Chapter 13
Concluding remarks

The overarching goal of this study has been to provide a preliminary description of selected structural features of Yolngu Sign Language on the levels of phonology, morphology and syntax and to compare to what extent it differs from existing sign language descriptions. The focus was on the use of signing space in YSL for grammatical purposes. This investigation builds on a tradition of studies demonstrating structural variation within the visual-spatial language modality (Zeshan, 2004ab; Perniss, Pfau, & Steinbach, 2007; Zeshan & Perniss, 2008). In general, the use of spatial grammatical structures in sign language has been widely assumed to be very similar. Consequently, there has been little expectation of variation between sign languages in this domain, especially in the establishment of loci in the neutral signing space for person reference, the use of verb directionality and classifier constructions. Yet, it turns out that there are very substantial differences between sign languages in their organization of signing space for grammatical purposes (Washabaugh, 1986; Nyst, 2007; Marsaja, 2008; Zeshan & Perniss, 2008; Aronoff, Meir, Padden, & Sandler, 2008; Padden, Meir, Aronoff, & Sandler, 2010; De Vos, 2012; Schuit, 2013) and this research has contributed to enhance our understanding of possible variation in this domain.

As stated in chapter 1 two central research questions led the direction of this research, which inquired the following:

(1) Does Yolngu Sign Language make use of the grammatical spatial structures common to the majority of sign languages studied so far, such as the use of abstract space to introduce referents into discourse, verb directionality to mark arguments of the verbs and classifier constructions to encode spatial information about referent’s location and motion?

(2) Do sociolinguistic settings of the signing community have an impact on the linguistic structure of Yolngu Sign Language?

Coming back to the question raised in the introduction, the collected YSL data showed that 1) YSL notably differs in all three spatial grammatical aspects from the descriptions of large Deaf community sign languages (Sandler & Lillo-Martin, 2006), but it strikingly resembles the small-scale village sign languages in these domains (Nyst, 2007; Marsaja, 2008; Padden, Meir, Aronoff, & Sandler, 2010; Schuit, Baker, & Pfau, 2011; De Vos, 2012).
This study has also shown that 2) possibly a combination of various sociolinguistic and demographic settings might have an impact on the linguistic structure of Yolngu Sign Language. In particular, the YSL data appears to fit the hypothesis of the context-dependency (Washabaugh, Woodward, & DeSantis, 1978; De Vos, 2012). Further research is needed, however, to investigate the habitual use of frame of reference among the Yolngu speakers and signers.

The findings reported here, though based on limited data, also add to our knowledge of variation across sign languages in the other grammatical domains apart from pronominal reference, verb directionality and expression of motion. The foregoing chapters of this book have presented remarkable features of YSL in the domains of phonology and syntax from a cross-linguistic perspective.

This book contributed to typological diversity of sign languages by describing and analyzing an alternate sign language, which has received extremely little attention from sign language linguists (but see a handful of scattered studies on alternate sign languages in Australia such as Kendon, 1988; Cooke & Adone, 1994; Green, Woods, & Foley, 2011; Pfau, 2012). Alternate sign languages in general have been largely neglected by the sign language research literature suspecting them to be “half-way” sign languages (as criticized in Nyst, 2007, p. 218). This study has substantiated the previous claims about Yolngu Sign Language being a developed sign language and not a manual code of the surrounding spoken Yolngu languages (Cooke & Adone, 1994). In any case, the findings reported here should have made it clear that much more detailed work on YSL and other rural sign languages is needed to get better insights into typological variation of languages in the visual-gestural modality. The alternate sign languages are in need of particular attention, since they are not only severely underdocumented, but also seriously endangered (Davis, 2010; Meir, Lanesman, Adone, & Cumberbatch, 2012). The author acknowledges and emphasizes the importance and necessity of systematic investigation of these sign languages and includes Yolngu Sign Language under the recently coined term “shared sign languages” (Kisch, 2008; Nyst, 2012) due to the existence of a sign language shared between deaf and hearing community members. The extension of this term has facilitated a prosperous comparison of Yolngu Sign Language with other shared/village sign languages, which has been offered in this book.