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Impersonal human reference in sign languages

Introduction and questionnaire

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1 Introduction

Impersonal human reference is still an underexplored domain of sign languages. The main aim of this special issue is to chart the different strategies to refer to backgrounded human arguments in a variety of sign languages. For impersonal human arguments we adopt the definition of R-Impersonal pronouns in Siewierska (2011: 57) according to which “R(eference)-impersonals are impersonals triggered by a reduction in referentiality. R-impersonals have the appearance of regular, personal constructions but feature a subject that is human and non-referential.”

R-impersonal constructions background an argument and generalize over sets of human referents. They have a semantic effect similar to that of operations on argument structure like personal passives (German: *Mein Rad ist gestohlen worden* ‘My bike was stolen’) and middles (Spanish: *Este jarro se limpia fácilmente* ‘This jar cleans easily/is easy to clean’). However, R-impersonals systematically differ from valency-reducing operations both syntactically and semantically. First, R-impersonals do not modify the argument structure of the predicate, and generally combine with modals and all types of intransitive verbs, unlike typical passive constructions. Secondly, unlike many passives, R-impersonals are systematically limited to a human interpretation. Finally, R-impersonal pronouns need not be limited to subject position or semantic agents, as English *one* or Spanish *uno* or generic uses of the second person singular.

The main goal of this special issue is to analyse the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic properties of R-impersonal strategies in sign languages. The range of strategies used to

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express R-Impersonals in a sign language was first studied in Barberà & Quer (2013) for Catalan Sign Language. This study offers a description of the overt markers of R-impersonal reference in Catalan Sign Language (LSC), as well as a characterization of anaphoric uses and the interaction of role shift in generic predications with arbitrary subjects. A few other studies mention particular human impersonal strategies for other sign languages in passing. Cuxac (2000: 199) proposes to analyse agreement verbs with a neutral actor in French Sign Language as the equivalent of the impersonal subject pronoun *on* in French. Nilsson (2004: ch 1) proposes that in Swedish Sign Language a particular form of an index sign directed to the chest (considered to be a first person pronoun) may have an impersonal and exclusive interpretation. R-impersonal reference in sign languages has increasingly attracted attention of linguists and there is recent work by researchers working within different frameworks (cf. Barberà & Cabredo Hofherr 2017a,b; Özkul & Kelepir 2015; Risler, 2016; Sze 2010, among many others).

Broadening the typological scope of studies on R-impersonals was the main aim of the “Workshop on R-Impersonal pronouns in Sign Language” organised by the editors at the UMR 7023 (CNRS & Université Paris 8/UPL), in February 2015. This workshop provided a forum of discussion for researchers interested in R-impersonal strategies in sign languages and contributed to a better understanding of cross-linguistic variation in the area of impersonal reference. Most of the contributions compiled in this special issue were presented at the workshop. This special issue features six chapters devoted to R-impersonal strategies and agent-backgrounding constructions in three historically related sign languages (Italian Sign Language (LIS), French Sign Language (LSF), and Catalan Sign Language (LSC)), and three typologically unrelated sign languages (Russian Sign Language (RSL), Hong Kong Sign Language (HKSL), and Turkish Sign Language (TID)). To elicit a semantically varied range of R-impersonal sentences, an R-impersonals questionnaire was provided to the researchers as a starting point. This R-impersonals questionnaire was developed as part of the ANR-DFG project on the Typology of R-impersonals (PI: Patricia Cabredo Hofherr and Volker Gast) to provide the basis for a database of a wide range of European and non-European spoken languages (see section 5). We adapted the questionnaire to sign languages (especially from a cultural perspective, but preserving the rest of the contents) in order to obtain similar elicited data from a range of languages using the visual-spatial modality. In order to make the collected data as comparable as possible, all the contributors had access to the following materials for their studies: (i) the R-Impersonals questionnaire; (ii) a commented version of the questionnaire (with a theoretical discussion of aspects to be taken into account); (iii) a checklist of aspects that should be considered when studying R-impersonals, based on exploratory work on LSC by the editors and insights from previous work on argument reduction in sign language in the literature (Kegl 1990; Saeed & Leeson 1999; Janzen, O’Dea & Shaffer 2001; Sze 2010; Özkul & Kelepir 2015; Risler, 2016, and others).

The present chapter is organised as follows. Section 2 briefly discusses linguistic means used for agent-backgrounding found across languages, introducing the notion of R(eference)-impersonals in detail. Section 3 presents cross-linguistic variation between different R-impersonal strategies. Section 4 highlights questions that are particularly relevant for sign

languages and introduces the studies in this volume. Finally, section 5 presents the Paris-Jena questionnaire on R-impersonals used to elicit the semantic range of agent-backgrounding strategies.

2 Agent-backgrounding devices

Argument-backgrounding devices are notoriously syntactically heterogeneous. As many R-impersonal strategies are limited to agents, we focus on agent-backgrounding in what follows. Agent-backgrounding can be expressed by argument-reducing operations like passives (1a), as well as referentially deficient subjects such as null subjects of infinitives (1b), antecedentless personal pronouns (1c, 1d), lexical pronouns like English generic *one* (1e) and indefinite pronouns like *someone* (1f).

- (1) a. The lift was repaired. (passive)
- b. It wasn't easy [**PRO** to repair the lift]. (null subject of infinitive)
- c. **They** repaired the lift. (antecedentless 3pl)
- d. When the lift breaks, **you** should repair it. (non-deictic 2sg)
- e. When the lift breaks, **one** should repair it. (dedicated generic pronoun)
- f. **Someone** repaired the lift. (indefinite pronoun)

These agent-backgrounding strategies can be grouped into four types:²

- (2) a. Type 1: Valency-reducing operations
 - (i) passives
 - (ii) middles
- b. Type 2: Null subjects of non-finite predicates
 - (i) infinitives
 - (ii) gerunds/ participles
- c. Type 3: Impersonal uses of personal pronouns
 - (i) antecedentless 3pl
 - (ii) non-deictic 2sg, 1pl
- d. Type 4: Dedicated referentially deficient pronouns:
 - (i) pronouns with a generic reading (Engl. *one*, German *man*),
 - (ii) indefinite pronouns (*someone*, Fr. *quelqu'un*)

The strategies in (2c, 2d) do not change the transitivity of the underlying predicate and are R(eference)-impersonals in the sense of Siewierska (2011):

² The status of impersonal verbal forms such as those found in Baltic and Celtic is still unclear. For discussion see Blevins (2003), Cabredo Hofherr (2017).

- (3) **R(eference)-impersonals** are impersonals triggered by a reduction in referentiality. R-impersonals have the appearance of regular, personal constructions but feature a subject that is human and non-referential. The non-referential human subject may be expressed lexically, pronominally or by the whole construction. (Siewierska 2011: 57).

As elicitation with the R-impersonals questionnaire as a rule yields examples of all four types, we briefly discuss each of them in turn.

Among the valency reducing strategies (Type 1), passives are distinguished from middles. Passives include an implicit agent as part of their interpretation (4a-ii), while middles allow readings with and without agents (Keenan & Dryer 2006), including anticausatives, unaccusatives, passives and property-middles (4a-ii)/(4b).

- (4) a. *La puerta se abrió.* (Spanish)
 the door REFL open.PFV.PAST.3SG
 (i) ‘The door was opened.’ (passive)
 (ii) ‘The door opened.’ (anticausative)
- b. *La puerta se abre fácilmente.*
 the door REFL open.prs.3sg easily
 ‘The door opens easily/is easy to open.’ (property middle)

Null subjects of non-finite clauses (marked [e] in the examples (5a, 5b) below) represent a further common way of expressing backgrounded agents (Type 2). Particularly with modal predicates (5b), non-finite clauses are semantically similar to passives under modals (5c) and examples with dedicated R-impersonal pronouns (5d):

- (5) a. [[e] Making this recipe] takes a lot of time.
 b. It is advisable [[e] to look after one’s children]. (modal + infinitive)
 c. Children **must** be looked after. (modal + passive)
 d. **One** should look after one’s children. (modal+R-imp. pron.)

Type 3 strategies are impersonal uses of personal pronouns, such as antecedentless 3pl and non-deictic 2sg, illustrated in (6). In (6a) the referent of the subject *they* is left unspecified, while *you* in (6b) can be paraphrased by "people in general". A particularly typical environment for 2sg with an impersonal interpretation are conditional or when-contexts (7).

- (6) a. **They** are working downstairs. (antecedentless 3pl)
 b. **You** only live once. (non-deictic 2sg)

- (7) a. If **you** play for the national team, **you** have to train every day.

- b. When **you** have a coffee late **you** may not sleep.

Notice that the distinction between type 2 and type 3 can be difficult to draw in languages with null subjects that do not have inflectional verbal morphology distinguishing finite and non-finite verb forms. Type 4 groups together dedicated referentially deficient human pronouns. Among these pronouns we can distinguish two broad classes: Pronouns that admit a generic reading in simple sentences like (8a) on the one hand and indefinite pronouns that do not admit a generic reading in a simple sentence (8b) on the other. In complex sentences like conditionals, however, indefinite pronouns can be used to generalise over people in general (9b).

- (8) a. **One** shouldn't drink and drive.
b. **Someone** shouldn't drink and drive.
- (9) a. When **one** has drunk, **one** shouldn't drive.
b. When **someone** has drunk, **he/they** shouldn't drive.

The contrast between (9a) and (9b) illustrates a further difference observed between dedicated R-impersonal pronouns with a generic reading and indefinite pronouns: while generic R-impersonals allow co-reference for multiple occurrences (9a), indefinite pronouns have to be taken up by a pronoun *he/they* (9b).

3 Readings of R-impersonals

As shown in Cabredo Hofherr (2003, 2006) and Siewierska & Papastathi (2011), R-impersonal strategies differ cross-linguistically with respect to their semantic properties. In what follows we discuss the availability of generic and existential readings (3.1), modal differences between generalizing readings (3.1.1.), temporal and evidential differences between existential readings (3.1.2), clusivity distinctions (3.2.), the restriction to human referents (3.3) and different types of domain restriction required for the interpretation of the R-impersonals (3.4).

3.1 Episodic vs. generalising readings of R-impersonals

R-impersonal strategies differ in whether they allow episodic and generalising readings (like English *they* and German *man*) or whether they are limited to generalising readings only (like English *one* or Spanish *uno*).

- (10) a. **They** repaired the lift. (episodic)
b. In France, **they** eat snails. (generalising)

- (11) a. **Man** hat mein Rad gestohlen. (German) (episodic)
 MAN has my bike stolen
 ‘Someone stole my bike.’
- b. **Man** braucht Wasser, um zu überleben. (generalising)
 MAN needs water in-order to survive
 ‘**One** needs water in order to survive.’

In his seminal study of arbitrary interpretation Cinque (1988) proposes that episodic and generalising readings are contextual variants: quasi-existential impersonals are associated with episodic contexts and quasi-universal impersonals with generalizing contexts.

- (12) a. Yesterday, they stole my bike.
episodic context → quasi-existential *they* = “someone”
- b. Here, they eat a lot of meat.
generalizing context → quasi-universal *they* = “people in general”

As pointed out by Condoravdi (1989) and Alonso Ovalle (2002), however, there are some exceptions to this correlation. R-impersonals are compatible with generalizations over events without generalizing over people in general (13a). Inversely, generalizing over groups of humans does not necessarily require a habitual predicate as shown by (13b).

- (13) a. In this park, **they** play football in the afternoons.
 generalizing context, but existential subject for each event (Condoravdi 1989)
- b. You can’t ring! In France **they** are sleeping now.
 episodic context, but generically interpreted subject “people in France” (Alonso Ovalle 2002)

3.1.1 Descriptive and prescriptive generic readings of R-impersonals

In generalizing contexts, the distinction between descriptive (14a) and prescriptive (14b) generics observed for generic noun phrases (Lawler 1972, 1973 and many since) is also relevant for some R-impersonal subjects. In Mauritian Creole, for example, for some speakers the zero subject impose a prescriptive reading (15a). A descriptive generic such as (15b) is not acceptable for these speakers (Alleesaib & Cabredo Hofherr 2013):

- (14) a. Prescriptive (law-like) generics
 Here, children go to school at 8am → rule: obligation on the subject
- b. Descriptive generics
 In France, they eat snails/ eat late. → observed regularity, no obligation
- (15) a. Dan Lafrans, [e] al lekol boner. (Mauritian Creole)
 in France go school early

- ‘In France, one goes to school early.’ (it is obligatory)
- b. #Dan Lafrans, [e] manz eskargo.
 in France eat snails
 ‘In France, one eats snails.’ (i.e. eating snails is obligatory
 ≠ *In France some people eat snails.*) (Alleesaib & Cabredo Hofherr 2013)

3.1.2 Anchored, vague and inferred existential readings

Quasi-existential readings of R-impersonals do not form a uniform class either. The questionnaire distinguishes between anchored existential and vague existential readings that differ with respect to the temporal anchoring of the event. ANCHORED EXISTENTIAL READINGS are anchored to a specific point in space and time, most clearly visible with “here and now” interpretations. In VAGUE EXISTENTIALS the t-variable is existentially quantified, stating that an event of this type has taken place or will take place.³

(16) Anchored existential

- a. The t-variable t is assigned to a constant: e.g. t=now, t=yesterday at 6pm
- b. Tocan a la puerta (Spanish)
 knock.3PL at the door
 ‘Someone is knocking at the door (now).’
- (i) The event of knocking is taking place at a specific moment: now.
- (ii) $\exists e \exists x: \text{knock}(e, x) \& x = \text{Agent}(e) \& \text{at}(t_0, e) \& t_0 = \text{UttT}$

(17) Vague existential

- a. The t-variable is existentially quantified.
 The time span that the event takes place in can be restricted e.g.
 t= sometime before now or t= sometime after tomorrow at 6pm
- b. Robaron mi bicicleta. (Sp)
 stole.3pl my bike
 They stole my bike.
- (i) There is a point in time before now and the event of stealing the bike took place at that moment.
- (ii) $\exists e \exists x \exists t: \text{steal}(e) \& x = \text{Agent}(e) \& \text{Theme}(e) = \text{bike} \& t < \text{UttT}$

The distinction between (16) and (17) is relevant for R-impersonals as many languages allow the vague existential examples as in (18b) but do not allow the anchored existential examples as in (18a) (Cabredo Hofherr 2003).⁴

³ For the difference between deictic and existentially quantified uses of Tense see Partee (1973); Kratzer (1998).

⁴ A contrast between a deictically anchored time and an existentially quantified time can also be found between simple past and present perfect in English (see Kratzer 1998):

(i) a. John arrived (yesterday at 6pm). (deictically anchored time ok)

- (18) a. Ils frappent à la porte. (French)
 they knock.3pl at the door
 ‘They are knocking at the door.’
 (they previously mentioned/inferred, not: someone is knocking)
- b. Ils ont volé mon vélo. (French)
 they have.3pl stolen my bike.
 ‘They stole my bike.’ (ok: someone stole my bike)

The classification in Cabredo Hofherr (2003) and Siewierska (2011) distinguishes a third type of existential, the inferred existential that infers the occurrence of an event from perceptible evidence.

- (19) Aquí han quemado madera. (Spanish)
 here have.3pl burnt wood
 Here, they have burnt wood.

Cross-linguistically the inferred existential uses of 3pl subjects are independent of the anchored and vague existential uses. Syrian Arabic, e.g., has anchored and vague existential readings of 3pl null subjects but no evidential use of the 3pl corresponding to examples like (19) (Cabredo Hofherr 2006). French distinguishes vague existentials from inferred existential uses: *ils* “they” is possible for vague existentials but not used for evidential existentials like (19). More research is needed on inferred existentials, however. Firstly, inferred existentials cross-classify with vague and anchored existential readings, (19) corresponds to a vague existential reading and (20) is its deictically anchored existential counterpart:

- (20) Aquí están quemando madera. (Spanish)
 here are.3pl burning wood
 ‘Here they are burning wood (now).’

Secondly, inferred existentials involve evidential distinctions. Inferred existential readings show contrasts with respect to the type of evidence involved in the inference (evidentiality): an example like (20) corresponds to a direct evidential where the speaker has direct evidence of the event (smell/ ashes), while examples like (21) are ambiguous between a direct evidential reading (the speaker has perceptual evidence that the bike has disappeared) and a hearsay evidential reading (the speaker was told that someone had his/her bike stolen).

- (21) Ils ont volé son vélo.

b. John has arrived (*yesterday at 6pm).

(existentially quantified time only)

they have.3pl stolen POSS bike.
'They stole his/her bike.' (ok: someone stole his/her bike.)

- (i) Direct evidential: speaker has direct evidence for the theft
- (ii) Hearsay evidential: speaker is reporting someone else's claim.

Deictically anchored existential readings, vague existential readings and inferential existential readings cannot plausibly be analysed as pragmatic variants of a single reading since the three readings can be dissociated in different languages (Cabredo Hofherr 2003).

3.2 Inclusive vs. exclusive readings of R-impersonals

R-impersonal strategies also differ with respect to the inclusion of the speaker: in Russian 3pl impersonals the speaker can be included (22a), while in Spanish 3pl the speaker is excluded (22b), while English *one* includes the speaker (22c).

- (22) a. Zdes' prinosjat počtu v 7 večera. (Russian)
here bring.3PL mail at 7 evening
Here they bring the mail at 7 in the evening (the speaker can be included: can be said by the postman)
- b. Aquí traen el correo a las siete. (Spanish)
here bring.3PL DET mail at 7 o'clock
(the speaker is excluded)
- c. One should not lie. (speaker potentially included) (English)

3.3 Restriction to humans

Cross-linguistically, R-impersonal uses of 3pl and 2sg pronouns and dedicated generic R-impersonal pronouns have to be interpreted as human (23a, 23b), while there are verbal passives that admit causes or inanimate instruments as implicit agents (23c).⁵

- (23) a. If **you** push boulders down here you can hurt someone. (human agent)
- b. If **one** pushes boulders down here one can hurt someone. (human agent)
- c. The boulder was pushed down the cliff. (by someone/by the glacier)

3.4 Domain-restriction and R-impersonals

In the literature, different types of R-impersonals are considered: 3pl and 2sg subjects and dedicated R-impersonal pronouns. In languages like Spanish, null 3pl subjects with a 3pl verb exclude the speaker (the same is true for English *they* and French *ils*). As the speaker is

⁵ Verbal passives **can** be restricted to human implicit agents, like the Icelandic *vera*-passive (Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2002: 132, ex. 43).

excluded, the corresponding meaning cannot be “people in general”. However, *everyone except for you and me* is not a plausible default interpretation and a restriction of the referent of the subject becomes necessary (Cabredo Hofherr 2003). This restriction can be supplied by a designated subject associated with the predicate ((24a), see section 3.4.1) or by a locative expression ((24b), see section 3.4.2)

(24) a. They raised taxes.

→ *they* = *people that are associated with raising taxes (government)*

b. *In Spain they eat late*

→ *they* = *people in/ associated with Spain.*

As shown in (22a) above, it is not true, however, that 3pl null subjects generally need domain-restriction. In Modern Hebrew and Russian, the null subject appearing with a verb marked for 3pl agreement can include the speaker. These null subjects do not require domain restriction: the reading they receive can be roughly paraphrased by “people in general”. 2sg and dedicated R-impersonal pronouns like English *one*, German *man*, and French *on* do not exclude the speaker and do not require domain-restriction (25).

(25) a. **You** only live once.

b. **One** shouldn't drink and drive.

3.4.1 Corporate readings

For a large subset of examples of R-impersonals the subject cannot be paraphrased as “someone” or “people in general”. These examples include an implicature that the subject is of a particular type prototypically associated with the predicate (*designated subject*, cf. Kärde 1943).

(26) a. They raised taxes again.

not: someone raised taxes, but the people who are qualified to raise taxes

b. They brought the mail.

not: someone brought the mail but rather the postman came

c. They killed the president.

ambiguous: vague existential *someone* or corporate: *the mafia*

Pesetsky (1995) coined the term CORPORATE to refer to ‘[a] pronoun [that] picks out some socially designated group of people, prototypically governments, bosses, criminals, or shopkeepers’. As pointed out by Tóth (2000), existential readings cannot be reduced to corporate readings, since Hungarian and Spanish null subjects with 3pl (finite) verbal agreement allow existential readings with predicates that do not have a designated subject (e.g. *sing, knock on the door*).

3.4.2 Locative universal readings

Another instance of R-impersonals with domain restriction are locative universal R-impersonals. Locative universals have to include a locative expression that is interpreted as an intrinsic, temporally stable property of the subject (individual-level predicate) as in (27a), not as a transitory, accidental property (s-level predicate) as in (27b):

- (27) a. En España, [e] comen tarde. (Spanish)
In Spain eat.3pl late.
In Spain as an intrinsic, temporally stable property of the subject:
'The Spanish/The people associated with Spain eat late.'
- b. En España, **uno** come tarde.
in Spain UNO eat.3sg late.
In Spain as an accidental property:
'When one is in Spain, one eats late.'

The most typical use of locative universals is the generic use, stating a regularity that is not temporally anchored (but see (13b)).

3.5 Verbs of saying

Siewierska & Papastathi (2011: 585) observe that the equivalent of an impersonal use of *they say* is possible in languages like Standard Finnish and Estonian, even though these languages do not have impersonal uses of 3pl otherwise. They conclude that expressions like *they say* are not representative examples of R-impersonals but a separate case that can be dissociated from other R-impersonal readings of the 3pl.

3.6 Conditionals

Conditionals are relevant to the study of R-impersonals since indefinite pronouns that appear in the antecedent with an anaphoric pronoun in the consequent of the conditional (28a) give rise to readings similar to generic human R-impersonals (28b). Note that unlike the dedicated R-impersonal pronoun *one*, the indefinite pronoun *someone* does not allow a generalising reading if it only appears in the consequent (29):

- (28) a. When **someone** _i goes out in the rain, he _i should take an umbrella.
b. When **one** _i goes out in the rain, **one** _i should take an umbrella.
- (29) a. When it rains, **someone** should take an umbrella. (not: people in general)
b. When it rains, **one** should take an umbrella. (ok: people in general)

Examples with conditionals are also diagnostic for the anaphoric properties of R- impersonal pronouns: dedicated R-impersonal pronouns in French, English, and English are peculiar in that they are taken up by themselves and not by 3sg in conditionals (31a), contrasting with indefinite pronouns (31b) that pattern with indefinite NPs (31c).

- (31) a. When **one**_i is ill ^{ok} **one**_i / ***he**_i should stay in bed.
b. When **someone**_i is ill ***someone**_i / ^{ok} **he**_i should stay in bed.
c. When **a person**_i is ill ***a person**_i / ^{ok} **he**_i should stay in bed.

4 Contributions to this issue

The articles in this special issue take up many of the topics discussed in the previous sections. They discuss various formal and functional properties of R-Impersonals and agent-backgrounding operations in six sign languages and they contribute findings and arguments that will foster future studies and discussions.

The first contribution **Impersonal reference in Russian Sign Language (RSL)** by Vadim Kimmelman presents the variety of strategies used in this language, namely pro-drop, an indefinite pronoun SOMEONE, a plural pronoun IXpl, and probably a second-person pronoun IX2 in impersonal contexts. The impersonal strategies in RSL follow the general typological tendencies previously identified for spoken languages and do not show obvious modality effects. Some impersonal strategies show evidence of influence of spoken/written Russian in the form of borrowing and/or code-switching. Kimmelman observes an intriguing contrast for impersonal uses of the 2sg between acceptability judgement tasks - in which impersonal 2sg was rejected - and sentence matching tasks - in which 2sg impersonals received an unexpectedly high acceptability scores.

In their contribution **R-impersonal interpretation in Italian Sign Language (LIS)** Lara Mantovan and Carlo Geraci discuss manual, non-manual, and syntactic agent-backgrounding strategies in LIS. Their study shows that the combination of raised eyebrows and mouth-corners down associated with the existential quantifier SOMEONE and the sign PERSON makes the agent-backgrounding reading more prominent. Other strategies that can be used in LIS to reduce referentiality are free relatives, perspective shift, and null subjects. Mantovan and Geraci also investigate the semantic status of SOMEONE, PERSON, and the null subject in more detail.

In **Agent-backgrounding in Turkish Sign Language (TID)** Meltem Kelepir, Asli Özkul, and Elvan Tamyürek Özparlak show that TID displays many of the agent-backgrounding strategies reported in the literature for spoken languages. In particular, TID allows impersonal uses of the 2sg and makes use of non-specific indefinite pronominals including the sign OTHER that derives exclusive non-specific indefinite pronominals. Kelepir, Özkul and Özparlak provide evidence that while lateral high R-locus is unambiguously

associated with non-specificity in TID, non-high (lateral and central) loci are underspecified for specificity. They propose an analysis of the R-locus of indefinite pronominals in impersonal contexts in TID in terms of two spatial features [+high] and [+lateral] which correspond to the pragmatic features of non-specificity and hearer exclusion.

Felix Sze and Gladys Tang in their contribution **R-impersonals in Hong Kong Sign Language (HKSL)** show that HKSL signers adopt the non-specific and indefinite determiner ONEdet-path (someone)/ ONEdet-path (anyone), null forms and occasionally the Chinese character sign PERSON/HUMAN to express R-Impersonals. Delimiting the ipsilateral side of the upper signing space to convey arbitrary reading is a frequent strategy in HKSL. In HKSL, personal pronouns are not used in these contexts and the use of pronouns is associated with high referentiality, and a specific and definite interpretation.

In **Impersonal human reference in French Sign Language (LSF)** Brigitte Garcia, Marie-Anne Sallandre, and Marie-Thérèse L'Huillier combine data from a large scale corpus and elicited data. They show that while in LSF existential contexts tend to occur with overt marking, universal unrestricted contexts appear with null subjects. Existentials with a generalizing/ habitual predication clearly involve the idiomatic sign PI, which is a strong habitual/ typicality marker in LSF. Moreover, they show that the highest degree of impersonality (in unrestricted universals) is expressed in LSF through subject ellipsis without any spatial anchoring for the lexical sequence of the utterance (neutral space).

The final contribution **Agent-backgrounding in Catalan Sign Language (LSC)** by Gemma Barberà, Patricia Cabredo Hofherr, and Josep Quer examines backgrounding strategies for human agents in Catalan Sign Language (LSC), building on previous work by the same authors. Here they focus on four types of agent-backgrounding strategies more closely: empty subject constructions, indefinite pronouns, the impersonal axis and general nouns and propose a fine-grained description of the semantico-pragmatic properties of each strategy.

5 R-impersonals questionnaire and methodology

To elicit agent-backgrounding strategies, the ANR-DFG project *Towards a typology of impersonal human pronouns* elaborated a questionnaire that covers a range of contexts in which well-studied R-impersonal pronouns from English, French, German and Spanish are typically found. This is a questionnaire in written language that probes a number of contexts that are known to be relevant cross-linguistically in the distribution of different human impersonal subjects, with the aim to elicit a more representative range of R-impersonal uses than described in standard grammars. However, elicitation by questionnaire has its drawbacks, notably transfer effects from the questionnaire language to the language under examination. To minimise the influence of the written language as much as possible, the questionnaire provides a wider context for each example. Furthermore, it was recommended to ask the informants the most natural equivalent in their own sign language for the given context. Finally, to detach the examples from the written language, it was recommended to use the

elicited recorded signed videos as basis for a discussion with the informants, modifying the sentence, if needed, and adding new examples with different strategies, if possible.

The following questionnaire adapts the contexts of the Paris-Jena R-impersonals questionnaire to sign languages.

Q1. Anchored existential context (anchoring at a known point in space and time)

1.1 Context: You are at a friend's party. You see the red flash telling that someone is pushing the button at the door. The host does not seem to see it. So you say to your friend:

They are knocking at the door. / Someone is pressing the button to flash the light at the door.

1.2. Context: You can smell grilled meat and you see smoke coming over your garden wall. You tell your friend:

Next door, they are burning wood / cooking barbecue.

Q2. Vague existential context (existentially quantified t-variable)

2.1 Context: You get back from a long journey and notice that your house has been broken into. You call a friend and say to him:

They have broken into my house.

2.2. Context: You get out of the house to cycle to work. But your bike is no longer there. You say to your neighbour:

They stole my bike.

Q3. Indirect evidential existentials (event is inferred on the basis of perceptual evidence)

3.1 Context: Sherlock Holmes walks into an old house and observes burnt wood and ashes on the ground. He says:

They have burnt wood here.

3.2 Context: Sherlock Holmes walks into an old house where there is a smell of smoke from a wood fire. He says:

They have burnt wood here.

3.3. Context: You can feel some vibrations coming from the street in front of the building where you are. This morning, when entering the building, you have seen some workers and you tell your colleague:

They are working downstairs.

In context 3.3, it may well be the case that your SL does not distinguish between WORK and WORKERS. Context 3.4 is another possible alternative.

3.4 Context: Going out of your apartment you see that the lift is working. You say:

Look, they have repaired the lift.

Q4. Plural subjects (predicate favouring a plural interpretation of the subject)

Context: Imagine an oversize outdoor chessboard in a public park. Usually, the chess pieces are neatly arranged on the board. Now, however, some are distributed over the board as in the

middle of a match and some of them are placed next to the board. Two friends pass by and one of them says:

They have played chess here.

Q5. Existential uses with habitual predicates (habitual events with varying subjects)

5.1 Context: There's a lot of crime in this neighbourhood.

You explain to a friend:

They often steal bicycles here.

5.2 Context: When I was little, there was a park in my hometown where kids usually played football. I tell my colleague about it:

They played football in the afternoons, but my mother wouldn't let me play.

Q6. Corporate subjects (designated subjects associated with the predicate)

6.1 Context: Three men are sitting in a café. They are not really interested in politics and only have a vague idea of how the government works. One of them is reading a newspaper headline on a recent tax increase and says:

They have raised the taxes again.

6.2 Context: You meet a new neighbour in the street and she enquires about the delivery of the mail. You say:

Here they deliver the mail at 7.

Q7. Locative universals (presence of a locative restricting the referent of the subject)

7.1. *Locative universals in generic contexts*

7.1.1. Context: Some people have strange eating habits. For example, *In France, they eat snails.*

7.1.2 Context: Your friend complains that at his new company they start working very early, at 8.30 am.

You say: *In Germany, they start working at 8 am.*

7.2 *Locative universals in episodic contexts*

Context: You just came back from China. You tell your friend the different traditions of the country. You also tell him that in most nations of Western Europe New Year's Day is on 1st January, but in China it's on a different day:

In China, they celebrated New Year last week.

Q8. Verbs of saying

8.1 Verb of saying: hearsay (generic)

Context: Bobby Fisher was one of the greatest chess players ever, even though...

they say/it is said that he was a heavy drinker.

8.2 Verb of saying: anchored or vague existential use

Context: Your friend wants to know whether you will play football tomorrow. You say:

They said in the weather report that tomorrow would be sunny.

Q9. Unrestricted universals (No domain restriction on the subject)

9.1 A friend has doubts between starting a new job that she does not like much or rather starting a world trip for a year. You make a general claim:

You only live once.

9.2 After a party, many colleagues who have drunk quite a lot decide not to take their cars but rather stay at the party house. The host is happy that they did the right thing and makes a general statement:

One should not drink and drive.

9.3 A mother realises that her son has been lying her for a while: he has not gone to high school for a week but didn't say it at home. When he arrives home, the mother makes a general claim:

One should not lie.

9.4 Context: You read about an expedition that is preparing to cross a desert. You point out to your child that the members should take plenty of water because:

One needs water to survive.

9.5 Context (adapted from Özkul & Kelepir 2015): A friend tells you that her husband has been fired because he was rude to his boss. You tell the friend:

You do not keep your job if you insult your boss.

9.6 Context: A male friend of yours tells you that he saw a pregnant woman smoking. You tell to your male friend: *When you are pregnant you shouldn't smoke.*

Q10. Universal readings without a modal (No domain restriction on the subject, no modal)

10.1 Context: The minister was ten minutes late for the press conference. And then,

One could see that he was drunk.

10.2 Context: You are in Cuba in a Rum-distillery. You want to know what rum is made of and the guide says:

One makes rum with sugarcane.

Q11. Conditionals

11.1 Context: A father is explaining to her daughter about the fermentation process of milk. The curious daughter asks:

What happens if one drinks sour milk?

11.2 Context: It's a cold afternoon and a mother is trying to convince some kids who are playing in the garden near the swimming pool to get away from water.

If one jumps into a swimming pool, one gets wet.

11.3 Context: Someone wants to know what the rules for a quiz are. You explain:

If someone gives a wrong answer he is eliminated.

11.4 Context: Someone wants to know how to best treat a cold. You say:

When one has a cold, one should drink orange juice.

11.5 Context: Someone complains about getting wet in the rain. You say:

When it rains, one should take an umbrella.

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