

Embodiment in ISL Passives

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Abstract

Taking a cognitive linguistic approach, this paper explores passive constructions in Irish Sign Language (ISL). Adopting Foley & Van Valin's (1984) concept of 'macroroles', we introduce the prototypical passive construction in ISL, a construction that incorporates several elements including a shift in focus from the Actor to the Undergoer, the recruitment of body partitioning, the use of an empty locus for establishment of an unspecified actor/s, and potentially, a body lean which may be coupled with averted eyegaze. We explore the viewpoint shifts that this construction allows signers, which support the cognitive grammar emphasis on the importance of construal. We also introduce a related category of constructions which recruit the signer's body as a surrogate for unspecified actors. Unlike the prototypical passive, these constructions are less complex in that they do not recruit body partitioning, body leans or averted eyegaze. However, they are interesting because they seem to demand inferential readings where the surrogate represents external actors or, metonymically, institutions. In particular, we discuss the use of the signer's body to represent an unspecified Actor and consider the role of embodiment as a lynchpin for understanding how passives operate. We present examples from the Signs of Ireland corpus and from the European Commission funded Medisigns project to illustrate these constructions in ISL.

Keywords: *Macroroles, Passive Constructions, Embodiment, Body Partitioning, Metonymy, Irish Sign Language, Cognitive Linguistics*

1. Introduction

In this paper, we investigate passives in Irish Sign Language (ISL) as one important expression of how signers employ their bodies as an analogue of the mapping between semantic argument

structure and narrative viewpoint. We introduce the prototypical passive construction in ISL, which we identify as a construction that incorporates several elements including a shift in focus from the Actor to the Undergoer, the recruitment of body partitioning, the use of an empty locus for establishment of an unspecified actor/s, and potentially, a body lean which may be coupled with averted eyegaze. We explore the viewpoint shifts that this construction allows signers, which support the cognitive grammar emphasis on the importance of construal: speakers' "manifest ability to conceive and portray the same situation in alternate way" (Langacker 2008, p. 43). We also introduce a related category of constructions which recruit the signer's body as a surrogate for unspecified actors. Unlike the prototypical passive, these constructions are less complex in that they do not recruit body partitioning, body leans or averted eyegaze. However, they are interesting because they seem to demand inferential readings where the surrogate represents external actors or, metonymically, institutions.

Our discussion employs Foley & Van Valin's (1984) 'macroroles' of Actor and Undergoer. Actor is a higher level generalization incorporating the semantic roles of agent, experiencer, instrument and other roles, while undergoer is a generalization incorporating patient, theme, recipient and other roles. Agent is the prototype for the macrorole of Actor, and patient is the prototype for Undergoer. We begin by introducing our data before turning to consider how passive constructions have been discussed for both spoken and signed languages. We go on to introduce passives in Irish Sign Language, laying out the features of a prototypical ISL passive construction. In particular, we discuss the use of the signer's body to represent an unspecified Actor and consider the role of embodiment as a lynchpin for understanding how passives operate.

2. Data

Our data is drawn from a number of sources, primarily the Signs of Ireland Corpus (SIC) which was collected in 2004 and comprises monologues from 40 ISL signers aged 18-65 from five Irish cities and towns, Dublin, Cork, Galway, Waterford and Wexford (Leeson, 2008; Leeson & Saeed, 2012). It includes 16 male and 24 female signers, all of whom had been educated in a school for the Deaf in Dublin (St. Mary's School for Deaf Girls or St. Joseph's School for Deaf Boys). This composition has allowed comparison both between male and female sign variants and for gendered generational variation, for example in mouthing, fingerspelling, and lexical choice. Both of these have been shown to be significant in Irish Sign Language, for example, in LeMaster (1990, 2002), Leeson & Grehan (2004), and Grehan (2008). The Signs

of Ireland Corpus has been exploited in a range of studies, including Mohr-Militzer (2011), Leeson & Saeed (2012), Fitzgerald (2014), Murtagh (2019) and Smith & Hoffman (this volume). The corpus is digitally annotated using ELAN, a software programme developed by the Max Planck Institute, Nijmegen and is housed at the Centre for Deaf Studies, part of the School of Linguistic, Speech and Communication Sciences at Trinity College Dublin. The present study is based on twenty narratives from the Signs of Ireland corpus. Ten are narrations of *Frog, Where Are You?*, five from female and five from male signers.¹ A further ten are personal narratives. In addition, the study draws on data from a European Commission funded project, Medisigns², which explored the experiences of Deaf people engaging with healthcare settings.

3. Passive constructions in spoken and sign languages

We assume as a starting point that typological research on spoken languages, for example Siewierska (1984, 2005), Shibatani (1985), Klaiman (1991), Keenan & Dryer (2007), Siewierska & Bakker (2012), has enabled a characterisation of a prototypical passive construction as one with the following features:

- (i) Relative to a corresponding transitive clause the agent or most agent-like participant is either omitted or demoted from subject to an oblique role.
- (ii) A patient or patient-like participant is promoted to subject.
- (iii) There is a change in verbal morphology, reflecting a reduction in valence.
- (iv) Pragmatically passives are foregrounding constructions used where the patient is relatively more topical than the agent.

These are prototypical features and so individual constructions may diverge from this set of features, for example, many languages also have impersonal passives formed from intransitive verbs. Within cognitive linguistics, voice patterns like active, passive and middle are seen as mechanisms enabling choices of construal, that is alternative views of an event allowing the speaker to assign participants different degrees of prominence (Maldonado, 2007; Langacker, 2008).

In sign language studies, there has traditionally been resistance to the idea that passive constructions exist. From the very beginning of modern sign language research it was reported that sign languages do not make use of passive voice, for example in Stokoe, Casterline &

Cronenberg (1976). Fischer (1978) argued that ASL has no passive construction, suggesting instead that word order and the cliticization of pronouns are used instead as functional equivalents. Deuchar (1984) makes a similar argument for British Sign Language. This view was supported by the claim that sign languages are typologically topic-comment languages (Deuchar 1984).

A counter argument was presented by Kegl (1990), who reports that in ASL, as in many spoken languages, for example Navajo, a control hierarchy assigns prominence to nouns according to their ability to function as the agent in an utterance, as in Figure 1. Kegl argues that this control hierarchy requires that the NP that is co-indexed with the signer's body ranks higher on the scale than any other argument. She notes that when the control hierarchy is violated, 'verb-doubling' occurs. Kegl argues that this hierarchy is violated when a third person is promoted to role prominence over a first person argument. 'Verb doubling' resolves the violation of the hierarchy by establishing a single argument-taking construction: for example, a signer might establish a third person's role prominence in the first half of the 'verb-doubling construction' which leaves the object unspecified. Kegl argues that this strategy of promotion up the control hierarchy is effectively a passive construction in ASL.

First person > Second person/ Third person > Animate > Inanimate > Moving > Nonmoving >
 Three-dimensional > Two-dimensional

Figure 1: ASL Control Hierarchy (highest to lowest)

While agreeing with this general approach, Janzen, Shaffer & O'Dea (2001) suggest that Kegl's account is too restrictive, focusing on detransitivising of the verb and omitting other features associated with the passive in American Sign Language (ASL). Instead these authors propose that ASL passives are characterised by a number of features, principally the demotion of the agent, including omission, and adoption of the point of view of the patient, marked by body orientation and verb form. This parallels characterisation of the active/ passive continuum in spoken languages described by Hopper & Thompson (1980). Janzen et al. (2001) note that in prototypical ASL examples, the agent is omitted. In less prototypical examples, the agent may be mentioned, but not as the subject of the verb. Another alternative in such situations is that the agent appears in an NP that is lower in specificity. In ASL this would be glossed as SOMEONE or WHO. Similar devices are employed by ISL signers (Leeson, 2001).

4. Passives in Irish Sign Language

We can identify in ISL a number of construction types that are placed on a continuum of transitivity from highly transitive events represented by active constructions through agent-demoting constructions to prototypical passives. We will identify in our data a prototypical ISL passive construction that includes a cluster of characteristics, principally:

- (i) The promotion of an Undergoer argument by establishing it at the canonical locus (c.), that is the signer's body;
- (ii) The demotion of an Actor argument by one of the following:
 - a. The empty slot strategy (with agreement verbs), with handshape associating with unspecified Actor for so-called classifier or polymorphemic verbs (e.g see Emmorey 2003) and by empty argument place for agreement verbs;
 - b. The Actor shifting to another locus, with interaction between the downgraded actor and foregrounded Undergoer, with respective roles represented via body partitioning;
 - c. The signer's body is partitioned off to indicate elements of the activity of the unspecified Actor vis-à-vis the Undergoer; the signer's torso is commensurate with the Undergoer's.
 - d) The signer leans back, (perhaps) indicating lack of volitional engagement in the event.
 - e) The lack of volition of the Undergoer marked by averted eyegaze, although this does not seem to be obligatory.

In addition to this prototype passive there are other related constructions that represent reduced transitivity on the transitivity continuum and reflect reduced prominence of the agent. These include:

- (i) The use of a dummy nominal SOMEONE in the subject argument position
- (ii) The use of the signer's body to represent an unspecified Actor.

We would identify these as agent demotion or detransitivising constructions on the transitivity continuum. In such cases, the agent appears in an NP that is lower in transitivity. In ASL, this would be glossed as SOMEONE, PERSON or SOMEWHERE, allowing signers to select toward vagueness in their utterances (Humphrey & Alcorn, 1996). Adoption of dummy

SOMEONE strategy is also available to ISL signers, as evidenced by examples (1) and (2) below:

(1)

fr+SOMEONE fr+TELEPHONE+fl AMBULANCE

“Someone phoned for an ambulance”

(Leeson 2001, p. 270, Example 6.30)

(2)

Index-CL+fr+MOVE+contact-c

Body-CL+EXIST+chest-----

‘(Someone) bumped into me’

(McDonnell 1996, p. 225, Example 6.113)

In both (1) and (2), while an Actor is specified in the syntax, it is underspecified in comparison to typically active constructions; in an active construction, the Actor would be explicitly specified.

We discuss the use of the signer’s body to represent an unspecified Actor in section 6 below. We also discuss a variant where the Undergoer occurs in a full lexical form as a topic followed by a verb wherein the signer surrogates an unspecified Actor. This seems functionally closer to the prototypical passive and we provisionally label this a topicalised passive construction.

5. The prototypical ISL passive

The clustering of the strategies that make up the prototypical construction positions the Undergoer centrally on the signer’s body and the downgraded Actor as a peripheral body part, e.g. an arm. The Actor/Force can be animate or inanimate. For example, in 3(a), we see the signer as the Undergoer, a patient lying on a trolley in the hospital, awaiting his procedure. An unspecified Actor (whom we can infer to be a nurse) opens his shirt/gown and (in b), shaves his chest. We note here that the Undergoer’s torso leans back, and his eyegaze is averted, both factors signifying his lack of active involvement in the event unfolding. As it happens, in this narrative, a story of near medical negligence unfolds: the patient is in hospital for a minor surgery on his finger while he is (in (3)and (4)) being prepped for heart surgery.

(3)



My gown was opened; My chest was shaved.

In this example, which leverages the body partitioning strategy, there is an interesting exploitation of scale within the signing space. We see a ‘zoom in’ effect as the signer narrows the listener’s attention to a selection of salient details or elements. In this way, in example 4, we see a focus on the patient’s body (the Undergoer role is mapped to the signer’s torso) and, via body partitioning, the injecting of anaesthetic by an un-named Actor to his arms and across his upper torso (mapped to the signer’s dominant hand, and arguably, his head, with eyegaze focused toward the locus of the administration of anaesthesia).

(4)



I was injected with anaesthetic.

Another example involving body partitioning, the foregrounding of the Undergoer position and demotion of the Actor can be seen in (5). Here, Sarah Jane is recounting a narrative about her holiday in Thailand. She was on a train and noticed that several men who passed her by were staring at her, leading her to feel self-conscious. Again, the Undergoer role is mapped to the signer's body while the various unspecified Actors' roles (the men looking at Sarah Jane as they pass her by) are mapped to the partitioned dominant and non-dominant hands of the signer, respectively. In this instance, Sarah Jane's face and head are not partitioned to reflect a non-Undergoer role, but instead, represent the affective component of how the Undergoer experienced the event. This suggests that there are additional subtle ways in which the sharing of focus between Actor/s and Undergoers is teased out in the encoding of such events, mapped to the signer's torso, head, mouth, and between dominant and non-dominant hand which have yet to be fully explored.

(5)



I was stared at by several men who passed me by. (Sarah Jane SOI 09 Dublin)

A similar pattern is found in (6), where Marion is recounting an incident from her school experiences. As was (and remains) common in schools for the deaf, the class was seated in a horse-shoe set up, with clear lines of vision to each other and the teacher. Having established where she sat within the horseshoe arrangement, Marion tells us that she had hidden a kitten in her school desk. During the class, the kitten began to “meow” and the hearing teacher heard it. She looked at Marion, and the other children in the class did too. In the screen shots below, we see that unspecified children in the classroom, located at loci to Marion's left and right (and probably representing all children in the class), looked at her. Again, we find that the signer has partitioned out her body, with the signer's torso and head/face representing the Undergoer's experience, while the dominant and non-dominant hands represent unspecified (but pragmatically retrievable) Actors.

(6)



I was looked at. (Marion SOI 08 Dublin)

A challenge lies in how we gloss these things. If we were to interpret this to English, we could say “Everyone looked/stared at me”, “I was looked/stared at (by the children in my class)” or even “They all looked/stared at me”. But these glosses run the risk of imposing “upon the data a wealth of unwarranted and highly variable lexical and grammatical information (depending upon the spoken/written language used for glossing)” (Pizzutto & Pietrandrea 2001, p. 42). Given this, we emphasize the benefit of taking a functionally driven approach to the analysis, predicated on the conditions we outlined earlier of such utterances rather than depending on ill-fitting English glosses to determine the intended meaning of a construction. We also emphasize the centrality of the signer’s body in this mapping – again, the idea that the signer’s perspective, be that as Actor or Undergoer, is privileged while the more backgrounded components, the Actors (the children), are partitioned out to less central positions on the signer’s body, the arms (see also Leeson & Saeed, 2012; Janzen, 2019).

In (7), we see a final example illustrating the combination of the strategies at play. Here, we see the foregrounding of the Undergoer and downgrading of Actor. Here, Willie tells how an unspecified Actor tapped his shoulder to gain his attention (a normative attention-gaining activity in Deaf culture (see also Matthews, 1996)). We also see evidence of body partitioning in this example. Here, Willie’s torso and head/face is commensurate with him as the actor while his dominant hand is associated with the unspecified actor.

(7)



Someone (unspecified) tapped my shoulder. (Willie SOI 37 Waterford)

Critically, it seems that where body partitioning takes place, the backgrounded entities mapped onto the signer's body (notably the signer's arms) are animate. Thus, in (3), we saw that the partitioned entity was a healthcare professional who removed Eddie's hospital gown and shaved his chest. In (4) an animate entity injects anaesthetic into Eddie's body. In (5), animate entities (from context, we infer these to be men) eye-up Sarah-Jane as they pass her by on the train and in (6) we infer that the animate entities are other children in Marion's classroom. Finally, in (7), the animate entity is an unspecified person, seeking to gain Willie's attention.

We can also note that in all of these examples (except for (4)), the signer's torso leans back in contrast with a default signing position. Such leans have been noted for marking out relative temporal zones in ISL (Leeson & Saeed, 2012), and it has been suggested that in Swedish Sign Language, they play a role in marking out comparisons (Nilsson, 2013).

While these integrated passives involves a shift of perspective and empathy on the part of the signer, we hypothesize that the actor demotion alone is a form of 'zooming out' to view the scene as a whole in a parallel to aspectual distinctions.

6. The use of the signer's body to represent an unspecified Actor

In some circumstances, the signer can opt to map the behaviours of an unspecified actor/s onto the canonical locus. In these instances, no body partitioning occurs: the entire embodied

mapping arises from understanding that the signer's body = the unspecified Actor/s. That is, in Liddell's (2003) terms, the signer's body becomes a surrogate for an unspecified actor/s. In (8), Fergus tells us that having experienced engine trouble, which led to leaving his car with a friend who is a mechanic, he later returned to the mechanic to find that work on the engine was underway. In the screenshot below, he tells us that the (engine) heads had been taken off – by an unspecified actor, mapped onto the signer's body. Clearly the signer didn't remove the parts, and given the context created, we can infer that the garage owner (or an employee thereof) stripped the engine back.

(8)



The engine was stripped back. (Fergus D. SOI (06) Dublin)

Another example illustrating the use of the signer's body to represent an unspecified actor/s comes from Senan's narrative about the war in Iraq. Here, Senan explains the concept of weapons of mass destruction, outlining how, if chemicals were released into the atmosphere, vapours could be inhaled by people which would make them sick. Again, the unspecified actor (who breathes in and consequently becomes sick) is mapped onto the signer's body. This embodied actor, we suggest, represents many possible victims, prompting us to suggest that a metonymic or synecdochical relationship holds between what is represented on the signer's body and the intended reading, in this case, 'many unspecified individuals'. This "signer's body = many unspecified actors" is a pattern we have reported for other examples too (Leeson, 2001; Leeson & Saeed, 2003, 2013).

(9)



A substance was inhaled and they became sick. (Senan SOI (01) Dublin)

In a related construction the undergoer occurs in a full lexical form as a topic followed by a verb with an actor argument demoted by a strategy wherein the signer embodies an unspecified actor, representing, via inference, a number of unspecified actors. In (10), Senan embodies an actor (representing one of many actors) who together (and in reality, with mechanical aid) pulled down the statue of Sadaam Hussein in Baghdad's Firdaus Square in March 2003³. In (11), an unspecified actor (inferentially representing many actors behaving in the same manner) is embodied by Senan, representing a person/s tearing down posters of Sadaam Hussein in the period following the invasion of Baghdad by the West.

(10)



The statue of Sadaam Hussein was pulled down. (Senan SOI (01) Dublin)

(11)



Posters of Sadaam Hussein were torn down. (Senan SOI (01) Dublin)

This raises an interesting point. Elsewhere the use of the signer's body as a surrogate for another (animate) entity reflects selection of that entity's viewpoint for the narrative. Here the unspecified nature of the actor entity reflects the focus of attention on the activity itself, and, we suggest, via inference, on the fact that there were many unspecified actors engaged in the activity.

7. Embodiment

Embodiment – the physical experience of being in the world – underpins a range of linguistic systems such as spatial prepositions, and the metaphorical mappings between, for example upright stature and success, moral strength, etc. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). It has been argued that the signer's perspective on an event is privileged (Leeson, 2010; Leeson & Saeed, 2012, Leeson et al., 2013). That is, signers exploit a relationship between narrative perspective and the position of the signer's body, presenting what is before them at c. locus as the most focused elements in a discourse (Leeson, 2010). Other less salient information is presented more distantly from the signer's body. Janzen (2010) describes similar behaviour in ASL as a form of metaphor whereby 'spatial distance is conceptual difference'. He argues that signers present items that are considered to be conceptually distant from each other as being physically distant in signing space, and those that are considered to be conceptually similar or identical at adjacent points in space, or the identical point in space.

Leeson and Saeed (2012) have argued that the privileging of signer perspective can be identified in the tendency to encode actor-led activity on the signer's body (that is, signer = actor), where the action is led by the signer (as him- or herself, as narrator or, as we have seen, as a character in a role shifting). We can see evidence in the ISL constructions in this chapter of the transitivity continuum of the signer's body being used as a window or framing device on participants in an event, thus providing an embodied version of the way that grammatical constructions simulate perspective or the locus of attentional focus.

As we have seen, active sentences lead the understander to experience an event from the perceptual or action position of the agent, while passive sentences evoke the perspective of the Undergoer. So in one position on the transitivity continuum, active sentences where an actor is prominent the signer may use her body to represent the actor. At the other end of the continuum in the prototypical passive the signer's body may represent the Undergoer. We have seen too more complex cases where the signer's body is used to incorporate the entire transitivity chain via body partitioning. In our examples we have seen instances where the Undergoer is represented centrally on the signer's body and the downgraded actor as a peripheral body part, for example an arm. We can see this as an embodiment of the use of the use of signing space to model participant prominence, as noted above (Janzen, 2010; Leeson, 2010).

There are a number of avenues for future research in this area. One is to investigate the factors that influence signers to use a surrogate strategy in framing participants via different views of events, which Liddell (2003) talks about as 'on-stage' and 'off-stage' views. That is, when the signer presents a view on an event from his or her core perspective, that is as narrator, or through use of the signer's body as a surrogate for another (typically animate) entity, he or she is selecting a particular viewpoint and 'forcing' the viewer to see the event from that perspective. It may also be the case that there is a link between evidentiality and point of view, with a stronger commitment to the truth of a described event being associated with the use of surrogates (Leeson & Saeed, 2012; see also Straity, 2005 for comments on ASL4). That is, it might be the case that a signer chooses to use a surrogate when he or she is committed to or has first-hand experience of the event being described. Given this, it is interesting that eight of the ten signers who signed an ISL version of the Frog Story encode some key events in the same way, with variation only associated with the direction in which the boy's body was facing, towards the left or the right, and regarding the relative size of the unspecified actor (mapped

onto the handshape selected to represent the actor). In the first event, something snaps at the nose of the key actor in the story, a little boy who is looking for his missing “pet” frog. It transpires that the entity who is responsible for the biting is a gopher (sometimes reported as a squirrel by our ISL signers). Samples of how this is encoded can be seen in (12) and (13).

In the second event, the boy scrambles up a tree to peer into a hole in a tree trunk. An owl emerges and the boy falls to the ground. In both instances, as in (12) and (13), the foregrounded experience is that of the boy as semantic Undergoer.

(12)



The boy's nose was snapped at. (Carmel, Frog Story)

(13)



The boy's nose was snapped at. (Sean, Frog Story)

A second area of enquiry is the factors governing the choice of body partitioning strategies. Part of this enquiry concerns choices of representation, where signers modulate focus, scale and metonymic selection. We would also suggest that there are possible relationships between the degree of partitioning that arises and the nuance of perspective that a signer intends to present relating to an event. Finally, it seems reasonable to suggest that there is a consistent and pervasive metaphoric relationship between the leveraging of distal parts of the body as a mapping to less central characters in a prototypical passive event in Irish Sign Language.

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¹ A wordless picture book *Frog, where are you?* (Mayer 1974) was used to elicit narratives from ISL signers, employing the same protocol.

² medisignsproject.eu

³ For video coverage of the event, see: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2013/mar/09/saddam-hussein-statue-toppled-baghdad-april-2003-video>. which prompted the ISL narrative that we report on here. (Last accessed 10 March 2020)

⁴ Thanks to Prof. Terry Janzen and his class at the University of Manitoba, Canada, for raising this possibility.