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Delimiting reported discourse: Cross-modal criteria

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The target article “Reported speech as a dedicated syntactic domain: Typological arguments and observations” by Spronck and Nikitina constitutes an ambitious attempt at defining the core properties of reported speech constructions from a typological point of view. Even though the amount of descriptive work in sign languages is still limited when compared to spoken languages, there exists a significant amount of research on this topic. It would have been particularly interesting to incorporate those results into the empirical basis on which the proposal is built. This could also have influenced the choice of label for the phenomenon discussed in their Section 1.2: a more encompassing choice of label such as “reported discourse” might have included automatically both languages in the oral-auditory modality and in the visual-gestural modality, and the reference to other types of reported discourse, such as thought, might have been more transparent. However, beyond the terminological choices, what is particularly interesting from the proposed typological approach is that the evidence provided by sign languages in the domain of linguistic reports provides further support for some of the claims made in the article.

From early on, sign language research identified that in linguistic reports a strategy was used whereby the signer adopts the “role” of the reported illocutionary agent (for an overview, see Lillo-Martin 2012). This strategy is known as “role shift”, and descriptively it is flagged by the following general characteristics for the sign languages described so far:

- (i) Marking:
 - a. Body lean towards the referential location associated with the reported signer, sometimes only marked with head lean.
 - b. Facial expression associated with the reported signer.
 - c. Eyegaze break with the actual interlocutor at the beginning of the reported stretch.

(ii) Interpretation:

Person, time and space parameters are shifted to the reported context and interpreted accordingly.

Role shift is the most genuine way sign languages have to encode reports. The overt markings can combine, but eyegaze change seems to be required (Herrmann & Steinbach 2010). The phenomenon has received different characterizations that compare it to reported discourse in spoken languages. One of the most recurrent questions in the relevant works is whether role shift can be equated to quotation in the strict sense, that is, mentioning the utterance that someone else produced in a different context, thus corresponding to example (1) in the target article. Relying on spoken language categories, it seems well established that sign languages can also produce typical indirect discourse, as example (2) in the target article. Both examples are repeated here for simplicity of exposition.

(1) John said: “Look, there is marmalade here!”

(2) John says that there was a typhoon yesterday.

Interestingly enough, role shift as described above only marks structures such as (1) corresponding to direct discourse, and never indirect discourse of the type in (2). This is illustrated in examples (3) and (4), respectively, in Catalan Sign Language (LSC). In (3) the tier above the report stands for all the nonmanual markers of role shift that identify overtly the reported utterance anchored to the main clause subject, namely the source of the report. Example (4) features simply a case of an indirect report realized as an embedded complement clause of a verb of saying which is not marked as role shift. In Figure 1 it can be observed how role shift markers are coarticulated with the embedded subject pronoun IX-1 in (3), in contrast to the third person pronoun IX-3 in (4) in Figure 2, without role shift (the raised eyebrows observed are a marker of topic).¹

¹ I follow the usual glossing conventions in the sign language literature, according to which manual signs are represented by the capitalized word corresponding to the gloss of the sign (the most general translation into a spoken language). The scope of nonmanual markings is represented with a line that spreads over the manual material with which it is coarticulated. The relevant abbreviations for the purposes of this paper are the following: #-VERB-# (verb agreeing with subject and object; the number before the verb refers to the grammatical person of the former and the one after the verb refers to the latter); IXa (locative index pointing to locus *a*); IX-# (pronominal index; the number corresponds to person); rs (role shift); t (topic marking); + + + (reduplication of the sign). The referential indices *i*, *j*, *a*, etc. link the first person role in role shift fragments to the intended author of the reported utterance.

Figure 1: IX-1_i in (3).

Figure 2: IX-3_i in (4).

- (3) ANNA_i 3-SAY-2 IX-1_i FED-UP LOSE+++ (LSC)
‘Anna told you that she was fed up with losing so often/ Anna told you:
‘I’m fed up with losing so often.’
- (4) ANNA_i 3-SAY-1 IX-3_i FED-UP LOSE+++ (LSC)
‘Anna told me that she was fed up with losing so often.’

Third, although wh-question formation is typically forbidden out of a quotation in a language like English, it turns out to be possible in ASL (Schlenker 2017a).

- _____rs-a
- (7) IN LA WHO IX-a [JOHNa] SAY IX-1 WILL MEET HERE WHO (ASL)
 ‘In LA, who did John/he say he would meet there [in LA]?’

Again, this kind of wh-extraction out of a role shift fragment is not possible in another sign language like LSC, further supporting the observation that the grammatical properties of particular (sign) languages determine the syntactic and semantic properties of R in reported discourse.²

Sign languages can provide interesting evidence to examine the claim that “reported speech constructions are conditioned by grammar” (Section 2.8). In isolation, this statement seems rather trivial, but it points in fact to an important empirical observation: gesture and prosodic cues typically accompany R in reported speech. The authors of the target article subscribe to the idea that these are multimodal properties that are often coarticulated with reports, but do not constitute proper marking (however, they remain agnostic as to whether this can be the case in some languages). This point connects directly with the proper characterization of role shift in sign languages.

In the visual-gestural modality, gesture and expressive prosody are even harder to disentangle from signing proper because they are all realized in the same medium, and it is often far from trivial to distinguish the linguistic part of the signal from the paralinguistic, expressive or communicative part. Role shift itself bears on the surface the reproduction of the gestural and the facial expression of the reported agent. The relevant literature has mostly focused on its use to report utterances and has used different labels to this end (*constructed dialogue*, as in Metzger 1995; *attitude ascription*, as in Quer 2013, or *attitude role shift* as in Schlenker 2017b, among others). Nevertheless, it is clear that in signed discourse role shift, which necessarily marks the linguistic report, also flags the imitation of actions or gestures carried out by the individual the report is about. This type of role shift occurs systematically intertwined with the utterances or thoughts of the reported agent, in a richer and more structured fashion than in co-speech gesture. For researchers that distinguish between the two uses, the latter

² Other dependencies like long-distance NPI licensing in R by a negative element in M are excluded in ASL. For details, see Schlenker (2017b).

one is labelled *constructed action*, as in Metzger (1995), or *action role shift* as in Schlenker (2017b).³ Other researchers, though, do not make such a clear-cut distinction and treat role shift structures as a single phenomenon that reports on utterances and actions with the same means, and call it *constructed action* (Cormier et al. 2013) or *personal transfer* (Cuxac 2000). From this perspective, we observe that the debate addressed in Section 2.8 of the target article reproduces itself along very similar lines in the study of role shift in sign languages. At bottom lies the question whether gesture and expressive prosody have to be accounted for by the linguistic system or not, and the answers vary as to how the linguistic system is defined. Roughly speaking, the more restrictive view focuses on the study of grammar and lexicon as the core language faculty and leaves outside “paralinguistic” or co-expressive signals like co-speech, co-sign gesture or expressive prosody, albeit recognizing that they align with the linguistic signal and closely interface with it. The more encompassing view that studies language as the broader communicative ability of humans broadens the focus to include those signals, which may be not determined by grammar in the strict sense but are part of the linguistic system. This is an extremely interesting and thriving area of research, and more extensive research on role shift in sign languages should contribute directly to the debate.

The authors of the target article put the emphasis on reported speech being approached as a “dedicated syntactic domain” or a “crosslinguistic syntactic category”. They correctly emphasize the morphosyntactic variation attested in the realization of R and the optionality of the occurrence of M. However, the definition they offer in (31) (Section 3.1) points towards a more semantic-pragmatic nature of the defining components. Without having to renounce the study of the grammatical variation in the ways R is realized and how it is constructed with M, it looks safer to conclude that reported discourse is a discourse phenomenon identifiable on semantic-pragmatic grounds in discourse generally, but encoded by grammatical means. This does not mean that certain incarnations of reported discourse cannot be analyzed in terms of syntactic subordination of R to M, with all the consequences thereof, as in (2). This is, for instance, a requirement for certain role shift structures where a quantifier binds a pronominal element in R, as in the LSC example (8):

3 Schlenker (2017b) suggests that mimic-like reproduction of gestures falls outside the scope of action role shift, though. According to him and Lillo-Martin (2012) action role shift in ASL is marked by the absence of 1st person indexicals. For discussion, see Quer (2018).

- _____rs-i
- (8) NOONE_i SAY IX-1_i AGR-1 SCARED DARKNESS (LSC)
 ‘Noone says he’s scared of darkness.’

The fact that role shift (and reported discourse more generally) is a discourse phenomenon does not exclude the possibility of treating it with grammatical means. This approach is proposed for instance in Quer (2005, 2011), where role shift is analyzed as the realization of a context-shifting operator, or in Herrmann and Steinbach (2010), where it is seen as an agreement phenomenon. In both cases the role shift nonmanual markers are characterized as the overt grammatical markers of the structures under examination. Grammar can thus be argued to also be at the core of such a cross-sentential phenomenon as role shift/reported discourse: as we have seen above, the particular grammars of individual languages determine diverging properties in a phenomenon like role shift that looks very similar on the surface. Only further in-depth work into these matters in more sign languages will allow for a better understanding of the interactions between the strictly linguistic properties determined by the grammar and the gestural and prosodic expressive signals intertwined with the report. Advancement in this domain will obviously help disentangle the same issues arising for the analysis of reported discourse in spoken languages.

From these few observations we can safely reach the (by now trivial) conclusion that in order to achieve a truly cross-linguistic characterization of a natural language phenomenon, it is not only advisable but also necessary to take the evidence from sign languages into account. Some of the claims made in the target article are clearly supported by sign language evidence, thus strengthening the cross-modality of the proposed criteria and generalizations; others might be reconsidered on the basis of such additional evidence. A lot of descriptive and analytical work lies ahead for sign language linguists, but seeing those results incorporated into current description, analysis and theorizing of human languages will boost the required work in sign language research.

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