Encoding transitive actions in Italian Sign Language: Agent’s or patient’s perspective?

Abstract:
A special class of verbs attested in all signed languages, indicating verbs, does not only encode the meaning of the verb but at the same time also deictically refers to the agent and the patient of the action. Accordingly, such verbs encode exactly transitive actions (e.g., pay, kick, kiss). Recent research shows that indicating verbs favour motivated use of space (Cormier et al., 2015). This implies that signers can map an agent onto their body by adopting agent’s perspective starting the sign from the signers location and deictically refer to the patient by the final location of the sign. Although agent’s perspective is considered to be typical strategy for indicating verbs (Jenzen et al., 2001), signers can also take the patients perspective by mapping the patient onto their body and start production of indicating sign from the location to deictically refer to the agent and end production of the sign on the body of the signer. This strategy can be called passivizing perspective shift (Jenzen et al., 2001). The context in which one strategy is chosen over another has not been investigated so far.

Previous studies in vocal languages literature have found that sentence structure for encoding transitive actions is biased by the attentional focus of an agent or a patient resulting in choice of active/passive forms for encoding (Tomlin, 1997). In this experiment we aimed at investigating the interplay between attention of the signer on the general prominence of the referent (i.e., main character) and presence of an action that supposedly could shift the attentional focus of the signer from the main character to the character doing an action. Accordingly, we aimed to explore whether the shift in attentional focus would result in specific encoding strategy used- agent’s perspective versus patient’s perspective.

The material for the experiment consisted of 12 GIFs, 6 GIFs for each condition where we manipulated attentional focus. Twenty-three deaf adult signers described the GIFs (presented in semi- randomized order) to another deaf adult. For the present study, we annotated whether the target action was encoded from agents, patients or both perspectives.

We found that in both conditions signers were significantly more likely to encode the GIFs by mapping the main character onto their body (i.e., passivizing perspective shift). Thus, our results indicate that in LIS signers tend to take the perspective of the generally more prominent character and that the action per se does not influence the change in the strategy. Moreover, such strategy allows encoding of more fine grained information. Not only it
deictically refers to the agent and patient but as well to the location of the action which arguably makes passivizing strategy more informatively efficient.

This is the first study to assess the focus of topicalization in Italian Sign language based on experimentally collected data and provides first quantitative insights in regard to the choice of linguistic strategies in encoding.

References:

