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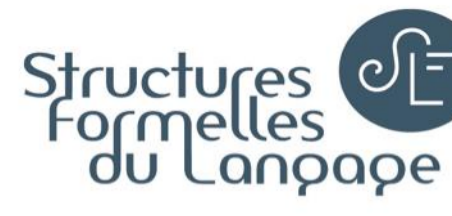


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# Impersonal human reference in French Sign Language (LSF)



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## STATE OF THE ART

**Definition:** “R-impersonals have the appearance of regular, personal constructions but feature a subject which is human and non-referential.”  
(Siewierska 2011: 57; see also, a.o., Cabredo-Hofherr 2006)

•Barberà & Quer 2013 : pioneering work on impersonal human reference in a sign language : Catalan Sign Language (LSC) > LSC overtly marks impersonal human reference through a distinctive spatial location in the upper area of the frontal plane, a zone already identified for encoding non-specific indefinite referents (Barberà 2012).

**Nota:** in LSF, a similar value of the upper area of the frontal plane has been noted, as a starting point for the motion of directional/agreement verbs with an indefinite agent (Millet 1997; Cuxac 2000)

•Special Issue of *Sign Language & Linguistics*: 'Impersonal Human Reference in Sign Languages' (Barberà & Cabredo-Hofherr, 2018) >> RSL, LIS, TID, HKSL, LSF, LSC

•For LSF, L'Huillier et al 2016 : first systematic study focalised on the expression of impersonal human reference.

## THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL OPTIONS

### Semiological approach

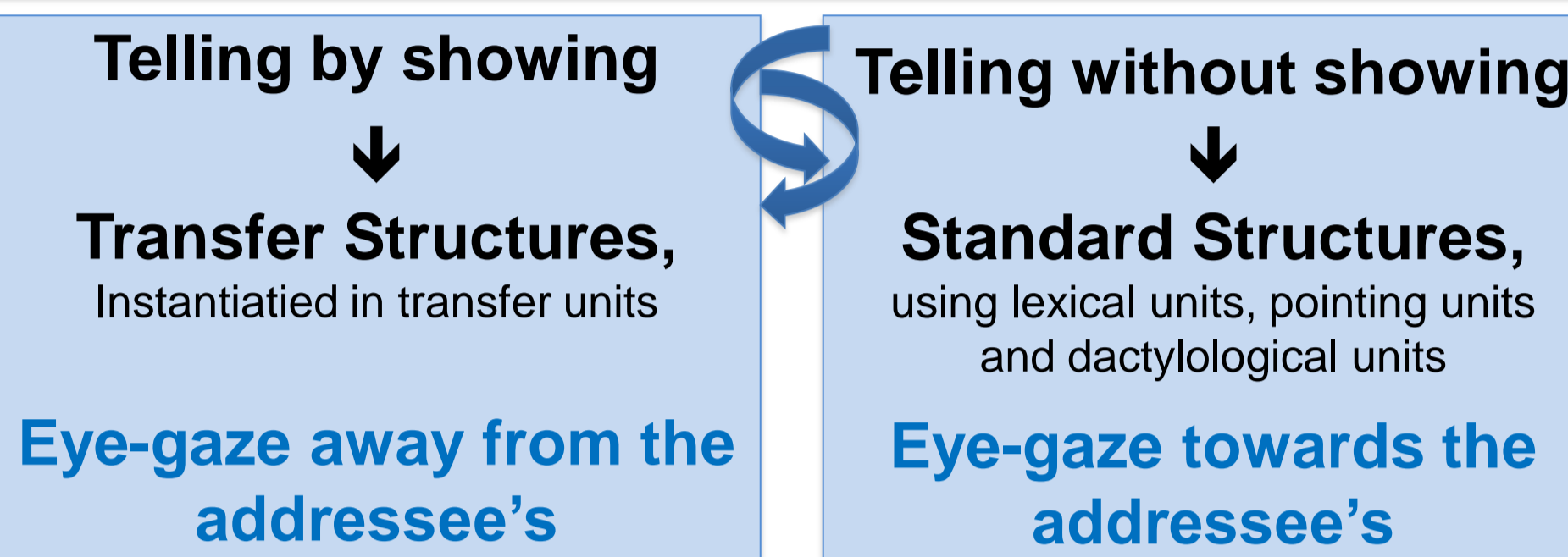
(Cuxac 2000, Cuxac & Sallandre 2007, Garcia & Sallandre 2014...)

**Transfer Units = ±**

- classifier constructions/productive signs/depicting signs
- constructed action/ role shift/surrogate

(Garcia & Sallandre 2014)

Two semiological and linguistic modes of meaning production in SLs



### Approach for our discursive corpora (L'Huillier et al 2016)

—A cognitive-functional approach ((Reichler-] Béguelin 1993, Cornish 1999, Jonhson 2011)

—Prevalence of semantic and communicative intent

—Taking into account the cognitive representations of the interlocutors

### TYPOLMP QUESTIONNAIRE

—Adaptation to SLs by Cabredo-Hofherr & Barberà (2015) of a questionnaire developed by the Franco-German project *Towards a typology of human impersonal pronouns (Typolmp)*, ANR-11-FRAL-0011 & DFG—

The sentences of the questionnaire cover a range of contexts that are characteristics for human impersonal subjects in better-studied languages such as English, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Russian and Spanish

1. Anchored existential context (anchoring at a known point in space and time)
2. Vague existential context (event took place at some point in the past)
3. Indirect evidential existentials (event is inferred on the basis of [mostly visual] evidence)
4. Predicates requiring a plurality of referents
5. Existentials uses, with a generalizing/habitual predication
6. Corporate / collective subjects : 6.1 in episodic contexts; 6.2 In generic contexts
7. Locative universals : 7.1 In generic contexts; 7.2 in episodic contexts
8. Universal readings without a modal
9. Verbs of saying
10. Unrestricted universals
11. Conditionals

### TWO COMPLEMENTARY TYPES OF METHODOLOGIES > TWO KINDS OF DATA

- (1) **Corpus data (LS-Colin, Cuxac et al 2002; Creagest, Garcia & L'Huillier 2011):** the sequences we considered (chosen on a merely semantic basis) come from the productions of 7 Deaf adults (5 from Creagest, 2 from LS-Colin).
- (2) **Elicited data (Typolmp Questionnaire):** 2 French Deaf adults, F & M, respectively 50 & 65 years-old, interacting with a Deaf researcher (M-T. L'Huillier), assisted by a Deaf researcher (Hatice Aksen)

## MAIN RESULTS

❖ **DIRECTIONAL VERBS (including verbs of saying),** like GIVE, SAY or INFORM: use of a high frontal zone as a marker of impersonal human reference in LSF (starting point of directional verb).

❖ **UNIVERSAL:** the preferred strategy appears to be the agent ellipsis.

❖ **EXISTENTIAL** tend to occur with overt agent marking

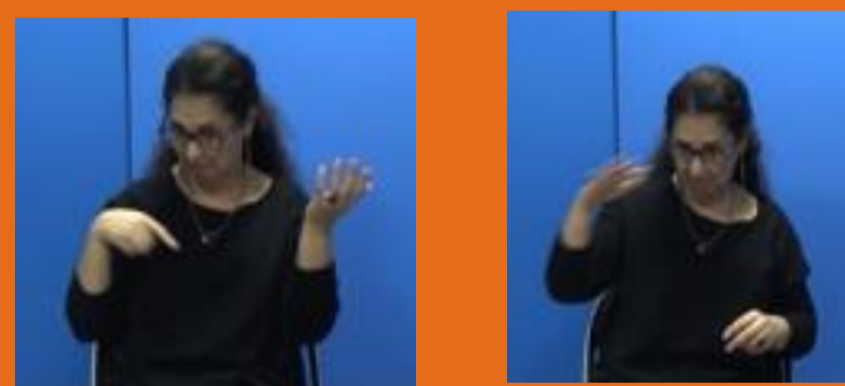
In existential contexts, contrast between:

- **A singular agent : marked by ONE (SOMEONE) or PERSON**



(left: thumb variation; center: index variation; right: in LSC) **The marker PERSON**

- **Contexts evoking a non-singular agent or a vague plurality: marked by IX3pl (circular pointing).**



**IX3pl markers**  
(left: index rotation down; right: sweeping flat palm)

❖ **EXISTENTIAL WITH GENERALISING/HABITUAL PREDICATION and LOCATIVE UNIVERSALS**  
*Nota: in both contexts (5) & (7), impersonals are marked by the LSF sign PI*



FRANCE PI WHAT PI EAT SNAIL  
*Transl. Engl.: In France, they eat snails. (Fr. En France on mange des escargots.)*

❖ **UNRESTRICTED UNIVERSALS**

- **Dominant strategy: agent ellipsis without spatial anchoring : highest degree of impersonality**



MUST ENJOY ONE TIME LIFE  
*Transl. Engl.: You live only one. (Fr. On ne vit qu'une fois.)*

- **Two alternative strategies but specially in discourse corpora vs. elicited data**

1/ Instructional personal transfer



MIX<sup>Instructional</sup> PT  
*Transl.: Mixing it well, like this, you see ?*

2/ 2nd person pronoun : pointing IX2 (rare)



IX<sub>2</sub> (YOU) PREGNANT SMOKE NEVER DANGER  
*Transl.: You must never smoke when pregnant, it's very dangerous.*

### Types of space:

The figure synthesizes the different distances and heights used in 'ALL DEAF' (blue) – 'ALL WORLD' (red) – 'ALL' (green) – 'THREE PERSONS' (blue) – 'ALL THREE' x3 (yellow) – 'PUBLIC' (white).



(Aksen, 2018)

## FURTHER RESEARCH

**Hypothesis requiring further investigations:**

The agent ellipsis strategy is an option in almost all contexts tested by the questionnaire and in the vast majority of cases, the target sentences could be translated to French with the pronoun *on* (according to Gast & van der Auwera 2013)

⇒ **The agent ellipsis in LSF appears to be the closest equivalent to French *on*.**

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