



Department of  
Linguistics and Modern Languages

語言學及現代語言系

# Last But Not Least: Focus and the Clause-final Position in Hong Kong Sign Language (HKSL)

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**Date:** February 18, 2025 (Tuesday)  
**Time:** 4:30pm - 6:15pm (Hong Kong Time, UTC +8)  
**Venue:** Y C Liang Hall, LHC G04 (G/F),  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong



# 18

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## Abstract

How languages encode information structure has been a widely discussed topic across spoken languages, but this has received much less attention in sign languages. In this talk, I will be addressing an interesting observation that in many sign languages, focus-sensitive elements often occur in the clause-final position, including *wh*-elements, the focused constituent of a *wh*-cleft, phrases with the focus-particle 'only', and sentential negative markers (Petronio 1991, Wilbur 2012, Davidson 2022, among others). This typological pattern is attested across unrelated sign languages. Hong Kong Sign Language (HKSL) will be my case study for a deeper investigation of this pattern. I explore the correlation between focus and the clause-final position in HKSL by examining declarative root sentences. I show that in elicitation data, signers of HKSL display a preference to locate non-subject focus in the clause-final position. Such a preference becomes even clearer in acceptability judgment data. When word order alternation is allowed, the word order with a clause-final focus is generally preferred.

I further argue that this preference is driven by prosody, i.e., it is preferred for focus to occur in the clause-final position where it can obtain the primary sentential stress. Evidence comes from the relative duration and prosodic markings of the constituents. I extend and develop Wilbur's (1994, 1996, 1997, 2012) proposal for ASL, that focus is located in the clause-final position to receive the primary prosodic prominence of the sentence.

## Speaker

Linghui (Eva) Gan is currently a Ph.D candidate in Linguistics at the University of Connecticut. She received a B.A in Minority Languages and Literatures from Minzu University of China, an M.A. in Chinese Linguistics & Language Acquisition from CUHK, and a research M.A. in Linguistics from the University of Amsterdam. Her research interests include syntax and semantics/prosody interfaces of sign languages, language acquisition of deaf children, bimodal bilingualism, and language attitudes and language rights of Deaf communities.

All Are Welcome

Enquiries

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