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ASL IX to locus as a modifier

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In ASL, a pointing gesture with an index finger (IX) can be used to refer to entities. When the referent is not physically present in the context, it can be associated with different locations in the signing space (locus) so that IX to that locus refers to that referent. It has been argued that loci are overt instantiations of indices (Lillo-Martin and Klima 1990) that the pronominal element IX carries. I propose an alternative analysis of IX to a locus (IXLOC), where it is analyzed as a relative clause modifier, taking a locational variable a.

(1)  
   a.  \[IXLOC = \lambda a. \lambda x. x \text{ is signed at } a\]  
   b.  \[IXA = \lambda x. x \text{ is signed at } A\]

There are at least two motivations for this analysis. First, loci are neither obligatory nor licensed in all anaphoric contexts. ASL freely allows null arguments and bare nouns for anaphoric reference when there is a single salient entity in the discourse (Ahn, Kocab, and Davidson 2019). Also used in this context is a neutral IX, which points not to a previously established locus but to a neutral position. In contrary, IX to locus is not frequent in naturally produced data (Czubek 2017; Frederiksen and Mayberry 2016), and is licensed when contrast has to be drawn between referents (Ahn, Kocab, and Davidson 2019) as in (2). This suggests that the primary role of IXLOC might be in distinguishing the intended referent from a set of other competing referents, rather than in anaphorically referring to that referent.

(2)  
   BOY IXA SEE GIRL IXB READ. IXA DANCE.  
   ‘A boy saw a girl read. He danced.’

Second, IX to locus is only licensed when the locus has been associated with the referent in previous discourse, a use that I call the introductory use. The introductory use is illustrated by the first instance of IXA in (3), where the referent is associated with locus A.

(3)  
   JIN *(IXA) ENTER CLUB. IXA DANCE.  
   ‘Jin entered a club. He danced.’

Note that without the first instance of IXA in (3), it is infelicitous to use IXA to refer to Jin in the second sentence. Thus, it is not possible to analyze both instances of IXA as anaphoric elements. If IX to locus is analyzed as a pronoun carrying an index, the introductory use of IXLOC would need a separate account from the anaphoric one.

If IXLOC is analyzed as a modifier, the difference between the introductory use and the anaphoric use can be derived straightforwardly without proposing two separate denotations. In the introductory use, the referential expression Jin combines with a relative clause “that is signed at a” in an appositive manner, so that the resulting interpretation is Jin with the added information that Jin is the one signed at a. In the anaphoric use, I propose that a null anaphor, which is readily available in
the language, is the head noun of the same relative clause “that is signed at a”, and that the relative clause is restrictive, as in (4b). Relative clauses with null heads are also found in spoken languages like Mandarin, as in (5).

(4) a. \([\text{JIN IX}_A] = [\text{j} \text{i} \text{n \ [who is signed at A]} \ ]\) \quad \text{‘Jin’}
   b. \([\text{IX}_A] = [\emptyset \text{ IX}_A] = \text{tx. } x \text{ is signed at A}\) \quad \text{‘the one signed at A’}

(5) Wo mai-de \ hen gui.
    \ I buy-RC \text{HEN expensive}
    ʻThe thing I bought was expensiveʻ.

The details of deriving the appositive meaning in (4a) have to be worked out further, as appositive relative clauses are standardly assumed to differ from restrictive ones in structure and meaning (cf. Del Gobbo 2007). But the basic analysis of IX_{LOC} as a modifier can remain consistent between introductory and anaphoric uses even if this difference is taken into account.

Thus, analyzing IX_{LOC} as a relative clause modifier allows us to unify the introductory and the anaphoric use and better account for the contrastive distribution.

References


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