

## Backgrounded agents in sign language: passives or impersonals?

Gemma BARBERÀ and Patricia CABREDO HOFHERR

(CNRS/Paris 8)

**INTRODUCTION.** Here we investigate the structure in (1) that has been analysed as a passive in American Sign Language (ASL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) (Janzen et al. 2001; Kegl 1990; Saeed and Leeson 1999). In this construction for an agreeing verb the agent is left unexpressed with the verb agreeing with the body of the signer, which functions as the patient. Additionally, it involves role shift, a mechanism typical from signed languages where the signer adopts the role of a character of the story (marked by *rs* in 1).

- (1) \_\_\_\_\_<sub>rs:police</sub>  
POLICEMAN 3-HIT-1. (ASL)  
'The policeman got hit.'

Basing our evidence in Catalan Sign Language (LSC) and Italian Sign Language (LIS) data, we claim that semantically this structure is better analysed as impersonal reference, similar to constructions with unspecified agents (2).

- (2) Al policia ∅ le pegaron.  
'The policeman, they hit him.'

**ARGUMENTATION.** The target structure has restrictions that are not characteristic of passive constructions:

### (i) Semantic restrictions in the agent and the patient

In (1) the grammatical subject has to be animate and unspecified. This restriction is shared with structures with unspecified agents (3). In LSC and LIS, the low referentiality is instantiated with a null argument and the location for the subject in the verb is established in a spatially marked location (4).

- (3) They lifted the chair.  
(4) MARIA MEETING PREPARE CL.type-on-computer ∅ 3<sub>ip.up</sub>-CONVENE-1. \_\_\_\_\_<sub>rs:mary</sub> (LSC)  
'Maria was preparing for the meeting and they convened her.'

However, as (1) and (4) show, the patient also has to refer to an animate entity, which is expressed with co-occurring role shift – this additional restriction has to be explained independently as it does not apply to impersonal constructions as (3).

### (ii) No syntactic promotion of the object

LIS uses a structured signing space for the localisation of the functions for subject and object: subjects are associated in the ipsilateral area (ip) and objects stand in the contralateral one (cl) (5) (Geraci 2013). However, in the target structure in LIS, the lateral consistency is kept and the object is not promoted to the ipsilateral area (6).

- (5) GIANNI<sub>ip</sub> CAT<sub>cl</sub> 3<sub>ip</sub>-STEP-ON-3<sub>cl</sub>. (LIS)  
'Gianni stepped on a cat.'  
(6) CAT CL.limb-walk 3<sub>ip.up</sub>-STEP-ON-1<sub>cl</sub>. \_\_\_\_\_<sub>rs:cat</sub> (LIS)  
'A cat was walking and they stepped on it.'

### (iii) Transitivity is kept

The structure includes either an agreement verb, where the movement goes from the location established for the subject to the location for the object (6), or a handling classifier, which incorporates an agentive external argument and an internal one (Benedicto and Brentari 2004) (7).

- (7) \_\_\_\_\_<sub>rs:john</sub>  
JOAN WALK STROLL 3<sub>ip.up</sub>-CL<sub>handl</sub> GUN-SHOOT-1. (LSC)  
'While John was strolling along, they shot him.'

**CONCLUSION.** This structure is more adequately analysed as a different information packaging that operates at the syntax-discourse level. Typologically this structure is better decomposed as constructions with a topicalised object, with the expression of the patient always co-occurring with a particular prosodic topic marking (raised eyebrows and a

