

Reflexive pronouns in Russian Sign Language and Sign Language of the Netherlands: modality and universals

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I. Binding theory (Chomsky 1981)

Principle A: A reflexive pronoun must be bound in its local domain.

(1) The boy_i hurts himself_i

Principle B: A non-reflexive pronouns must be free in its local domain.

(2) The boy_i hurts him_s

Principle C: A full noun must be free.

(3) The boy_i hurts John_s

Further complications: Reinhart & Reuland 1993, Büring 2005.

Research question: Do sign languages have the same types of pronouns and what are their properties?

Other sign languages have personal and reflexive pronouns: Israeli, American, Croatian SLs (Meir 1988, Lillo-Martin 1995, Alibašić Ciciliani & Wilbur 2006), however, the properties of reflexives are unclear.

III. Pronouns used in reflexive contexts in RSL

1. True reflexive pronoun SEBA (+/- agreement) Fig. ①

(1) [BOY IX-A] PAINT SEBA(+IX-A)

'The boy paints himself', #'The boy paints him'

2. Pointing sign IX: non-reflexive Fig. ②

(2) [BOY IX-A] PAINT IX-A/IX-B

'The boy paints himself/him'

3. Non-reflexive sign BOUNDARIES-A Fig. ③

(3) [BOY IX-A] PAINT BOUNDARIES-A/BOUNDARIES-B

'The boy paints himself/him in detail'

4. Possessive reflexive SVOJ (+/- agreement) Fig. ④

(4) [BOY IX-A] PAINT SVOJ(+IX-A) PORTRAIT

'The boy paints his own portrait/#someone's portrait'

5. Possessive pronominal POSS

(5) [BOY IX-A] PAINT POSS-A/POSS-B PORTRAIT

'The boy paints his own portrait/someone's portrait'



① SEBA [RSL]

② POINTING-A [RSL]



③ BOUNDARIES-A [RSL] ④ SVOJ [RSL]

II. Methodology

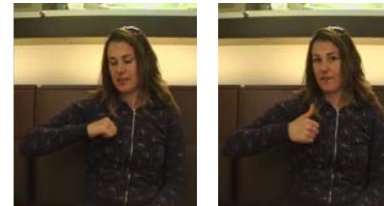
• 2 unrelated sign languages:

- Russian Sign Language (RSL): up to 2 000 000 signers; almost no linguistic research; mostly oral education
- Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT): 20 000 signers; considerable linguistic research; different educational methods in different periods

• 9 signers of RSL from Russia & 3 signers of NGT from the Netherlands

• Data elicitation:

- translation task (situations presented in written languages)
- grammaticality judgment
- interpretation of constructed examples



⑤ ZELF (without agreement) [NGT]



⑥ LOOK-1 [NGT]

IV. Pronouns used in reflexive contexts in NGT

1. True reflexive ZELF+IX (! obligatory agreement) Fig. ⑤

(1) [BOY IX-A] ABOUT ZELF+*(IX-A) TALK

'The boy talks about himself'

2. Pointing sign IX: non-reflexive

(2) [BOY IX-A] ABOUT IX-A/IX-B TALK

'The boy talks about himself/him'

Notice: no possessive reflexive in NGT – no possessive reflexive in Dutch, while both RSL & Russian have them

V. Reflexive forms of agreeing verbs in RSL & NGT

(1) IX-A TEA POUR-A [RSL]

'He poured tea to himself'

(2) IX-1 LOOK-1 [NGT] Fig. ⑥

'I look at myself'

VI. Results 1: Modality effects

Pointing as an unrestricted pronoun

➢ RSL and NGT have a **unique type of pronoun** not attested in spoken languages.

• According to Kiparsky's 2002 typology of pronouns, there are 2 universals:

1. There are no obviative locally-bound pronouns.
2. There are no unrestricted (referentially independent non-obviative) pronouns.

• Pointing in RSL and NGT is an example of an **unrestricted pronoun**:

(1) LOOK IX-A! – *referentially independent use*

'Look there!'

(2) [BOY IX-A] PAINT IX-A/IX-B – *co-reference in co-argument context* → *non-obviative*

'The boy paints himself/him'

• **Explanation:** visual modality. Pointing unambiguously identifies referents, so it can be used to express co-reference in any context.

VII. Results 2: Universal semantics

Bound-variable reading vs. co-reference

• Why do sign languages **use reflexive pronouns** if they have pointing? Is there any difference between the two means of expressing co-reference?

• Non-reflexive pronouns (IX, BOUNDARIES) are used to express **co-reference** in the co-argument context, while true reflexive pronouns (SEBA, ZELF) are used to express **the bound-variable reading**.

(1) IX-PL EACH-PL PAINT IX-PL [RSL] (2) EACH-PL IX-PL PAINT [NGT]

'Each boy paints all boys as a group/#himself'

(3) IX-PL EACH-PL PAINT SEBA [RSL] (4) EACH-PL ZELF+IX-PL PAINT [NGT]

'Each boy paints himself'

(5) EACH-PL TEA POUR-PL/ POUR-A POUR-B POUR-C [RSL, NGT]

'Each one poured tea for all others/#for himself'

• Reflexive forms of agreeing verbs are co-referential forms (according to this test)

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