

Subjects in sign languages

40 years after Keenan

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Sign languages vs. spoken languages

- Sign languages are expressed in the gestural-visual modality but spoken languages use the vocal-auditory modality.
- Sign languages are more iconic than spoken languages in their vocabulary and grammar (cf. various non-manual markers).
- Sign languages are much younger than spoken languages. (No sign language in use today is more than 300-400 years old.)

Sign language research

- The first scholar to describe the grammar of sign languages was William Stokoe (1919-2000) in his book *Sign language structure* (1960).
- Stokoe argued that sign languages had the same basic elements as spoken languages.
- Research on sign language syntax did not take off until the mid seventies and many sign languages remain understudied.

Diachrony

- Due to their relatively young age, sign languages have had much less time to develop various grammatical markers than spoken languages.
- This makes a difference for various tests for subjecthood, e.g. those relating to case and agreement.

ÍTM vs. Icelandic

- Sign languages have generally more freedom of word order than spoken languages.
- Thus, adjectives and demonstratives can follow nouns and verbs can follow objects in ÍTM but not in spoken Icelandic:

(1a) CAR YELLOW/THIS

(1b) HE BISCUIT ATE

Null hypothesis

- Still, it has been argued that word order variation in languages like ASL is subject to various restrictions.
- Null hypothesis: Sign languages have subjects and objects just like spoken languages.

Subjects and objects

- It is easy to distinguish subjects from objects in languages with a fairly rigid word order, but not in languages with a relatively free word order.
- It is usually assumed that sign languages have grammatical functions like subject and object.
- Cormier, Fenlon & Schembri (2015) express some skepticism about this; see also Engberg-Pedersen (2002) and Bouchard (1996).

Absence of case

- Some subject properties that are familiar from spoken languages do not apply to sign languages.
- For instance, case marking in many spoken languages is based on grammatical functions (NOM for subjects and ACC for objects).
- This does not apply to sign languages because they do not have morphological case.

Agreement

- Another subject property of many spoken languages is that (nominative) subjects trigger (person and number) agreement with the finite verb, but objects do not.
- This does not straightforwardly carry over to sign languages, where “agreement” is only found with so called agreement verbs. (The other two classes are spatial verbs and plain verbs.)

Subject vs. object agreement

- There seems to be a contrast between subjects and object with respect to agreement verbs in sign languages.
- Meir (2002) claims that the orientation or facing of the hands is determined by grammatical function.
- The facing is towards the direct object of verbs with one object and the indirect object of ditransitive verbs. (ÍTM *kenna*)

Subjects before objects

- The clearest evidence for grammatical functions like subject and object in sign languages comes from word order.
- All established sign languages that have been studied are either SVO or SOV.
- The subject precedes the verb and the object in the basic word order of all established sign languages.

Word order

- Subjects precede objects in basic word order in ASL:

(2) FATHER LOVE CHILD (Valli et al. 2011:112)

- Some deviations from the basic word order are possible in ASL but they tend to be marked in some way.
- Importantly, topicalized objects are accompanied by non-manual markers, e.g. a forward head-tilt and a pause.

Object first

top

(3) CHILD FATHER LOVE (ASL, Valli et al. 2011:114)

▣ Object-first orders can also arise because of subject pronoun copy, accompanied by subject pro-drop:

(4) pro BOOK BUY IX3_α (NGT, Perniss et al. 2007:15)
'He buys a book.'

Wh-questions

- ▣ Wh-questions in ÍTM are formed by wh-in-situ (by speakers over 40)
- ▣ Hence, they show the base position of subjects and objects in ÍTM:

(5a) NEW.YEARS.EVE YOU EAT **WHAT?** (signwiki.is)

(5b) **WHO** DESTROY THIS MOBILE.PHONE?

Verb + object = VP

- Objects differ from subjects in that they are inside the VP headed by the transitive verb whereas subjects are outside VP.
- Evidence for a VP constituent in sign languages comes from various phenomena where VPs behave like syntactic units, e.g. topicalization:

top _____ hn
(6) LOVE MARY, JOHN (ASL, Arons 1994:87)

Adverb placement

- ▣ Quadros & Lillo-Martin (2010:229-230) claim that adverbs like *YESTERDAY* or *SOMETIMES* in LSE and ASL cannot break up the string verb + object, despite their relatively free distribution.
- ▣ This follows naturally if verbs and their objects form a VP.

Adverbs in ÍTM

□ Adverbs cannot break up a VP in ÍTM:

(8a) **ADV** – subject – verb – object

(8b) subject – **ADV** – verb – object

(8c) *subject – verb – **ADV** – object

(8d) subject – verb – object – **ADV**

Anaphora

- Reflexives in spoken languages display a clear subject-object asymmetry:
- A reflexive object can refer to a subject but a reflexive subject cannot refer to an object.
- This is also true of sign languages:

(9a) IX-a TALK ABOUT SELF+IX-a (NGT, Kimmelman 2009:32)

(9b) *SELF-a TALK ABOUT IX-a 'He talks about himself.'

Subject Pronoun Copy

- One construction that distinguishes subjects from objects in some sign languages is subject pronoun copy (Padden 1988).
- A clause-final pronoun referring to the subject, often accompanied by a head nod:

(10) WOMAN BUY CAR PRO-3

(Auslan, Johnston & Schembri 2007:204)

'The woman is buying a car, she is.'

Auslan

- The constituent which the sentence-final pronoun refers to can be a full NP or a pronominal. It can also be null:

(11) DANCE PRO-3 (Auslan, Johnston & Schembri 2007:204)
'She is dancing.'

- Pronoun copy seems to be restricted to subjects in Auslan.

ASL

- By contrast, both subject and object pronoun copies are possible in ASL.
- In fact, the same clause in ASL can have two copies but the subject copy must precede the object copy.

(12) JOHN_i LIKE IX_j, IX_i, IX_j (Neidle et al. 2000:172)

‘John likes her, him, her.’

NGT

- There are conflicting claims in the literature on NGT about subject pronoun copy.
- Bos (1995): Pronoun copy is restricted to subjects in NGT.
- Gijn (2004): Pronoun copy is much more common with subjects than objects .
- Crasborn et al. (2009): Pronoun copy actually refers to the topic of the sentence, including spatio-temporal elements.

Null arguments

- Subjects and objects are often unexpressed in sign languages.
- Context plays a crucial role in licensing such arguments, at least with plain verbs:

(13a) _____re

WANT TEA (Auslan, Johnston & Schembri 2007:208)

'Do you want tea?'

(13b) WANT

'Yes, I do.'

Null subjects vs. objects

- Lillo-Martin (1986) claims that there is a subject-object asymmetry with respect to null arguments of plain verbs in ASL.
- Null subjects of plain verbs can occur within islands , but null objects cannot:

(14) ${}_a$ MOTHER, ${}_a$ pro DON'T-KNOW "WHAT" (${}_a$ pro) LIKE

- 'Mother_j, she doesn't know what_k (she_j) likes'

Conclusions

- ❑ Sign languages have grammatical functions just like spoken languages.
- ❑ The clearest evidence for this comes from word order facts (subjects precede objects; objects form a VP with the main verb).
- ❑ Some tests for subjecthood work only in some sign languages and many potential tests remain to be investigated.

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