TOPICS IN RSL AND NGT: HOW PROMINENT ARE THEY?

Different sign languages (SL) have often been claimed to be topic-prominent [1], that is, to consistently mark the thetic vs. categorical distinction as defined in [6]. However, this is a matter of debate [2], and recently the consistency and prominence of topic marking has been challenged for several SL [3]. The purpose of this study has therefore been to find out whether topics are consistently marked in two unrelated SL, namely Russian SL (RSL) and SL of the Netherlands (NGT), and whether the data justify considering one or both of these SL as topic-prominent. This comparative study thus contributes to the debate whether topic-prominence is an important typological characteristic of SL.

To answer this question, corpus data have been analyzed: for RSL ≈2500 utterances from 6 native signers, and for NGT data ≈2000 utterances from 9 native signers from the Corpus NGT [4,5]. The data are of two types: retellings of cartoons and personal stories. In RSL approximately 1100 utterances contained a constituent with topical function and in NGT approximately 1000 utterances.

Both languages have a specific strategy to mark both 'aboutness' and 'scene-setting' topics. In both languages the topics can be placed in the utterance-initial position and marked prosodically, namely by a pause after the topic, and/or head tilt or eye-brow raise scoping over the topic. If both scene-setting and aboutness topics are marked, the former usually precedes the latter (ex.1). NGT also has a separate strategy of clause-final pronoun copy that can refer back to the topic of the sentence, which is not attested in RSL (ex.2). NPs and clauses can be aboutness topics, but VPs cannot. There is a separate strategy that is used for thetic sentences in both languages, namely the VS order without prosodic break (ex.3), which appears to be more common in RSL than in NGT, but optional in both languages. However, topics do not have to be marked prosodically or syntactically (ex.4); in fact approximately 50% of topics are unmarked. Interestingly, topic shift – the topic of the sentence in question is different from the topic in the previous sentence – is the factor that has the most significant influence on topic marking: most of the marked aboutness topics are shifted, and all aboutness topics marked with eye-brow raise are shifted. The thetic vs. categorical distinction is not always marked either, as a sentence containing an unmarked subject (ex.4) can be interpreted both thetically and categorically.

To summarize, topics in both RSL and NGT are regularly marked. Moreover, both languages have a syntactic position allocated to topics. The presence of an elaborate strategy to mark thetic sentences might be another argument for the topic-prominence. However, the fact that unmarked sentences can be interpreted both categorically and thetically and the fact that there are functional (topic shift) and syntactic (no VPs) restrictions on marked topics, exclude a classification of these languages as topic-prominent [2,6]. Therefore, although having more tools for marking information structure than for instance Hong-Kong SL [2], RSL and NGT are still not topic-prominent.

Examples:

Notational conventions: hb – head tilt backwards, / – prosodic boundary, top – aboutness topic, sst – scene-setting topic.

(1) a. $\underline{\text{hb}}$ [THEN]$_{sst}$ / [IX]$_{top}$ / GO [NGT]
'Then he goes away'

b. [FOURTH]$_{sst}$ / $\underline{\text{hb}}$ [IX CAT]$_{top}$ / LOOK [RSL]
'In the fourth story the cat looks. '

(2) [IX-1]$_{top}$ DARE [IX-1]$_{top}$ [NGT]
'I dare'

(3) a. COME TRAM [NGT]
'A tram comes'

b. IX APPEAR CAT [RSL]
'A cat appears'

(4) a. [CAT]$_{top}$ CLAMBER [NGT]
'The cat clambers'

b. [CAT]$_{top}$ LOOK [RSL]
'The cat looks'

References:

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