Right dislocation pronouns 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; Teubner 1976; Baker and Cokely 1986; Jetten 1995, 1997, 1999, Rosental 2001). The possibility of COMMENT-TOPOC in sign languages has not been explored in detail. In this paper, I would like to argue that apart from TOPIC-COMMENT sequences, COMMENT-TOPOC structures also exist in Hong Kong Sign Language (HKSLS), and the past comment topics can be manifested as sentence-final pronouns, a phenomenon somewhat similar to what sign linguists usually dubbed as ‘subject pronoun repair’ in spoken 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 pronouns in HKSLS

2.1 Definition
A sentence-final pronoun is defined as the double expression of an argument/constituent within the sentence, even in its primary position, and once sentence-final as a pronounal, following Bos (1995).


Example 1 (HKSLS) (GLADYS) [same sign] WRITE SATURDAY (GLADYS) sentence unit
GLADYS: Gladys wrote down “Saturday” (on the paper).’

Example 2 (HKSLS) (GLADYS) [same sign] WRITE SATURDAY (GLADYS) sentence unit
GLADYS: “Saturday” (on the paper).’

2.2 Data source and spontaneous data of HKSLS by native
a) Around 1 hour 30 minutes of monologue data (semi-structured) by four native signs
b) Access to question c) Picture-based narratives
b) Around two hours of paired conversation with no restrictions on topics by four native signers (i.e. free conversation - unstructured)
Out of the 3859 analysable sentence units in the spontaneous data, 637 contain a sentence-final pronoun (17.4%).

2.3 Characteristics
A sentence-final pronoun in HKSLS can be preceded by more than one co-referential overt expression (637/14%, 134% in SLR).

Example 3:
(1) [I] GROW UP-HAIR H-9 DISLIKE (1) I sentence unit
I did not like [using] hearing aid as I grew up.

(0) GROW UP-HAIR H-9 DISLIKE (1) I sentence unit
I did not like [using] hearing aid as I grew up.

b) Sentence-final pronouns in HKSLS are not necessarily preceded by co-referential overt expressions in the original syntactic positions (without antecedents: 172/487, nearly 40% similar to ASL & SLR).

Example 4:
(2) [AGAIN STUDY NOT (I)-fixa] sentence unit
(2) I (I) did not study (design) again.

(0) GROW UP-HAIR H-9 DISLIKE (1) I sentence unit
I did not like [using] hearing aid as I grew up.

2.4 Proposed analysis: Sentence-final pronouns as right dislocated pronouns

4.1 What is a dislocation structure?
A dislocation construction is a sentence structure in which a referential constituent which functions as an argument or adjunct within a predicate-argument structure occurs 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)

• The only necessary criterion for a dislocation construction in spoken languages is that the pronoun does not take part in the semantic and syntactic dependency relations and arguments.
• This is also true in the sentence-final pronouns in HKSLS, as they come after your question tags, who-question words and negators.
• Spoken languages vary greatly 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 HKSLS are pronouns.
• Right-dislocated constituents in spoken languages can be omitted form a sentence without causing structural or semantic uncertainty.
• This is true in HKSLS, as sentence-final pronouns are optional rather than obligatory constructions.
• Right-dislocated elements in spoken languages are not necessarily prominent – they are necessarily unmarked.
• In addition, a right-dislocated phrase forms a simple intonational unit with the preceding clause and cannot be separated by a pause.

4.3 Functions of right dislocated pronouns in HKSLS

4.3.1 Right dislocated pronouns in HKSLS being topic-marking devices
• According to Lambrecht (1989), marking the discourse topic is one of the main functions of right-dislocated elements. A topic is a nominal construction, i.e., grammatical constructions which serve to mark a constituent as the topic of a sentence with respect to which a given sentence expresses a relevant comment (1992:107).
• This means exactly what is observed in the sentence-final pronouns in HKSLS, as all of them represent ‘subject-like’ topics.

4.3.2 Distribution of right-dislocated pronouns in HKSLS
• Bos (1995) distinguishes between and with without overt antecedents stems from the same underlying structure.
• Sentence-final pronouns occur more frequently when subject agreement is absent, she proposes that sentence-final pronouns serve the function of identifying the subject, especially when there is no overt agreement morpheme in the clause.

4.3.3 Topic-pronouns spell out agreement features in the absence of verb inflection.

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