What's shakin'? – On the spreading domain of the negative headshake

It has long been realized that headshakes, as used in clausal negation in many unrelated sign languages, are not just co-speech gestures, but rather lexical and/or grammatical elements that are tightly linked to the syntactic structure of an utterance (Pfau 2002, 2015; Quer 2012). Yet, it has also been shown that sign languages differ from each other when it comes to the spreading domain of the headshake. For American Sign Language, which displays the order S-Neg-V-O, it has been argued that the manual negator NOT is optional, and that, in the absence of NOT, the headshake has to accompany the entire VP, i.e., the c-command domain of Neg (Neidle et al. 2000). In contrast, in German Sign Language (DGS), the most common order is S-O-V-Neg; the manual negator is also optional, but in contrast to ASL, it is possible for the headshake to only accompany the verb when NOT is absent (Pfau 2002; Pfau & Quer 2002). This distribution has been accounted for by assuming (i) that the negative head Neg is on the right, and (ii) that it hosts a headshake-affix, which triggers rightward V-to-Neg movement. Still, spreading of the headshake is optionally possible, and when it occurs, it targets material lower in the structure – similar to what has been described for ASL.

In this talk, I will reconsider the spreading facts, taking as a starting point recent findings reported for Sign Language of the Netherlands (Oomen & Pfau 2017). I will demonstrate that the previous downward-spreading account cannot be maintained given, among other facts, that pronominal subjects and certain right-adjoined functional elements can be under the scope of the headshake. I thus suggest that the DGS phrase structure is actually S-Neg-VP, that the verb moves leftward to Neg, that the headshake is a featural (suprasegmental) affix, and that its spreading domain is prosodically rather than syntactically defined.