Topics in the Grammar of Spanish Sign Language (LSE)

Edited by

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- A Grammar of Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT)
- A Grammar of Turkish Sign Language (TİD)
- A Grammar of Catalan Sign Language (LSC)
- A Grammar of Italian Sign Language (LIS)

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3.7. Pronouns

Spanish Sign Language (LSE) makes use of different strategies to refer to present and non-present discourse referents (individuals, objects, locations...). The extended index finger handshape is the unmarked configuration used in LSE pronouns, and for that reason pronouns are also referred to as 'pointing' or 'index' signs. However, the function of the index sign is not limited to pronominal reference, as it may also be used as a demonstrative, a locative or a determiner.

3.7.2. Personal pronouns

Personal pronouns are used to refer to the participants in the conversation (speaker and addressee) and to other present and non-presents referents. In LSE, personal pronouns are spatially modified in order to identify the entity they refer to. If the referent is physically present, the pointing is directed towards its location. If the referent is not physically present, the pronoun is directed towards a location within the signing space previously associated with that referent.

The index-finger handshape is used as the non-marked configuration to refer to the speaker, the addressee and both animate and inanimate non-participants. Apart from the index handshape, LSE allows the use of the 2 -configuration when referring to a non-present discourse referent (i.e., third person singulars). Besides, the flat w- handshape can be used to refer to present referents in a polite register. The following subsections discuss the grammatical distinctions encoded in the LSE pronominal system, namely person, number, and clusivity.

3.7.2.1. Person

LSE personal pronouns encode the distinction between different discourse roles. That is, differences in the articulation of the pointing sign are used to mark first, second and third person. Such differences are associated, in turn, with different interpretations, namely reference to the speaker, to the addressee and to a non-participant in the conversation. The person markers used in LSE personal pronouns are described below.

In the singular, first person is formally marked by directing the pointing sign towards the center of the speaker's torso. In spontaneous discourse, the pronoun may be directed to one of the sides of the chest, the shoulder or the throat. Pointing towards the signer is associated with reference to the speaker.

First person singular pronoun

Different to the case of first person, the specific location towards the sign is directed to does not differentiate by itself second from third person pronouns. In order to mark second and third person (i.e., reference to the addressee vs. reference to a non-participant in the conversation) we must consider the direction of the index sign with respect to other articulators, namely the eye gaze and the head.

In second person singular pronouns, the direction of the pointing sign is aligned with the direction taken by the signer's head and eye gaze. That is, in order to mark second person, the signer matches up the direction of all three articulators. This way of signaling second person applies both when referring to the actual interlocutor of the conversation and to the reported addressee in role shift constructions.

Second person singular pronoun

Third person is marked by orienting the pointing sign towards a different direction from that of the eye gaze and the head. The pointing sign may be directed either to the location of a present referent, or to the location within the signing space associated with a non-present referent in the previous discourse.

Third person singular pronoun

The same markers described for singular pronouns are also found in dual and plural forms. Specifically, first person is marked by pointing towards the signer (or upwards in the case of collective plurals); second person is marked by aligning the movement traced by sign with the direction taken by the head and the eye gaze; while in third person the direction of the hand is different from that of the head and the eye gaze.

3.7.2.2. Number

LSE personal pronouns express the number values singular, plural and dual. In singular forms, the pronoun is articulated with a straight movement, which is directed either towards the location of a present referent or towards the location within the signing space associated with a non-present referent. The specific forms the pointing sign adopts for the different person values (first, second and third person) are described in [section 3.7.2.1].

Plural marking, on the other hand, is achieved by modifying the movement of the singular form. Specifically, the so-called 'collective' plurals are marked by incorporating a circular movement to the pointing sign in order to signal that the pronoun refers to more than two entities.

First person collective plurals have two variants, one in which the index sign points upwards (as in picture (a) below), and a second one in which the index sign points downwards (as in picture (b) below).

a) First person plural pointing upwards

b) First person plural pointing downwards

Second and third person collective plural pronouns are marked by orienting the circular movement outwards. As in the case of their singular counterparts, second and third person plurals are distinguished in terms of the alignment of the hand with respect to head and the eye gaze. Specifically, second person plural pronouns are

marked by aligning the direction of the eye gaze, the head and the movement traced by the pointing sign, as in pictures (a) below. In third person plural pronouns, on the other hand, the circular movement is oriented towards a different direction from that of the eye gaze and the head (e.g., the lateral space).

a) Second person plural pronouns

b) Third person plural pronoun

If the context explicitly refers to a plurality of non-participants, a third person pronoun without plural morphology may be used (i.e., without circular movement). That is, a pointing sign articulated with a straight movement may be understood as referring to a plurality of referents. In the case of previously referred plural entities, it is sufficient for the pronoun to point at the same location associated with the collective referent in order to recover the plural meaning.

IX$_3$ IX$_2$ LIKE.
'You like them.'

(Fernández Landaluce, 2016: 316)

Another strategy used in LSE to mark reference to more than one entity involves the use of the so-called 'exhaustive' forms, which are expressed by reduplicating the pointing sign at different locations within the signing space.

Dual number is expressed with a 🤟-handshape moving back and forth between the locations, whether real or assigned, of the intended referents. Differently from the case of singular forms, the palm of the hand is oriented upwards or towards the signer. Whenever reference to exactly two entities is made, the use of a collective plural form (index finger accompanied by a circular movement) is not available to pick up the two referents.

Third person dual pronoun (3+3)

Finally, number marking can also be expressed in LSE pronouns by incorporating a numeral into the pointing sign. The resulting forms, as in the case of plural marking, are articulated with a circular movement. Although the pronoun can mark up to ten referents, forms marking numbers higher than three or four are not common. Besides, numeral incorporation is not mandatory, as the same form can be expressed by using a plural pronoun followed by a number. Indeed, that is the only option available in case the number of referents exceeds ten, as shown in the example below.

IX3pl TWELVE.
'The twelve of them.'

(Herrero, 2009: 231)

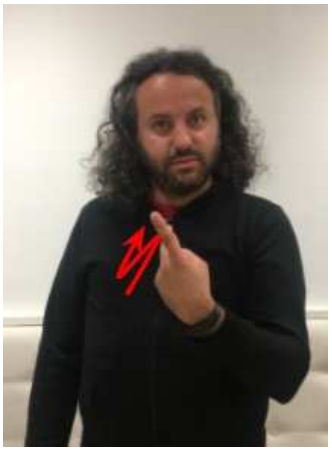
3.7.2.3. Clusivity

First person plural and dual pronouns may encode whether the denotation of the pronoun includes or excludes the addressee(s).
The exclusive meaning ('I and others, not you') is marked in plurals by displacing the circular movement traced by the pronoun towards the ipsilateral or towards the contralateral side of the signer's body –see picture (a)–. The inclusive meaning ('I, you (and others)') is marked by tracing a circular movement that crosses the central space, defined by the axis created by the direction of the signer's eye gaze and head orientation –see picture (b)–.

a) First person exclusive plural pronoun

b) First person inclusive plural pronoun

By using the same mechanism, the dual pronoun may also indicate whether it refers to the speaker and the addressee (inclusive meaning: 'I and you.sg') or to the speaker and other person, not the addressee (exclusive meaning: 'I and someone else, not you'). Therefore, when the head and the eye gaze are aligned with the movement traced by the sign –as in picture (a) below– the pronoun conveys the inclusive meaning, whereas a misalignment in the direction of the hand with respect to the head and the eye gaze results in the exclusive interpretation –as in example (b)–.



a) Dual inclusive pronoun b) Dual exclusive pronoun

3.7.3. Possessive pronouns

LSE has two possessive pronouns, POSS and OWN, which can be used in both attributive and predicative possession. Example (a) illustrates the use of POSS to express a possessive relation within the noun phrase (attributive possession), while in (b) OWN is used predicatively.

a) CAR POSS_1 BLUE.
'My car is blue.'

(Fernández Landaluce, 2016: 230)

b) THINGS ALL IX++ OWN++. IX IX IX IX OWN++.
'All these things are mine. This, that and that are mine.'

(Fernández Landaluce, 2016: 236)

Possessive relations in first person are expressed with the sign OWN, which is articulated with a flat hand making contact with the signer's chest.

First person possessive

Possessive relations in second and third person are expressed with the possessive pronoun POSS. POSS has

two variants: one with the 🤏-handshape –as in examples (a) and (c)– and the other with 🤟 –as in examples (b) and (d)–. Both second and third person can be either one-handed or two-handed.

a) Second person possessive with 🤏-handshape

b) Second person possessive with 🤟-handshape

c) Third person possessive with 🤏-handshape

d) Third person possessive with 🤟-handshape

Plural possessives are formed compositionally, with the possessive form POSS following the plural pronominal sign.

a) IX1pl-incl POSS$_1$ CASA
‘Our house’

(Fernández Landaluce, 2016: 230)

b) IX2pl POSS$_2$ CASA
‘Your.pl house’

(Fernández Landaluce, 2016: 230)

c) IX3pl POSS3 CASA
‘Their house’

(Fernández Landaluce, 2016: 230)

Second and third person forms can also be expressed by preposing a singular, a plural or a dual personal pronoun to the sign OWN.

IX$_2$ OWN CAR
‘Your.sg car’

(Fernández Landaluce, 2016: 229)

Additionally, the sign OWN can also be used as a construction marker.

KEY OWN BANK
'The bank's key'

(Rodríguez González, 1992)[Raquel Ve1]

Apart from the use of POSS and OWN, possessive relations in LSE can also be expressed by personal pronouns, particularly when referring to body parts, physical states or kinship terms.

IX_3 IX_1 SIBLING-FEMALE WORK LAWYER.
'My sister is a lawyer.'

(Costello, 2015: 171)

If the context makes the possessive relation clear, both possessive and personal pronouns can be dropped.

CAR BROKEN.
'My car is broken.'
'His car (of the person the conversation is about) is broken.'

(Fernández Landaluce, 2016: 230)

As for the position of the possessive in the noun phrase, it can appear either preposed or postposed to the possessed noun.

a) $POSS_1$ CAR BLUE.
'My car is blue.'

(Fernández Landaluce, 2016: 230)

b) CAR $POSS_1$ BLUE.
'My car is blue.'

(Fernández Landaluce, 2016: 230)

Information on data and consultants

The descriptions offered are based on existing literature. See the references below for information on data and consultants

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