

# Right dislocation pronominals in Hong Kong Sign Language

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## 1. Aim of this paper

In the literature, it is generally assumed that sign languages are best characterized by TOPIC-COMMENT sequence, with topics occupying invariably at the sentence-initial position (Woodward 1972, Friedman 1976, Baker and Cokely 1980, Janzen 1995, 1997, 1999, Rosenstein 2001). The possibility of COMMENT-TOPIC in sign languages has not been explored in details. In this paper, I would like to argue that apart from TOPIC-COMMENT sentences, COMMENT-TOPIC structures also exist in Hong Kong Sign Language (hereafter HKSL), and the post-comment topics can be manifested as sentence-final pronominals, a phenomenon somewhat similar to what sign linguists usually dubbed as 'subject pronoun copies' in other sign languages. Evidence will be provided to argue that they are right dislocated topics on a par with those found in spoken languages.

## 2. Sentence-final pronominals in HKSL

### 2.1 Definition

A sentence-final pronoun is defined here as the double expression of an argument/constituent within the same sentence, once in its regular position, and once sentence-finally as a pronominal, following Bos (1995).

Sentence-final pronominals have been reported in ASL (Padden 1988, Lillo-Martin 1990, Petronio 1991, Aarons, Bahan, Kegl and Neidle 1992, Wilbur 1994b, 1999), SLN (also known as NGT) (Bos 1995, van Gijn 2004) and Japanese Sign Language (JSL) (Torigoe 1994, Fischer 1996).

### Example 1 (HKSL):

[IX-gladys GLADYS(name sign) WRITE SATURDAY IX-gladys] sentence unit  
Nominal antecedent sentence-final pronominal  
'Gladys wrote down "Saturday" (on the paper).'



d) In HKSL, the copied constituents can be subjects (82%), hanging topics (7%), left dislocated topics (1.1%), embedded subjects (5%), and objects (1%). One striking commonality among these copied elements is that the vast majority of them represent the 'aboutness' topic of the ongoing discourse. (compare: SLN – only subjects; ASL – subjects and objects; JSL – subjects, objects & locatives)

### Example 4: (sentence-final pronoun represents a hanging topic)

[COMPANY CANNOT STRICT IX-elder-sister] sentence unit  
'As for my elder sister, her company was strict and rejected (her leave request by saying) CANNOT.'



e) HKSL allows the use of sentence-final pronominals in various sentence types, including declaratives, negation, yes/no questions, negative y/n questions and wh-questions (similar to SLN).

### Example 5:

[HOW-COME INTERESTED-IN BASKETBALL HOW-COME IX-2 ?] sentence unit  
'Why did you become interested in playing basketball?' (wh-question)



### Example 6:

[CL-card MEMBERSHIP HAVE IX-2 ?] sentence unit  
'Do you have a membership card?' (y/n question)



f) Sentence-final pronominals in HKSL can co-occur with verbs of different argument structures and morpho-syntactic types: two-place predicates, three-place predicates, subject control verbs, object control verbs, dative verbs, agreement verbs, plain verbs, spatial verbs and classifier predicates.

g) Sentence-final pronominals in HKSL are unstressed and are produced without a preceding intonation break: there is no noticeable pause preceding the pronoun and the preceding sign is not lengthened (similar to SLN & ASL). The lack of intonational breaks is also evident in the spread of grammatical non-manuals associated with wh- and yes/no-question over the sentence-final pronominals. (See example 5 and 6 above for the brow furrow associated with constituent and polar interrogatives)

## 3. Major proposals on sentence-final pronominals in other languages – Can they be applied in HKSL?

a) Wilbur (1994b, 1999) on ASL:  
o Those with overt antecedents: doubling for stress assignment → emphatic.  
o Those without overt antecedents: occur mostly with psych verbs, including verbs of cognition, and adjectival predicates which do not mark agreement with the subjects → sentence-final pronominals are agreement marking devices.

## b) Bos (1995) on SLN:

o Sentence-final pronominals with and without overt antecedents stem from the same underlying structure.  
o As sentence-final pronominals occur more frequently when subject agreement is absent, she proposes that sentence-final pronominals serve the function of identifying the subject, especially when there is no overt agreement morphology in the clause.

## c) Torigoe (1994) on JSL:

o Sentence-final pronominals spell out agreement features in the absence of verb inflection.

## BUT, in HKSL:

o Sentence-final pronominals in HKSL are not restricted to psych-verbs and adjectival predicates that lack agreement morphology. They can occur across all verb types, including agreement verbs.  
o No specific prosodic or contextual clues that may induce an emphatic reading with the sentence-final pronominals in HKSL.

### Example 7

[IX-students FOLLOW-ME IX-students]  
'The students followed me (in selling used books). (FOLLOW-ME – agreement verb)



### Example 8

[TELL-ME IX-government]  
'The government told me so.'



## 4. Proposed analysis: Sentence-final pronominals as right dislocated pronominals

### 4.1 What is a dislocation structure?

A dislocation construction is a sentence structure in which a referential constituent which could function as an argument or adjunct within a predicate-argument structure occurs instead outside the boundaries of the clause containing the predicate, either to its left (left-dislocation) or to its right (right-dislocation) (Lambrecht 2001).

### 4.2 Characteristics of right dislocations in spoken languages (Lambrecht 2001)

a) The only necessary criterion for a dislocation construction in spoken languages is the extra-clausal status – they do not take part in the semantic and syntactic dependency relations between predicates and their arguments

\* This is also true in the sentence-final pronominals in HKSL, as they come after yes/no question tags, wh-question words and negators.

b) Spoken languages vary a great deal in what can be right-dislocated. NPs, particularly pronouns, are one of the most common categories that can be right dislocated in spoken languages.

\* All the right-dislocated elements observed so far in HKSL are pronominals.

c) Right dislocated constituents in spoken languages can be omitted from a sentence without causing structural or semantic unacceptability.

\* This is true in HKSL, as sentence-final pronominals are optional rather than obligatory constructions.

d) Right-dislocated elements in spoken languages must not be prosodically prominent – they are necessarily unaccented. In addition, a right-dislocated phrase forms a single intonational contour with the preceding clause and cannot be preceded by a pause.

\* Sentence-final pronominals in HKSL are all unstressed and are not separated intonationally from the preceding constituents of the sentence.

Proposal: Sentence-final pronominals in HKSL are comparable to right dislocations in spoken languages.

## 5. Functions of right dislocated pronominals in HKSL

### 5.1 Right dislocated pronominals in HKSL being topic-marking devices

o According to Lambrecht (1994), 'it is a general consensus in the literature on dislocation that Left Dislocation and Right Dislocation are topic-marking constructions, i.e. grammatical constructions which serve to mark a constituent as denoting the topic (or theme) with respect to which a given sentence expresses a relevant comment' (2001:1072).  
o This is exactly what is observed in the sentence-final pronominals in HKSL, as nearly all of them represent 'aboutness' topics.

### 5.2 What distinguish right dislocated pronominals from other topics in HKSL?

o Distribution of right-dislocated pronominals in HKSL  
o Over 90% of the right-dislocated pronominals are found in conversation.  
o Nearly 50% are found at the end of a conversational turn, i.e. end of a declarative sentence, after a yes/no question, after a wh-question.  
o Nearly 30% are found at momentary suspension of signing in a stretch of consecutive sentences by the same signer.  
o Proposed functions of right-dislocated pronominals in HKSL  
o It is proposed that sentence-final pronominals in HKSL are a general topic-maintaining device.  
o While there is no absolute restriction on the types of interaction (i.e. genre) and linguistic environments in which they occur, they appear more frequently at the end of conversation turns because of a relatively stronger need to uphold the prominence of the ongoing topic before the speech floor is passed onto the addressee.  
o This is particularly important for interrogatives: the addressee is supposed to respond directly to the question concerning a given topic rather than switching to a different one. This can explain why sentence-final pronominals are common in interrogatives.  
o In continuous, uninterrupted production, momentary suspension indicates that the signer has completed what he had planned to say and is thinking about what to say next rather than passing the floor to the addressee. Similar to the end of a conversation turn, it may be hypothesized that the signer rounds up what has been said so far with a sentence-final pronoun while the planning of the next sentence is still underway.  
o Seen in this light, sentence-final pronominals in HKSL serve to uphold the prominence of the ongoing topic, thus enhancing discourse coherence in general.

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## 2.2. Data source: spontaneous data of HKSL by native signers

a) Around 1 hour 30 minutes of monologue data (semi-structured) by four native signers  
o Answers to questions  
o Picture-based narratives

b) Around two hours of paired conversation with no restrictions on topics by four native signers (i.e. free conversation - unstructured)  
o Out of the 3839 analyzable sentence units in the spontaneous data, 437 contain a sentence-final pronominal (11.4%).

## 2.3 Characteristics

a) A sentence-final pronominal in HKSL can be preceded by more than one co-referential overt antecedent (65/437, 14.9%)(similar to SLN).

### Example 2:

[IX-1 GROW-UP HEARING-AID IX-1 DISLIKE IX-1] sentence unit  
'I did not like (using) hearing aid as I grew up.'



b) Sentence-final pronominals in HKSL are not necessarily preceded by co-referential overt expressions in the original syntactic positions (without antecedents: 172/437, nearly 40%)(similar to ASL, SLN & JSL).

### Example 3:

[Ø AGAIN STUDY NOT IX-lisa] sentence unit  
'She (Lisa) did not study (design) again.'



c) Over 70% of the overt antecedents were also pronominals in HKSL (similar to SLN, which has an even higher percentage).