Pronouns and pointing in sign languages

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Abstract

Pointing signs are used for pronominal reference (among many other functions) in sign languages. Many pointing signs do not look very different from non-signers' pointing gestures (Kendon, 2004; Kita, 2003c). However, most sign language researchers, regardless of their theoretical perspective, assume that there is evidence for considering these pointing signs to be pronouns (i.e., distinct from pointing gestures used by non-signers). In this paper, we compare canonical properties of pronominal pointing signs in sign languages with (a) personal pronouns in spoken languages and (b) pointing gestures used by non-signers. We find firstly that the features that make pronominal signs difficult to characterise morphosyntactically are those features they share with pointing gestures and not with pronouns. Secondly, we find that the features that make pronominal signs difficult to characterise gesturally are those features they share with pronouns and not with pointing gestures. Therefore, we conclude that pronominal signs cannot be characterised exclusively either as personal pronouns, or as pointing gestures, but instead have characteristics of both. We discuss implications of this conclusion for linguistic theory and also for our understanding of linguistic diversity and linguistic universals.
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1. Introduction

Human languages display considerable structural diversity, and yet at a basic level they share many properties. These are the two main tenets behind the study of linguistic diversity and the search for linguistic universals. Given the enormous amount of diversity across languages, Evans and Levinson (2009) question whether there are any true linguistic universals at all. In doing so, they argue against some substantive universals that have been proposed in the literature, providing examples and evidence for each case. One such universal proposed by Pinker and Bloom (1990) is 'anaphoric elements', including pronouns and reflexives. Evans and Levinson argue that many languages lack reflexives and some also lack clear personal pronouns. They also note: "Sign languages like American Sign Language also lack pronouns, using pointing instead" (2009:431).

In a response to Evans and Levinson (2009), we previously noted that very few studies in the sign language literature make such a claim, and that, in fact, most sign linguists assume (and some have explicitly argued) that sign languages do have pronouns (Cormier et al., 2010).[1] Arguments for the presence of pronouns in sign languages have included the greater systematicity in use of pointing in sign languages when compared to gesture used by non-signers, together with

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[1] Exceptions include Friedman (1975) and Johnston (2013).

Fig. 1. (a) Pronominal sign directed to signer; (b) pronominal sign directed to addressee; and (c) pronominal sign directed to non-addressed referent.

the syntactic distribution of pointing signs (Meier and Lillo-Martin, 2010). Thus, in terms of Evans and Levinson's claim that sign languages use pointing instead of pronouns, we concluded that this assertion was too simplistic and that more research was needed.

In this paper, we aim to explore in more detail the question of whether sign languages have personal pronouns or whether they do not, and instead use pointing gestures (akin to pointing used by non-signers). We compare characteristics of pronominal signs in sign languages with characteristics of personal pronouns in spoken languages and with characteristics of pointing gestures used by non-signers. In doing so, we come to the conclusion that it can neither be argued that pronominal signs are unproblematically equivalent to personal pronouns nor that they are identical to pointing gestures, because closer examination reveals that they share features of both. We discuss the implications of this for linguistic theory and for our understanding of language diversity and linguistic universals.

2. Background: pronominal signs

Prior to the 1960s, sign languages were generally considered to be elaborated gestural systems and/or manual representations of speech (e.g., Sapir, 1921). Stokoe (1960) was the first to recognise and describe the sublexical structure of American Sign Language (ASL), and thus claim that it shared fundamental linguistic properties with spoken language. In the decades following Stokoe's work, there was a continuing emphasis on the status of sign languages as ''real'' languages, worthy of linguistic study in their own right (see, for example, Klima and Bellugi, 1979). Various theoretical frameworks were applied to sign languages, most of them within the generative tradition[2] (see Sandler and Lillo-Martin, 2006 for an overview); this approach also resulted in borrowing a considerable amount of linguistic terminology from spoken language studies.

One such example is the term 'pronoun.' One of the earliest references to pronouns and pronominal signs in a sign language is from Friedman (1975:946), who claims that ASL does not have lexicalised pronouns: ''The ASL lexicon contains no signs classifiable as 'pronouns'. The equivalent of pronominal reference is achieved by the signer's first establishing a frame of reference, in front of his body, within which he establishes points of reference identified with the objects, persons, and locations to which he will refer''. It seems that the main reason Friedman claims that pointing signs are not lexicalised in ASL is because of the multi-functionality of pointing: for locative purposes, associating locations in space with referents, etc. Furthermore, she argues, the use of pointing in ASL for reference-tracking purposes ''vastly differs from oral language'' (p. 947). Even so, Friedman does recognise that these signs have a pronominal function: ''An index which is oriented and moving towards the signer serves as the 1P pronoun'', while she claims that an index towards interlocutor ''serves as the 2P pronoun'', and an index away from the signer and interlocutor ''serves as the 3P pronoun'' (Friedman, 1975:948). Examples from British Sign Language (BSL) signers are shown in Fig. 1a–c.[3]

Despite Friedman's (1975:946) claim that ASL does not have 'pronouns' per se, there has been widespread usage of the term 'pronoun' to refer to these signs across different sign languages and within a variety of theoretical perspectives (e.g., Ahlgren, 1990; Alibasic Ciciliani and Wilbur, 2006; Berenz, 2002; Bos, 1995; Cormier, 2005, 2007; Deuchar, 1984; Engberg-Pedersen, 1993; Farris, 1998; Hatzopoulou, 2008; Klima and Bellugi, 1979; Liddell, 1990, 2000b, 2003; Lillo-Martin and Klima, 1990; McBurney, 2002; Meier, 1990; Petitto, 1987). Most of these analyses either assume or explicitly argue that pronominal signs are distinct from pointing gestures as used by non-signers. However, we question these assumptions here for several reasons. The role of gesture in sign language has been a matter of debate for some time (e.g., Liddell and Metzger,

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