Classifiers as DOM? A preliminary analysis of object marking in LIS

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Introduction. Sign language (SL) classifiers (CLs) are meaningful handshapes that denote animate and inanimate entities by considering one or more salient characteristics (shape, semantic category, the way in which they are handled or manipulated). Italian Sign Language (LIS) displays several CLs, which can be grouped into three main categories: entity classifiers, body-part classifiers, handle classifiers. As in other SLs, these handshapes can combine with verbs of motion and location resulting in classifier predicates, namely morphologically complex constructions in which the handshape denotes the referent (lexical root) and the movement (verbal root) conveys its location, motion, or handling. Alternatively, CLs can function as proforms for their referents, by being dislocated in the signing space to encode agreement and plurality. The articulation of the CL at a specific point (locus) of the signing space contributes to the definite interpretation of the referent. In other words, locative features encode the referentiality of the entity to which the CL refers (Bertone 2009: 96). Branchini (2020) accounts for the use of a specific entity CL (the 'flat closed 5' in (1)), produced with the non-dominant hand, to disambiguate the arguments' syntactic roles by marking the object in potentially ambiguous LIS declarative sentences and wh-questions. Taken together, these different functions attested for nominal CLs are reminiscent of the phenomenon known as *differential object marking* (DOM) (Bossong 1985) detected in several spoken languages and a couple of SLs (Börstell 2019; Bross 2020), which refers to the marking of some direct objects in a language. Cross-linguistic studies show that the presence of DOM correlates with semantic and pragmatic features of the object (animacy, definiteness/specificity, topicality), as well as with some features of the verb (a.o. Hopper & Thompson 1980; de Swart 2007). Despite the superficial similarity between DOM and LIS nominal classifiers, in-depth studies investigating the occurrence and function of object-marking CLs in LIS are still lacking.

(1) flat closed 5

Goals. The goal of this study is twofold: (i) to investigate the occurrence of the flat closed 5 classifier to mark objects in LIS, in relation to different phonological, semantic and pragmatic features of referents; (ii) to understand whether the factors that trigger the production of the CL allow to consider it as an instantiation of DOM.

The study. Considering the specificity of the phenomenon, data collection consisted of grammaticality judgments on LIS sentences referring to different signed contexts, which were also provided through pictures. Different variables were manipulated while preparing the contexts: the animacy of the object referent (human, animate, inanimate), the type of the nominal sign for the referent (invariable, inflectional), the verb type (plain, agreement with two points of articulation in the neutral space, agreement with one point of articulation in the neutral space, agreement starting from the body and ending in the neutral space). In so doing, we created 24 contexts, corresponding to 24 sentences. If the informant accepted the sentence, he was asked to produce it. Moreover, other alternatives were investigated, such as the possibility of dislocating arguments and using pointing signs or other classifiers to mark objects. The relevant productions have been analysed with ELAN, after the creation of a template that allowed to annotate specific features (phonological, semantic and pragmatic) of the object and the verb, as well as the occurrence of dedicated non-manual markers (NMMs).

Results. As this is an ongoing project, here we discuss the data collected involving one Deaf informant, who is a LIS native signer. Although preliminary, they offer interesting insights. From the analysis of the semi-elicited productions, it results that objects in transitive constructions can be followed by the flat closed 5 classifier, as in (2).

top

(2) DOG CL(flat closed 5): 'be_located'$_a$ SON POSS$_1$ LOVE$_a$

'My son loves that dog (there).'

Its production is strictly linked to the presence and position of the referent in the extra-linguistic context, either at the moment of utterance, or earlier in the discourse. As the example shows, the referent and the CL are dislocated in sentence initial position, and their articulation is marked by specific NMMs: squinted eyes and raised eyebrows. The occurrence of the CL is semantically constrained: it can be used with human referents (both proper names and definite NPs) and small animals such as cats and dogs, but never with inanimate referents. There seems to be no phonological restrictions instead: the CL either occurs with referents whose sign is body-anchored, or with inflectional nominal signs, as well as with plain and agreement verbs (of all types). What seems to be phonologically constrained is the choice of the hand selected to produce the classifier: the non-dominant hand is used when (i) the nominal sign for the object referent is an asymmetrical two-handed sign; (ii) the verb is of the agreement type.

Discussion. Albeit preliminary, data show that the flat closed 5 CL is indeed used to encode definiteness of the object referents, by spatially locating them in the signing space. This, together with the fact that it is used with animate rather than inanimate referents, suggests some parallels with DOM. Moreover, it occurs with left-dislocated objects, hinting to a function of signalling the retrievability of the referent (a.o. Guardiano 2010). This is confirmed by the presence of the typical NMMs associated to topics in LIS: squinted eyes are necessary to retrieve a previously mentioned referent in the memory of the interlocutor, whereas raised eyebrows define it as active in the discourse (Calderone 2020). The fact that the CL also conveys locative features recalls the Romanian DOM marker *pe*, which results from the grammaticalization of a preposition with a locative meaning. Crucially, according to Mardale (2015: 219) *pe* started as a preposition with a concrete locative meaning, but gradually lost it to become a preposition with a more abstract meaning ('as for'), later a topic marker and finally a direct object marker. Therefore, we can speculate that the CL marking direct objects in LIS, by conveying both definiteness and locative features, could gradually grammaticalize into a 'genuine' DOM marker, while losing its locative function to mark objects with specific semantic and pragmatic features. Indeed, the use of the CL is not to describe the position of the referent, but rather to draw the attention of the interlocutor on it by recalling its position in space, thus a more abstract function of the 'as for' type seems to be already at play. In the same vein, its occurrence with topic objects assimilates it to a topic marker. If this is on the right track, the use of this CL would support theories assuming that the topicality of the direct object, rather than the necessity of differentiating between subject and object (a.o. Aissen 2003), is the source for DOM (Leonetti 2003, 2008; Iemmolo, Arcodia 2014; Braitor 2017), but further investigations with more variables and informants need to be carried out.

Conclusions. This study analyses the occurrence of a nominal CL in LIS transitive constructions. Preliminary data suggest some correspondence with DOM markers, thus constituting a first step towards the understanding of the function of object-marking CLs in LIS, in a cross-linguistic and cross-modal perspective.

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