

## Does Clause-final Finger Pointing Refer to a Null Topic in JSL?

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, we deal with finger pointing (hereafter, PT) that optionally appears in the clause-final position in Japanese Sign Language (hereafter, JSL), and examine whether it can refer to a null topic phrase. In JSL, like other sign languages such as Sign Language of the Netherlands (Crasborn et al. 2009), the clause-final PT can refer to a topic in a sentence, according to Hara and Kurosaka (2013) and Hara, Kobayashi and Uchibori (2014). A topic phrase in JSL must be accompanied by the topic NMM that consists of raised eyebrows and a head nod followed by a brief pause, as shown in the example in (1) below:

- (1) (transcript of the video data corresponding to Oka and Akahori (2011: 73 (1)), <https://www.youtube.com/embed/MBjP-Md8zyY?rel=0> and [showinfo=1](#))

\_\_\_\_<sub>TOPIC</sub>

OTOKO ONNA SUKI PT<sub>3(OTOKO)</sub>

MAN WOMAN LIKE PT<sub>3(MAN)</sub>

‘He likes her.’ (translated from O and A’s Japanese translation)

Huang (1984) argues that some spoken languages such as Chinese allow a topic phrase to be omitted from a sentence. If JSL patterns with Chinese in this regard, a topic such as *OTOKO* ‘man’ in (1) above can be omitted in an appropriate context, but still can be referred to by the clause-final PT. This paper aims to examine whether this is the case.

Uchibori (2016) provides a clue to this question. She discusses several examples including the clause-final PT that refers to neither an argument nor a topic marked with the topic NMM. For example, consider the following sentence.

- (2) \_\_\_\_<sub>RS</sub>

FUNE HOUDAN<sub>CL</sub> SHIZUMU<sub>CL</sub> PT<sub>3(ABOVE THE RIGHT SHOULDER)</sub>

SHIP CANNONBALL<sub>CL</sub> SINK<sub>CL</sub> PT<sub>3(ABOVE THE RIGHT SHOULDER)</sub>

‘A ship was sailing, a cannonball hit the ship, and the ship was sunk by someone who planned and ordered to carry out the attack.’

The clause-initial element *FUNE* ‘ship’ is an argument of the predicate *SHIZUMU* ‘sink,’ and is marked with an NMM that indicates the so-called referential shift (RS), which is expressed by squinted eyes in this example. The clause-final PT points to somewhere above the signer’s right shoulder. The referent of this PT is interpreted as someone unknown to the signer who planned and conducted the attack. Bruening (2013) argues that one of the identifying features of the passive in natural language is that the external argument does not appear, and is interpreted as an existential such as *someone* (= an implicit agent). Following Imanishi Yusuke (p.c.), Uchibori (2016) suggests a

possibility that the JSL example in (2) is regarded as passive, because the clause-final PT refers to someone who is interpreted as the implicit agent of the event of the ship's being sunk. This seems to be consistent with Bruening's (2013) generalization.

In this paper, however, we point out the possibility that the example in (2) above includes a null topic, which is interpreted as the mastermind behind the attack. That is, it is possible to assume that in a felicitous context where a topic is omitted (i.e. the topic covertly exists), the clause-final PT actually refers to the null topic. This does not completely deny the passive analysis suggested by Uchibori (2016). Instead, we demonstrate that it is essential to investigate further in what context a sentence such as (2) is used felicitously, in order to examine exactly what the clause-final PT in JSL can refer to. We will look at more relevant data, and explore the possibility that the clause-final PT refers to a null element that is interpreted as a topic in an appropriate context.

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