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Low Referentiality in LIS and LSF

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BACKGROUND

Cross-linguistically, a variety of constructions convey ignorance about a discourse referent; these include epistemic indefinites (e.g. German *ingendeinen*) and impersonals (e.g. French *on*), as well as syntactic strategies such as null subjects.

GOALS

We explore the strategies for expressing 'low referentiality' in Italian Sign Language (LIS) and French Sign Language (LSF) in a crosslinguistic and crossmodal perspective. We show that the patterns from LIS and LSF fit into known typologies as long as both manual signs and facial expressions are considered; micro-variation between LSF and LIS falls within the range of attested variation.

METHODOLOGY

Data are from native signers of LIS and LSF. After elicitation, informants judged for acceptability and felicity of each sentence in various contexts. The relevant contexts to elicit low referentiality come from Barberá and Cabredo Hofherr (2016). Elicitation and evaluation were conducted in sign language. Spoken language was never used, including in written form.

RESULTS

We discuss two existential quantifiers (SOMEONE and PERSON), one non-manual sign (frown face), and sentences with null subjects. Examples here come from LIS.

With neutral non-manuals, existential quantifiers yield fully referential readings, while low referential readings are highly marginal (LSF is more tolerant than LIS). The null pronoun is ambiguous between the two readings, ex. (1).

(1)   a. PERSON/SOMEONE HOUSE ENTER.
    'Someone entered my house and I have in mind who.' = *Fully referential*
    ??/# 'Someone entered my house and I have no idea who it might be.' = *Low referential*
      b. *pro* HOUSE ENTER
       ✔ *Fully referential*   ✔ *Low referential*

When the frown facial expression co-occurs with quantifiers, only low referential readings are accessible, ex. (2).

(2) _____ :-(
      SOMEONE/PERSON HOUSE ENTER.
        # *Fully referential*   ✔*Low referential*

A series of tests determines the impersonal vs. indefinite status of these strategies (Cabredo Hoffer 2008). Results are summarized in Table 1. We also tested whether the existential markers are epistemic indefinites (Aloni and Port 2012). Results are summarized in Table 2. Finally we tested whether *high* loci convey non-specific readings as in Catalan SL (LSC). Results (not shown here) indicate that this is not the case for LSF nor LIS.

Test	SOMEONE	PERSON	Null subj.
Low scope with frequency adverbs	*	*	✔
Joint reference in anaphoric chains	*	✔LIS *LSF	✔
Compatible with generic readings	*	*	✔
Compatible with corporate readings	*	*	✔

Table 1: Impersonal constructions have a positive values for all the tests.

Test	SOMEONE/PERSON
Ignorance about referent	✔
Free choice reading under deontic modals	✔
Sensitivity to identification methods	✔

Table 2: Epistemic indefinites have a positive values for all the tests.

ANALYSIS

LIS and LSF mark low referentiality either by leaving the argument unexpressed or by pairing the signs SOMEONE and PERSON with adequate nonmanuals. These options are also available in LSC. Differently from LSC, space is not used to convey indefiniteness or specificity in LIS or LSF. SOMEONE and PERSON behave as epistemic indefinites (like German *ingendeinen*), while the null subject is the impersonal marker (as in spoken Italian).

REFERENCES

1. Aloni and Port. 2012. Epistemic indefinites and methods of identification. In Alonso-Ovalle and Menéndez-Benito (eds.), *Epistemic Indefinites*. Oxford University Press.
2. Barberà and H. Cabredo. 2016. When ONE patterns with SOMEONE: Defining the properties of two indefinite pronouns in Catalan Sign Language (LSC). *FEAST*.
3. Cabredo H.(2008). Les pronoms impersonnels humains. *Modèles linguistiques*.