Role shift in sign languages

Role shift (RS) is a construction commonly used in sign languages to report utterances or thoughts from an agent’s perspective (the attitude holder).

If it is signaled by non-manual markers (NMs): body shift and eye gaze contact break with the actual addresser towards the locus associated with the addressee of the reported context (Fig.1).

RS licenses indexical shift: in the scope of an attitude verb, 1st and 2nd person pronouns (IX and IZ) get their reference from the reported context (Quer 2005, Schlenker 2017).

In LSC, other indexicals like the locative adverb HERE tend to shift as well (see (5), (6)).

The interaction of ellipsis and role shift in sign languages

Cecchetto et al. (2019) argue that in Italian Sign Language (LSI), RS has interpretative consequences on the elided clause (C3) regarding the availability of so-called strict-sloppy readings (Dahl, 1973):

(1) GIANNI, SAY IX3, MARIA KISS. PIERO SANE.

--- RS: strict

Gianni said that he kissed Maria. Piero did (say that he kissed Maria), too.

(2) GIANNI, SAY IX3, MARIA KISS. PIERO SANE.

--- RS: sloppy

Gianni said that he kissed Maria. Piero did (say that he kissed Maria), too.

Cecchetto et al. (2019) justify the sloppy reading in (2) by positing a covert role-shift operator (C1) allowing context shift in the elided VP.

In LSC, other indexicals like the locative adverb HERE tend to shift as well (see (5), (6)).

Here we focus on pragmatic grounding of interpretations of ellipses.

Ellipsis phenomena are sensitive to the type of the attitude verb:

(5) Ellipsis QUD matching condition

(Kehler 2016)

For any antecedent C4 and target clause C5 for which

\[ C_4 \subseteq C_5 \]

QUD (\[ C_4 \subseteq C_5 \])

In words, if the meaning of the antecedent is part of the alternatives that the target clause denotes, then the QUD corresponds to that set of alternatives.

Ellipsis targets the Main Point of Utterance

We explain the different readings in (3a) in terms of accessible QUDs identified by the addressee.

The QUD is identified on pragmatic grounds by identification of the VP (matrix or embedded) that serves as the Main Point of Utterance (MPU; Simons 2007, 2019), which defines at-issue content.

In (3a), the matrix VP is interpreted as the MPU and, consequently, as the relevant antecedent for ellipsis, whereas in (3b) the embedded VP is considered at-issue.

QUDs for both interpretations will differ accordingly:

(10) a. \[ [C_4]_w \] = \[ \text{Alex likes Alex} in w \]

--- RS: the set of possible answers to the question Who did x say that x likes Alex?

b. \[ [C_4]_w \] = \[ \text{Alex likes Alex} in w \]

--- RS: the set of possible answers to Who likes Alex?

To capture the above data, we propose to augment Kehler’s 2016 QUD-matching condition in (9) with a constraint on MPU sensitivity.

(11) Ellipsis QUD matching condition (revised)

For any antecedent C4 and target clause C5 for which

\[ C_4 \subseteq C_5 \]

QUD\text{\textsubscript{MPU}} (\[ C_4 \subseteq C_5 \])

The interaction of ellipsis with context-shift

The data in (3b) and (6) suggests that ellipsis-induced alternatives in C4 are sensitive to the different types of contexts available in C5, without RS, the utterance context fixes the interpretation of indexicals in C4, whereas RS blocks its availability as a parameter for their interpretation.

In role-shifted structures such as (3b) and (6), the utterance context is not considered at-issue anymore: only the embedded, reported context is, constraining the available referents for both IX and HERE in C5.

Being not at-issue, the denotation of the indexical pronoun in (3b) as the speaker is excluded in order to avoid presupposition failure between first-person morphology and NMs signaling role-shift (cp. Zucchi 2003).

A similar reasoning applies to (6), where the relevant focus alternatives needed to license ellipsis take into account the respective locations of the antecedent subject Marina and the contrastive remnant of the elided sentence Jordi, but not that of the speaker.

Questions

--- 1. Why is there no difference between 3rd person and role-shifted 1st person pronoun in (3)?

--- 2. How can we capture the distribution of matrix (SAY) and embedded (LIKE) VPs as antecedents?

References

Scan the code above in order to access the references! Comments much welcome, thank you: david.blunier@unige.ch, giorgia.zorzi88@gmail.com