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 pronoun must be free in its local domain.
(2) The boy_i hurts him_i

Principle C: A full noun must be free.
(3) The boy_i hurts John_i


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

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

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 his own portrait/someone’s portrait’

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’

V. Reflexive forms of agreeing verbs in RSL & 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

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)
References:

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