ICONIC VARIABLES AND NULL SUBJECTS
IN GERMAN SIGN LANGUAGE (DGS)

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BACKGROUND

Null subjects (NSs) in sign languages are common (see e.g. Lillo-Martin 1986 for American SL; Bos 1993, Oomen 2017 for SL of the Netherlands (NGT); Glück & Pfau 1998 for DGS).

Oomen 2017 (NGT):

- **Psych-verbs**: NS = first person (but not third person)
- iconically motivated place of articulation on the body (see also Meir et al. 2007):
- default first person interpretation

HYPOTHESIS

In DGS, body-anchored verbs (i) – but not neutral verbs (ii) – limit subject drop to first person arguments as a result of an iconic association between the body and first person.

DATA

DGS Corpus (Blanck et al. 2010): subset of 58 dialogues (~8h:30)

1. Identified verb tokens representing verb meanings from the ‘ValPaL’ list (Hartmann et al. 2013):
   - 48 body-anchored (BA) forms; 523 tokens
   - 24 neutral (Neut) forms; 164 tokens

2. Annotated information about the subject:
   - Person: 1st / 2nd (excluded) / 3rd
   - Overtness: overt / non-overt
   - Role shift in clause: no / yes
   - No restriction on third person NSs expected in clauses with role shift, due to shifted reference

RESULTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXAMPLES WITHOUT ROLE SHIFT</th>
<th>EXAMPLES WITH ROLE SHIFT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BA (N=426)</td>
<td>BA (N=97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overt</td>
<td>Overt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-overt</td>
<td>Non-overt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>1st</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>174 (41%)</td>
<td>41 (42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101 (24%)</td>
<td>15 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>3rd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>141 (33%)</td>
<td>16 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 (2%)</td>
<td>25 (26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neut (N=151)</td>
<td>Neut (N=13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overt</td>
<td>Overt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-overt</td>
<td>Non-overt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>1st</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41 (27%)</td>
<td>5 (39%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 (20%)</td>
<td>2 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>3rd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 (40%)</td>
<td>2 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 (13%)</td>
<td>4 (31%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- With the exception of just 10 examples, third person NSs do not occur with body-anchored verbs.

Acknowledgments: I thank Vadim Kimmelman, Roland Pfau, and Enoch Aboh for valuable comments on different versions of this work. This research has been carried out as part of the project “Argument structure in three sign languages: typological and theoretical aspects”, funded by the Dutch Science Foundation (NWO), grant no. 360-70-520.


ANALYSIS

- Body-anchored verbs introduce a locative adjunct with 3 components, whose meaning can be paraphrased as e.g. “[love] in the signer’s body’s heart”:
  - o Preposition: place of articulation
  - o Possessive determiner: variable x (signer’s body)
  - o NP: metaphoric/physical location of the event denoted by the verb (e.g. heart for LOVE; mouth for EAT)

  \[
  \begin{array}{c}
  \text{IP} \\
  \text{DP_1} \\
  \text{subj} \\
  \text{PP} \\
  \text{VP} \\
  \end{array}
  \]

  - The variable x is endowed with a feature b, specifying that x represents the body as the container of the state/action
  - x also receives a first person specification, unless the enumeration includes a lexical item with a non-first person feature
  - x is co-indexed with the subject, yielding the pattern:
    - o \( \alpha_{x+1} \rightarrow \text{subject} = \text{INDEX}_x / \Ø \)
    - o \( \alpha_x \rightarrow \text{subject} = \text{INDEX}_x / \text{NP}, \Ø \)
  - Neutral verbs lack a locative adjunct

CONCLUSION

- The DGS data provide support for the hypothesis that body-anchoring constrains the drop of non-first person subjects, suggesting iconic factors are at play
- This is captured in the analysis with a variable, co-indexed with the subject, that licenses a first person NS (only)

ALTERNATIVE ANALYSIS

(IN COLLABORATION WITH VADIM KIMMELMAN)

Body-anchored verbs are in an agreement relation with the subject:

- Overt subjects have a non-inherent person feature and an interpretable speaker/non-speaker feature;
- Verbs come equipped with an inherent first person feature;
- Interpretable speaker-feature is introduced on the verb as a last resort in case of a NS, which does not have any features
- Analysis mirrors Matsushansky’s (2015) analysis of gender mismatch in Russian