Summary of the dissertation "Space as a Communicative Resource – a Functional-Pragmatic Approach to Visual Languages" (Ulrike Wrobel)

This book provides a critical survey on the applicability of common spoken-language concepts that are used in linguistic enquiries of natural sign languages. Notions like *phoneme, syllable, morpheme, movement, verb* etc. are discussed and reviewed according to the fact that space does not merely govern the grammar of sign languages but displays a communicative function in visual languages: it is shown that sign languages use space as a communicative resource. Therefore, it is pointed out how a functional and pragmatic approach to the analysis of visual languages is able to show the merit obtainable by the use of space.

Here follows a short summary of each chapter:

Chapter 1: What is the signing space and how can it be used?
Chapter one determines the different functions of space that are used while signing. It illustrates what the signing space can be used for and how these results can be achieved.

Chapter 2: Signing space as phonemic space
The second chapter deals with the fact that two aspects of the signing space partly overlap: Ir is an area of articulatory performance and a domain of the speaker's body. This has an effect on the transition from the phonetic to the phonemic level: there is no visible difference between elements with different functions.

Chapter 3: Stages of morphological development
In harmony with linguistic theory, the third chapter characterises different phases of morphological development as phases in the conceptual design of movement. It is shown that movement is conceived of as a phonetic feature, a syllable, a phoneme, or a morpheme.

Chapter 4: Language in space: spatial language or spatial grammar?
The fourth chapter describes the effects on the categorisation of verbs caused by the fact that the border between the etic and the emic level is indistinct: too many different types of verbs arise. This process is fuelled by linguists having different ideas have about the so-called 'neutral space'.

Chapter 5: Signs in the signing space and the surrounding space in space
In chapter five it is shown that the processes described in chapter one to four cause a multiplication of analytical spaces in the theory.

Chapter 6: The use of space in signs from different semantic fields
The sixth chapter analyses DGS signs from different semantic fields. The results indicate difficulties concerning the classification of handforms within existing theories and show some general problems that arise in the application of common approaches.

Chapter 7: Advantages of a functional-pragmatic analysis of DGS
In the last chapter it is discussed how spatial qualities of speech situations and non-manual means that are relevant to discourse can be captured appropriately. I arrive at the conclusion that this cannot be done on a lexical level, but can only be achieved by analysing the functional use of signs. Direct and reported speech are taken as examples for proposing a functional-pragmatic view of sign language, an enhancement of Bühler's theory on the use of linguistic fields. By considering functional differences in the handling of space, different classes of signs can be described as distinct uses of functional fields, namely the symbol field, the deictic field, the operation field, the prompting field and the toning field (Ehlich 1979, Redder 1998). The toning field is of particular importance for the comprehension of the so-called 'special signs', a group of signs which is systematically presented here for the first time. This approach bears the following advantages: spoken and signed languages can both be described by taking the same theoretical approach, in which the cloning of analytical spaces can be stopped. Ontological problems can be treated by working with the concept of 'Origo' – a psycholinguistic idea of Bühler (1934). The different possibilities of using space can be specified as strategies for focusing the hearer's attention and therefore for facilitating language processing: visual languages use space is a communicative resource.