

LSF Relative Clauses in a Typological Perspective

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BACKGROUND

Relativization strategies refer to the grammatical means used in human languages to modify a noun with a sentence. One of them, relative clauses, continue to draw attention of linguists interested in spoken languages as well as those studying signed languages.

For the latter, proving that relative clauses are an available strategy leads to two goals. As with all typological work, it aims at enriching our general understanding of language's mechanisms in general, but it also aims at verifying that, as all natural languages, sign languages are able to embed sentences in each other in an ideally unlimited recursive operation.

GOALS

In this presentation, I will provide a description of LSF relative clauses. To achieve this, i) I start by presenting the general syntax of LSF relative clauses; going in depth from the macroscopic structure to the microscopic one, ii) I present new data helping us to dissociate LSF relative clauses from their present analyses as coordinated structures or some other kind of subordination, iii) I complete the picture by showing a number of interesting properties of LSF's relative clauses. Finally, I will integrate our study in a typological perspective by constantly drawing attention to both spoken and signed sign languages findings and will propose a unified account of the different kinds of relative clauses that we have identified.

Basic Data

Through the analysis of the production of two native signers of LSF during data elicitation sessions, I show that LSF instantiates at least three strategies of relativization: by means of a relative marker (glossed as PI, cf. (1a)), by means of the classifier for person cf. (1b), or via zero-marking (1c). All three types come with a set of nonmanuals that is normally limited to the relative marker/head. I also elicited data about wh-extraction, quantifier bindings and others as a way to control the syntactic properties of the structures we elicited. We used the playback method to collect acceptability and felicity judgments on a 7-point scale on every type of stimuli (Schenker 2011) in order to discriminate between well-formed sentences and structures.

- (1) a. IX-1 PREFER VET ^{rel}PI CURE DOG
- b. IX-1 PREFER VET PERSON-CL ^{rel}CURE DOG
- c. IX-1 PREFER VET ^{rel}CURE DOG
- 'I prefer the vet that cures the dog.'

The head of an LSF relative clause can be any argument from the subject to the adjunct. LSF relative clauses are mostly head external but can also be head internal. PI and PERSON-CL appear in the same positions with respect to word order, however they differ in their pattern when the head is plural. With a plural head we observe that the manual sign PI does not vary while PERSON-CL is marked for plural.

Properties of the relative marker.

Focusing on the relative marker PI, we have distributional evidence that it is a relative pronoun rather than a complementizer. Like relative pronouns in other SLs, PI shares many features with pointing pronouns. PI has an extended index handshape and directional movement (plus finger aperture). We also observed that spatial agreement and word order had an impact on the interpretation of the sentence.

Macroscopic structure.

These constructions instantiate headed relative clauses with the relative marker delimiting the left periphery of the relative clause. Word order facts in object-object relative clauses (not shown here) prove that we are dealing with externally headed relative clauses. However, we also found cases where the head remains inside the relative clause.

CONCLUSIONS

Through comparison with other languages I show that the morpho-syntactic properties of LSF relative clauses as well as their semantic properties can be part of an analysis that derives externally headed relative clauses from internally headed structures. I will also show that variation of agreement patterns and the syntactic position of PI derive different interpretations. This leads to a more complex analysis than is discussed here.

SELECTED REFERENCES

- Caponigro & Polinsky. 2011. Relative embeddings: A Circassian puzzle for the syntax/semantics interface.
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