According to Kita (2003) pointing is a foundational block of human communication. Studies focusing on pointing have revealed that there are three different body parts that are conventionally used to point; hand, mouth, and eyes. Pointing in many sign languages has different functions. Pointing with the hand includes index finger pointing, and flat hand pointing. Lip pointing and eye pointing are also used. Lip pointing is often combined with eye pointing which is used to catch the interlocutors' eye and shift toward a particular referent. These two types of pointing have also been observed in some rural sign languages such as Konchri Sain (Cumberbatch p.c.) and Kata Kolok (Marsaja, p.c.). Most of the studies dealing with pointing have concentrated on western sign languages. There are only a few cross-cultural studies on pointing (Enfield et al. 2007, Levinson 2003, Le Guen 2010).

In this paper we analyse an alternate sign language. In the first part of the paper we describe the sociolinguistic setting of this alternate sign language known as Yolngu Sign Language (henceforth YSL). The hearing people in several Yolngu communities in the Northern Territory of Australia use this language as an alternate mode of communication. However YSL is also the first language of a few Deaf signers who live in those communities (Maypilama and Adone 2012). This sign language evolved as an alternate sign language that was used under specific circumstances such as when speech was culturally inappropriate and silence was requested as in ceremonies, funerals and on sacred sites (cf. also Kendon 1988 for speech taboos in Central Australia). Nowadays YSL is used in all domains of daily interaction.

In the second part of the paper we investigate the different types and functions of pointing in YSL and use an anthropological linguistic frame to analyse these types of pointing. Yolngu people use a wide array of pointing (finger pointing, flat hand pointing, direct pointing, metonymic pointing, metaphorical pointing, lip pointing, and eye pointing) and the signers use a geocentric/absolute Frame of Reference (FoR) for transposed pointing (see Le Guen 2010 for Yucatec Maya of Mexico, Levinson 2003). Pointing is not only used for reference tracking in YSL, but also in narration, as well as to mark space/orientation. We follow Haviland (1993, 1996) & Wilkins (2003) who distinguish between the locally anchored space (immediate environment), interactional space, and narrative space in the discussion on pointing. Pointing is used when knowledge of the traditional country involves orientation precision and the use of space in communicative interaction. Further the use of pointing gestures in narratives is very important in Yolngu culture and is an indicator for knowledge. With the focus on pointing this study contributes to the ongoing discussion on culturally relevant differences in terms of existing spaces and use of frame of reference. It gives some insights into the mechanisms involved in the development of a sign language as an alternate sign language.