The Categorical Status of First Person in Signed Languages

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Person in signed languages

- Three-person system (e.g. Friedman 1975)
  - 1st, 2nd & 3rd
- Two-person system (e.g. Meier 1990)
  - 1st and non-first
- No person (e.g. Liddell 2003)
  - Use of space as gestural (gradient) rather than linguistic (categorical)
  - Pronouns and verbs “point to” their referents same as hearing people point
  - Listability problem

First person

- First person: linguistic category
- Evidence from two unrelated signed languages (American & British Sign Languages)
- Supporting two-person system proposed by Meier (1990)
### First person pronouns (ASL & BSL)

- First person singular pronoun (ME)
- First person plural pronouns (categories proposed by Cormier 2002)
  - Ostensive plurals: directly point to referents
    - TWO-OF-US
  - Lexical plurals: do not directly point to referents. Citation form: center of chest
    - WE/US

### Inclusive/exclusive pronouns?

- No distinct forms for inclusive
- Exclusive forms
  - Displaced to signer’s left or right side
  - Occur for lexical plurals in ASL (Cormier 2002) & BSL (Cormier 2004)
    - WE(right) or WE(left)

### Verb agreement

- Agreement verbs, indicating verbs
- Move from location associated with subject to location associated with object
  - e.g. GIVE
Subject agreement with 1PP

- Subject agreement is optional
- If subject agreement -> verb begins at center of signer’s chest, no matter what the location of the 1PP pronoun

Object agreement with 1PP

- Object agreement is obligatory
- Verb moves inward toward center of chest: US(center) GIVE-US[coil] “give us as a group”
- Agreement with displaced pronoun: e.g. WE/US(right)
  - Path movement may be to displaced side:
    - US(right) GIVE-US[coil](right)
  - If not, verb path must end at center of chest:
    - US(right) GIVE-US[coil](center)

2nd & 3rd person categories?

No

- Reference to addressee(s) or non-addressed participant(s): no single default location
- Use of space for non-first person reference, fully gradient, non-listable
- Gestural rather than categorical linguistic analysis fits for different non-first person locations
1st person category?
Yes

- Default location: Center of chest
- Marking of first person category
- Holds for subject agreement & object agreement
- Holds for ASL and BSL
- Displacement for exclusive marking possible
  - For exclusive pronouns and object agreement with exclusives
- Consistent with Meier (1990) but also work of Liddell
  - Liddell (2003) subscribes to Meier’s (1990) two-person system

Linguistic category?

- Roots in gesture?
  - Hearing non-signers in US and Britain point to center of chest to indicate “me”
  - Do hearing non-signers point to center of chest to indicate “we” - i.e. me plus others?

References

References

