

Aboutness topics and referential hierarchy in Italian Sign Language (LIS)

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The topicality in spoken languages has been addressed from a pragmatic, syntactic and prosodic perspective (Chafe 1976, Givón 1983, Gundel 1985, Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl 2007, Reinhart 1981). According to previous studies, the **aboutness topic**(AbT) is a given referent which represents what the sentence is about; cross-linguistically it may be realized with different referential categories(Ariel 1988, 1991) and marked by specific intonation contours.

As both syntactic and prosodic cross-linguistic differences have been detected in sign languages (SLs) (Aarons 1994, Brunelli 2011, Wilbur 2012, Sze 2013, Kimmelman 2014, Kimmelman and Pfau 2016), the purpose of this study is threefold: (i) to investigate the **prosodic features** of AbTs in LIS, considering manual(MMs) and non-manual markers (NMMs), (ii) to account for the **accessibility** of a referent in relation to its **informative status** (continued/shifted), to the **sentential distance** between the same referents and to the number of **competitors** (iii) to sketch a first **referential hierarchy** in LIS, by considering the distribution of syntactic categories such as full DPs, pronouns and null arguments with different verb types (Meir 2002, Benedicto & Brentari 2004, Frederiksen & Mayberry 2016, Koulidobrova 2016, Czubec 2017, Ahn 2019).

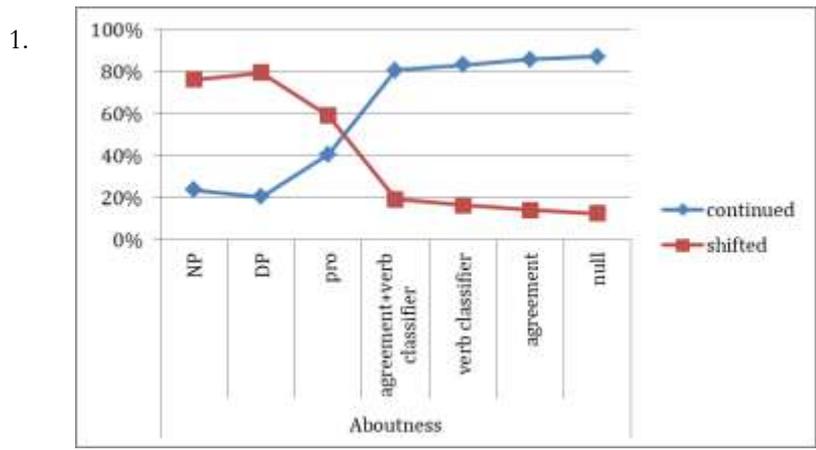
The data (1654 items), collected from nine native-signers, and analysed through ELAN and “R” (Crasborn & Sloetjes 2008) consists of two types: spontaneous storytelling between couple of signers and single monologues.

In LIS three tendencies of NMMs accompany AbT(ex. 1): (i) **raised-eyebrow** (re) (30%); (ii) **squinted-eyebrows** (sq) (32%) (iii) **head-tilt back** accompanying 13% of pronominal AbT subjects; prosodic markers (eye-blink and/or head-nod) separate AbT (20%) from the sentence. Similarly to (Dachkovsky & Sandler 2009), in LIS squinted-eyebrows fulfils a pragmatic function by signalling the low accessibility of a referent, its occurrence with DPs is statistically significant (*odds ratio* 6.06, $p<0.001$).

$$\frac{\text{re}}{\text{sq}} \quad \frac{\text{sq} \quad \text{hn} \quad \text{eb}}{\text{TABLE SIT.}}$$

(1) **IX-loc, IX-3 WIFE DAUGHTER** ‘Tomorrow, in an estate agency John buys a house’. [Fi_5st_60]

In line with (Ariel 1988, 1991), which state that the more salient the information is, the less linguistic material the speaker needs to codify it, in LIS 84% of continued AbT are realized as null arguments, on the contrary 78% of shifted AbTs (20%) are realized as NP/DPs, and the correlation is significant (*odds ratio* 9.29, $p<0.001$), while pronouns occupy an intermediate position, as can be seen in the Chart (1).



Sometimes, null arguments can also be realized as shifted AbTs. Indeed, language-specific strategies make the omitted referent retrievable even when shifted, such as predicative classifiers and agreeing verbs. By conveying anaphoric functions, the predicative classifier (JUMP) from the example (1) allows the drop of the Ab referent, in fact, it may only refer to the dog.

- (1) sq
 DOG BARK, BEAR_i IX-3_{i-a} FEAR, CL-FALL_a, **CL-JUMP**...
 ‘The dog barks, the bear is scared, (he) falls and (the dog) jumps over him’.
 [Mi_Mo_53-56]

For a more comprehensive picture of the accessibility of AbT, also sentential distance between antecedent-anaphora and the occurrence of competitors within this distance have been taken into account. The statistical analysis confirms that the interaction between squinted-eyebrows and DPs is emphasized by sentential distance (*odds ratio* 1.027, $p < 0.01$) and competitors (*odds ratio* 1.41, $p < 0.01$).

Such a research represents a first study on referentiality in LIS and an important litmus test for validating theories on the pragmatic, syntax and prosody of information structure proposed for spoken languages (Ariel 1991).

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