Reference Resolution in French Sign Language (LSF)

Brigitte Garcia and Marie-Anne Sallandre

1 Introduction

The present study examines the expression of nominal reference in French Sign Language (LSF). We will show that an analysis of nominal reference in sign languages (SL) has to take into consideration not only lexical signs but also the constructions currently referred to as classifier constructions in the literature (called non-conventional units in what follows to use a theory-neutral term).

Non-conventional units have been identified in all studied SLs and have long been recognised in diverse theoretical approaches under different names. Nevertheless, the description and the analysis of these units remain a major topic of debate in SL literature. As shown below, the few studies of nominal reference in SLs do not take non-conventional units into account. However, according to our study, nominal reference—and particularly the expression of definiteness and specificity—crucially require a better understanding of the interrelations between lexical signs and non-conventional units.

We begin by reviewing the debate regarding the description and status of non-conventional units in SL literature (section 2). Against this backdrop, we present our own theoretical framework and explain the centrality of non-conventional units for the structural economy of SL (section 3). We then discuss the main studies of nominal reference in a number of SLs, couched in diverse theoretical approaches (section 4). In light of these studies, we show (section 5) how the interaction between lexical units and non-conventional units in discourse allows a better understanding of the expression of nominal reference in SL.

1 The main abbreviations we use in this chapter are the following: LSF = French Sign Language; LU = Lexematic Unit; PT = Personal Transfer; SL = Sign Language; SpL = Spoken language; ST = Situational Transfer; TSS = Transfer of Shape and Size; TU = Transfer Unit. As for glossing conventions, we follow the habit in SL linguistics, that is: capital letters for conventional (lexical) units and lower case for non conventional units. Since SLs have no written form, glossing through the written words of a spoken language has become a general procedure.
The Expression of Reference in SL Discourse: Debates in the Literature

The relatively young field of SL linguistics was initially dominated by a formal, primarily generative, approach (Klima & Bellugi 1979). Since then, particularly since the 1990s, major theoretical debates have opposed the tenants of formal approaches and cognitive-functional approaches. These debates centre on two interrelated issues, both directly related to the topic of this chapter. The first subject of debate concerns the role and the status accorded to the use of space in SLs, as many SL categories and morpho-syntactic relations, as well as the introduction of nominal referents and the continued reference to them in discourse crucially involve the use of space. The second issue concerns the description of the constructions in SL discourse which cannot be analysed as conventional lexical signs. Both of these questions are related to the fundamental question concerning the impact of modality on linguistic structures (e.g., Meier et al. 2002; Woll 2003; Vermeerbergen 2006; Pizzuto et al. 2007; Perniss et al. 2007).

In what follows we review the opposing views on both issues. This allows us to position our own treatment of these phenomena, and more generally, the framework which we consider necessary for the analysis of nominal reference in SL.

2.1 Space and Its Use in SL Discourse

As visual-gestural languages, SLs involve a set of manual and non-manual articulators. In addition to hands and arms, these include gaze, torso and facial expression. These diverse articulators are used within the space in front of the signer, known as the signing space. Through various mechanisms a discourse entity can be associated with a location in the signing space. Association with a location in space is obtained by the direction of the gaze, manual pointing, direct placement of the manual lexical sign and body posture, or any combination of these means.

The first, formal, descriptions of the function of the signing space (e.g., Poizner et al. 1987) distinguished two distinct uses of signing space. The first

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2 The text generally considered seminal is Stokoe (1960) on American Sign Language (ASL).

3 The term *modality* is commonly used in SL linguistics to designate the production and reception channels used by languages: audio-oral for spoken languages (SpL) and visual-gestural for SL.