unit 2: Rwandan Sign Language Grammar

This unit aims at helping trainees to understand the use of Rwandan Sign Language grammar

### Unit learning outcomes

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Identify the rules and structure of Rwandan Sign Language grammar
- Apply the rules and structure of Rwandan Sign Language grammar

### Topic 2.1 Rules and structure of Rwandan Sign Language grammar

This topic discusses the grammatical rules of sign language and Rwandan Sign Language grammar.

#### Activity3:

**Explain the difference between the following sentences**

- a. Kalisa is going to school.      B. Tomorrow Kalisa no go to school.

Sign Language has a set of rules that it follows when being signed. A tool you can use to remember the rules is "TRIPSTONCL" as described below by Humphries (1992) in his book entitled Learning American Sign Language.

- Topic/Comment
- Rhetorical
- Information Seeking
- Pronominalization
- Simple Yes/No
- Tense With Time
- Ordering of Simple Sentences
- Negation
- Conditional
- Long Yes/No

Grammatical rules of English and sign language grammar are explained below:

### **Topic/Comment**

In a simple sentence, the topic is described first, followed by the comment. Example: HER MONEY LOST, SHE UPSET. English: She's upset that she lost her money. The subject was described first (her money was lost) and then the comment followed (she was upset).

### **Tense with Time**

The time sign is placed at the beginning or near the beginning of a sentence. Example: YESTERDAY, ME STAY HOME. English: I stayed home yesterday. The time sign was "yesterday" and was located near the beginning of the sentence.

### **Simple Yes/No**

Short sentences that ask a yes/no question. The order of the signs there is no change.

Example: EXERCISE YOU WANT? With eyebrows raised. English: Do you want to exercise? The sentence given was short and the answer would be a yes or a no; the order of the signs could be moved around as well and mean the same thing.

**Long Yes/No:** Long yes/no questions, sometimes they use a topic/comment format.

Example: CAT BLACK TREE CLIMB, YOUR? With eyebrows raised

English: Is that black cat climbing the tree yours? The question was longer than that of a simple yes/no; the topic was described before the comment (which was the "your" part).

**Information Seeking:** Simple questions that ask for information. They can have variable sentence structures and rely sometimes on non-manual signals to distinguish them from a declarative sentence.

Example: OLD + YOU? With eyebrows squeezed.

English: How old are you? The question was short and simple, the sentence structure doesn't really have much to change though. Normally, non-manuals would be used in all three question situations.

- **Pronominalisation:** Pronouns are indicated by pointing to either a person or thing that is present, or a place in the signing space that is used as a referent point for a person or thing. Pointing is mostly done with the index finger, but eye gazing and other handshapes are sometimes used.

Example: MY BROTHER VISIT-ME

English: My brother is visiting me.

In this case, the pronominalization was when "he" was used; you could either be pointing at the brother or a spot in your signing space to refer to as "he".

- **Rhetorical:** In a rhetorical question, the signer asks a question and then answers it.

Example: ME KNOW RSL? YES.

English: I know RSL. The signer asked his or her question, and then answered it; by doing so, we knew he or she knows RSL.

- **Ordering of Simple Sentences** - In simple sentences, the verb can be placed before or after the object of the sentence.

Example: ME PLAYGAME

English: I'm playing the game. The sentence was short and simple, and we were allowed to move around the verb and not have it change the sentence.

- **Conditional:** In a conditional sentence, the condition is described first, then the outcome of the condition is described.

Example: SUPPOSE SHE SEES ME, ME LEAVE

English: I will have to leave if she sees me. In most conditional statements, the word "suppose" is used; the condition was said first (suppose she sees me), and then the outcome came afterward (I'll have to leave).

- **Negation:** You can negate a thought by placing a negative sign before the verb or by first describing a topic and then signing the appropriate negative sign, or by giving a negative head shake.

Example: ME NOT WATCH FOOTBALL GAME.

English: I'm not watching the football game.

In this case, the word "not" was the negation portion of the sentence, making the sentence negative (Humphries & Padden, 1992).

### Self-assessment

Write the following sentences in English grammar structure

- a. Pen you have?
- b. Me game play like.

## 1.2.Rwandan Sign Language Grammar

This topic introduces you to different rules and structure of Rwandan sign Language grammar.

**Grammar** is a set of rules for using a language. These rules guide users in the correct speaking

### Activity 4:

Rewrite the following sentence in Rwandan sign language grammar

- a. Do you remember my name?
- b. What animals do you have at home?

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Typical signed sentences tend to be expressed in subject-verb-object order (SVO)[or just subject-verb order if there is no object]. Remember, like all languages, RSL has more than one right word (sign) order. Sometimes RSL sentences are expressed in object-subject-verb order (but not as often as the basic SVO order).

The difference between "topic-comment" structure and "topicalization" (They are not the same thing.)

Let's briefly discuss "topic-comment" sentence structure and topicalization.

- **What is a Topic?**

A topic is what you are talking about. You can use either a subject or object as the "topic" in a sentence.

**Examples:**

A. If you use the *subject* as your topic, then you are using an active voice.  
BOY THROW BALL.                      *The boy throws the ball.*

B. If you use the *object* as your topic, then you are using a passive voice.  
BALL, BOY THROW.                      *The ball was thrown by the boy.*

Note that the active voice is in Subject-Verb-Object word order: BOY THROW BALL. The passive voice is in Object, Subject-Verb word order: BALL BOY THROW.

- **What is Topic-Comment Format?**

Both of the aforementioned sentences are in Topic-Comment format. As we've already established, the topic is what you are talking about and the comment makes observations about that topic. Topic is for the first item mentioned in a sentence (whether it is the subject or object) and the comment is the latter, and it makes a *comment* about the topic. So let's take a look at those sentences again:

A. Active Voice, using the subject as your topic.  
BOY THROW BALL.                      Topic: *BOY* Comment: *THROW BALL*  
*What                      is                      the                      topic?*                      Boy  
*What is the comment saying about the boy? He threw the ball.*

B. Passive Voice, using the object as your topic.  
BALL, BOY THROW. Topic: *BALL* Comment: *BOY THROW*  
*What                      is                      the                      topic?*                      Ball  
*What is the comment saying about the ball? It was thrown by the boy.*

So, as you can see, the topic can be *either* a subject or an object. Now that we've established the rule, the topic can be a "BOY" or it can be the "BALL" he is throwing, and it can either be the

subject or object of the sentence.

- A. The BOY can be:
  - The subject of the sentence: BOY THROW BALL.
  - The object of the sentence: BALL, HIT BOY.
- B. The BALL can be:
  - The subject of the sentence: BALL, HIT BOY.
  - The object of the sentence: BOY THROW BALL.

All human languages possess a variety of right ways to say things. The same is true of sign language. There are a variety of "right ways" to structure your sentences in Sign Language. You can use more or fewer signs and rearrange them depending on the context of your sentence and what you want to emphasize. To ask the equivalent of "Are you married?" you can sign in any of the formats:

YOU MARRY?  
MARRIED YOU?  
YOU MARRIED YOU?

### **Topicalization**

As a general rule, when we use that particular signing order, we tend to use topicalization.

Topicalization is a **different** concept from "TOPIC / COMMENT."

Topicalization is a sub-category of topic/comment.

Topicalization provides a way to use an object as your topic. (In English that is referred to as using passive structure.)

**Topicalization** is the process of using a particular signing order (syntax) and specific facial expressions (plus head positioning) to introduce the object of your sentence and turn it into your topic.

For example, if instead of signing "BOY THROW BALL" suppose I signed BALL, BOY THROW.

I would raise my eyebrows when I signed the word BALL, and then I'd relax my eyebrows and sign the comment "BOY THROW" (with a slight nod of the head).

A sentence using Topic-Comment sentence structure can either be topicalized or non-topicalized:

#### **A. Topicalized**

1. YOUR MOM? ME MET YESTERDAY!  
Your mom is the topic and the sentence is an Object-Verb-Subject word order
2. MY CAT? DIED!

My cat is the topic and the sentence is in Object-Verb word order. The word, MY, is an attributive adjective.

B. Non-topicalized

1. ME MET YOUR MOM YESTERDAY!

I am the topic and the sentence is in Subject-Verb-Object word order.

2. MY CAT DIED! [Note there is no comma or question mark after "CAT."]

My cat is the topic and the sentence is in Subject-Verb word order. The word, MY, is an attributive adjective.

**Additional notes:**

**Who decides what correct and incorrect grammar is?**

The grammar (set of rules for proper use) of a language is developed by the group of people who use the language. New grammar rules come into existence when enough members of the group have spoken (signed) their language a particular way often enough and long enough that it would seem odd to speak the language in some other way.

**Interrogative Type: Yes/No Questions**

Symbol --- Q --- (1) raised eyebrows 2 tilted or diagonal head with shoulders forward and 3

hold the last sign a little longer to indicate the end of conversation.

English: Are you deaf? RSL: -- q –DEAF YOU?? (Delete “Are”).

I HAVE A QUESTION FOR YOU. (Sign a question mark in the air).

**Interrogative Type: Questions (who, what, where, why, how, which, how many, how much)**

Symbol --- Why Question (WQ) --- (with squeezed eyebrows and tilted or diagonal head)

English: What time is it? RSL: 1) TIME WHAT?

-- wq– 2) Time what?

---- wq ---Who is Kalisa ? 1) K-A-L-I-S-A WHO?

**Exception:**

----- q ---

**English:** How are you?

**RSL:** YOU HOW? (This is intended to start a conversation)

--- q ----

Who won the game? WIN WHO? ? (With strong curiosity)

### **Affirmatives**

Symbol --- y --- (head nodding) --y--

**English:** Tom can sign. **RSL:** T-O-M SIGN POSSIBLE.:

### **Negatives/Negation**

Symbol --- n --- (with squeezed eyebrows and headshake)

----- n ---

**English:** I don't have time. **RSL:** 1) ME TIME HAVE ZERO.

2) Me have no time.

3) Time have no Me.

Note: The negative sign cannot be left out while preserving the negative facial expression. Sometimes we replace negative prefixes (un, im, in, dis) with "not" Use "not" for negative contractions such as "don't", "isn't" Use "can't" for "cannot" "Won't" and "refuse" share with same sign while mouthing "won't"

- **Plurality**

**Note:** English prefers the plural, while RSL prefers the singular. In many cases, you need to change from a plural English word to a singular RSL word. RSL is always singular unless notified otherwise. RSL functions on singularity on the widespread assumption some situations are always plural. Below are examples for clarification.

**English:** How many classes are you taking? **RSL:** CLASS YOU TAKEMANY HOW?

I am going to the movies. ME MOVIE GO.

We want more potato chips. POTATO CHIP MORE WANT.

Do you like animals? ANIMAL YOU LIKE??

I have friends at school. ME FRIEND MANY HAVE SCHOOL THERE.

**Note:** However, if the RSL signers want to emphasize something plural in their sentences, below is the guide for plurality.

- 1) Use a number if known. If the count is three or more, list them by number on the fingers, leaving out “and”
- 2) Or, use a quantifier [some, many, several, pile, row, both, all, etc.] to make a plural.
- 3) Use cluster affix such as “group” or demonstrative pronouns such as “these” with an index finger
- 4) If not, repeat the noun sign twice to the right (This is called reduplication or repetition). You can’t use repetition along with a quantifier or a number except for child+ and parent+. It is okay to say “many child+”.
- 5) Use plural pronouns (we, they, all-of-you).

**English:**For years and years **RSL:**YEAR++

The kids are outside. 1) KID++ OUTSIDE THERE.

2) KID MANY OUTSIDE THERE .

### **Verb Types**

Like English, RSL sentences should have a verb. A complete sentence contains a noun and a verb. Of course, there are exceptions such as where?, your name?, what time? Also, RSL doesn’t have verb conjugations in many cases. Below are many types with explanations and examples for your better understanding.

#### **State of being Verb: To be**

**Note:** There are no ‘to be’ verbs in RSL.

**English:** The captioned movie is thumbs up. **RSL:**CAPTION MOVIE THUMB++ .

**Modals** (Helping/Auxiliary Verbs) (need to, should, must, can, would, might, could)

**Note:** In RSL, a modal can be placed either before or after a main verb, or both (for emphasis).

**English:** You should get an interpreter.**RSL:**

1) INTERPRETER YOU GET MUST.

2) You get interpreter can.

3) You can get interpreter. (For emphasis)

### **Present Tense**

**Note:**RSL uses present tense verbs for past, present and future tenses

**English:**I had breakfast this morning. **RSL:** ME BREAKFAST MORNING HAVE.

### Time Indicators/Tense Markers

**Note:** In many cases, you need to place time indicators at the beginning of the sentence to set up the tense and raise eyebrows. This rule applies to past, present and future tenses. If there is no time indicator in the sentence, the listener would assume the present tense.

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Symbol --- **TI** --- (with raised eyebrows)

**English:**We will leave tomorrow. **RSL:**WE TOMORROW LEAVE.

**Note:** Replace “in” or “on” with “past” or “future”.

**English:** In 1999... **RSL:**PAST/BACK 1999 .....

In 2050... FUTURE 2050...

In the morning... This morning or during morning

This past week WEEK PAST.....

On Thursday Thursday, Last Thursday, This Thursday, Next Thursday

On March 1 March 1st, Last March 1st, This March 1st, Next March 1st

**Frequency (every night, always, sometimes, every other day, every month, etc.)**

**English:**I go to work every morning.**RSL:**EVERY-MORNING ME WORK GO.

Every-morning me go work.

### **Time**

**English:**The local news is broadcast at 8:00 p.m. **RSL:** Local news announce time 8:00 night.

### **Age**

**English:** She is ten years old. **RSL:** 1) SHE YEAR TEN. .

2) She old ten.

**Year**

**Note:**Don't mention thousand in the year.

**English:** In two thousand four (2004)      **RSL:** 2004

**Numbers**

**English:** 1600 = sixteen hundred      **RSL:** 1,600

**Note:** must sign thousand.

**Possessives**

**English:**My sister's name is Brenda.**RSL:** SISTER MINE NAME B-R-E-N-D-A.

**Unit Summary**

This unit covered different grammatical rules of Rwandan sign language using the TRIPSTONCL as a tool to remember the rules. Topic/Comment, Rhetorical, Information Seeking, Pronominalization, Simple Yes/No, Tense With Time, Ordering of Simple Sentences, Negation, Conditional, Long Yes/No

**? Reflection questions**

**1. Complete the table below**

<b>English grammar</b>	<b>Rwandan Sign Language. grammar</b>
Are you deaf?	.....
Where is your car?	.....
What is your name?	.....
How old are you?	.....

**2. Write the following sentences in Rwandan Sign Language grammar**

- A. 1.I had breakfast this morning.      RSL:.....
- B. 2.I wanted to know if I can leave now.      RSL:.....

**3. Write these sentences in Rwandan Sign Language grammar**

- A. 1. What time is it?      RSL:.....
- B. 2. Who is Kamali?      RSL:.....

**4. Write these sentences in Rwandan Sign Language grammar**

- A. Have you been there?      RSL.....
- B. I have a question for you? RSL.....

## References

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