

Indexicals under role shift in Sign Language of the Netherlands: experimental insights

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In order to report speech and other attitudes, sign languages (SLs) make use of a dedicated construction known as role shift (RS), in which the signer embodies the matrix attitude holder to report the content of the original utterance by using a complex of non-manual markers (RS-NMMs) such as eye gaze shifts, body leans, and head turns. These constructions famously exhibit total or partial shifting of indexicals, where the meaning of expressions such as *I* and *you* is ‘shifted’ from the context of utterance to the reported context [1, 2]. This is exemplified in (1) for the SL of the Netherlands (NGT), where RS-NMMs are noted above the glosses, with underscore marking scope:

- (1) IX₃ SAY QUICK ^{gaze, head and body left} IX₁ DISABLE [NGT corpus, [3]]
‘He_i said straight away: “I_i am disabled”.’

A popular analysis in the formal semantics literature treats RS-NMMs as realizing a context-shifting operator, analogous to the one proposed for the indexical shift in spoken languages [4, 5]. However, previous studies suggest that this might be too strong a conclusion. First, indexicals can fail to shift even when under the scope of RS-NMMs, as demonstrated in (2) for German SL (DGS), where the second person indexical IX₂ denotes the actual addressee:

- (2) a. Felicia: IX₁ DREAM ANNA IX₃ LOTTO WIN [DGS, [6]: (28)]
‘I have dreamed that Anna won the lottery.’
b. Tim reports to Anna: FELICIA ₃INFORM₁ ^{rs}IX₁ DREAM IX₂ LOTTO WIN
‘Felicia_i told me_T, she_i dreamed that you_A won the lottery.’

Second, while the presence of RS-NMMs seems not to force a shifted interpretation upon indexicals, the reverse seems also true: RS-NMMs might not be required for indexicals to shift, as data from Russian SL (RSL, [7]) and Hong-Kong SL (HKSL, [8]) suggests. Such results are hard to accommodate under current context-shifting theories, and suggest that RS-NMMs are neither necessary nor sufficient for the interpretation of indexicals. This raises the following questions: i) what is the semantic status of RS-NMMs? and ii) are there any constraints on the way indexical expressions in structures such as (2) are interpreted and if yes, what are they? The present study aims at answering these questions, focusing on NGT.

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