Strong Pronominals in ASL and LSF*

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Abstract: Theories of pronominal strength (e.g. Cardinaletti_and_Starke_1999) lead one to expect that sign language, just like spoken language, can have morphologically distinct strong pronominals. We suggest that ASL (American Sign Language) and LSF (French Sign Language) have such pronominals, characterized here by the fact that they may associate with *ONLY* even in the absence of prosodically marked focus.

Keywords: sign language, strong pronouns, pointing, focus

Theories of pronominal strength such as Cardinaletti_and_Starke_1999 are stated in a modality-neutral fashion. Since there are morphologically strong pronouns in spoken language, they predict that such pronouns could exist in sign language too, but none have been described: Bertone_and_Cardinaletti_2011 argue that strong pronouns in LIS (Italian Sign Language) display longer-than-normal duration, but treat this as a *prosodic* fact. Filling the typological gap, we suggest that ASL (American Sign Language) and LSF (French Sign Language) have *morphologically* distinct strong pronominals, characterized here by the fact that they associate with *ONLY* even in the absence of prosodically marked focus.

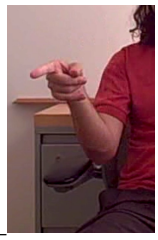
Data were elicited from one native Deaf ASL and one native LSF signer, each the child of Deaf, signing parents. We used the playback method and transcription conventions described in Schlenker_2017, Schlenker_et al._2016, with quantitative acceptability judgments (7 = best, average score at the beginning of each example) and detailed inferential questions; the reference of each video and the number of judgments obtained are found after each example, and raw data (including descriptions of focus marking) can be found in the Supplementary Materials.

In (1)c, the pronominal *CL-IX-a* yields the same meaning *as if* it were focused, but overt focus (written with a subscripted $_F$) as in (1)d is unnecessary to obtain this interpretation. *CL-IX-a* is realized by signing the person classifier *CL* with the non-dominant hand, while pointing towards it with the dominant hand (picture in (1)b). (While (1)a-d are highly acceptable, the consultant discerns an English influence due to *ONLY*; further paradigms should thus be investigated.)

(1) *Context:* The speaker is the director of the school. He tells a group of teachers what they are allowed to say or to put in writing after the students took an exam.

IX-1 RECENTLY CONVERSATION JOHN$_a$ MARY$_b$. IX-1 ONLY ALLOW ___ TELL IX-b BILL FAIL.
'I recently had a conversation with John and Mary. I only allowed __ to tell her that Bill failed.'

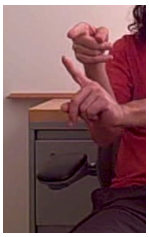
a. [7] __ = IX-a_



him (ASL, 24, 75a, 3 judgments; ASL, 24, 76a, 3 judgments)

b. [6.7] __ = IX-a$_F$

him$_F$ (ASL, 24, 75c, 3 judgments)

c. [7] __ = CL-IX-a_ 
him$_F$ (ASL, 24, 76b; 3 judgments)

d. [6.7] __ = CL-IX-a$_F$
him$_F$ (ASL, 24, 76c; 3 judgments)

b, c, d => the speaker disallows anyone other than John to tell Mary that Bill failed

In LSF, a *simplex* pronominal with a distinct manual morphology, and produced with the labialization *PI* (video in (2)b), displays this strong behavior too. It also has uses as a relativizer (Hauser_2016,Hauser_and_Geraci_2017). Focusing the normal pointing sign in (2)a (from three separate paradigms) primarily yields the expected reading (here and throughout our LSF data, focus seems to be primarily marked by eyebrow raising). The interesting observation lies in (2)b,c: *ONLY* associates with *PI* irrespective of whether *PI* is focused. (The position of *ONLY* slightly varied from one example to the next, hence the summary transcription *ONLY IX-1/IX-1 ONLY/ONLY*).

(2) YESTERDAY IX-1 1-MEET MARIE$_b$ PIERRE$_a$. ONLY IX-1/IX-1 ONLY/ONLY WANT __ b-HELP-a IX-a.
'Yesterday I met Marie and Pierre. I only want(ed) __ to help him.'

a. [7] __ = IX-b$_F$
her$_F$ (LSF, 57, 2482b; 2 judgments; LSF, 57, 2492b; 3 judgments; LSF, 57, 2498b, 3 judgments)

b. [7] __ = PI-b
her$_F$ (LSF, 57, 2482c; 2 judgments) **video of *PI-b*:** https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Mz-VKVeYNKVGNZZzVlT2VNUWM/view?usp=sharing

c [7] __ = PI-b$_F$
her$_F$ (LSF, 57, 2482d; 2 judgments)

d. [6.3] __ = CL-IX-b
her$_F$ (LSF, 57, 2492c; 3 judgments) **video of *CL-IX-b*:** https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Mz-VKVeYNKaEg5dHd3MjZzaUU/view?usp=sharing

e. [6.7] __ = CL-IX-b$_F$
her$_F$ (LSF, 57, 2492d; 3 judgments)

f. [7] __ = CL-PI-b
her$_F$ (LSF, 57, 2498c; 3 judgments) **video of *CL-PI-b*:** https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Mz-VKVeYNKanBJRVl1LVhpZDQ/view?usp=sharing

g. [6.7] __ = CL-PI-b$_F$ (LSF, 57, 2498d; 3 judgments)

a, b, c, d, e, f, g => the speaker doesn't want anyone other than Marie to help Pierre
(a yielded conflicting inferences in LSF, 57, 2482b but not in LSF, 57, 2492b and LSF, 57, 2498b)

(2)d-e shows that the same semantic result can be obtained by using the ASL strategy in (1)c, with a person classifier simultaneously signed with a pointing sign (video in (2)d). And (2)f-g shows that using this strategy we can replace the pointing sign with *PI* (video in (2)f), with similar semantic results.

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Supplementary Materials

Raw ASL and LSF data can be found at: https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Mz-VKVeYNKXzFQbXBoU0RteGs/view?usp=sharing

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