Passing by the passive: ASL impersonal

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It is well known that ASL is a null subject language: subjects may remain silent with various verb types (1).

(1) A: SEE $_1$POSS CANDY?
    B.1: YES, ($_a$IX) EAT-UP   - *plain*
    B.2: YES, ($_a$IX) $_a$MOVE$_b$ - *spatially agreeing*
    B.3: YES, ($_1$IX) $_1$GIVE$_b$ - *person agreeing*

The literature has thus far focused almost exclusively on the instantiation of subject omission when linguistic antecedent is present (Lillo-Martin 1986; Bahan et al. 2002, i.a.; Author 2012), thus overlooking a subcase of null subjects without such antecedent. The focus of this paper is the antecedentless null subject as in (2), as well as its impersonal passive-appearing counterpart (3) in plain contexts like (1B.1).

(2) HERE KNOW THREE LANGUAGE   'Here (people) know three languages'
(3) a. THREE LANGUAGE USE HERE   'Three languages are used here'
     b. CHURCH BUILD TEN CENTURY   'The church was built in 10th century'

Despite the lack of relevant morphology, passive has been argued to exist in ASL, the functional goal of the construction being defocusing the agent and 'changing the perspective' of viewing the event from the agent to the patient (Kegle 1990, Jantzen et al. 2001, Villanueva 2011). However, as Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002), Keenan & Dryer (2007), i.a. point out, 'impersonal passives' are in principle syntactically ambiguous between active and passive analyses. Here, we offer evidence that while resembling passive semantically, the impersonal cases under examination differ from passive syntactically.

We borrow methodology from Maling (2002, 2006, 2015) for Icelandic: among other characteristic behaviors, passives promote objects to the subject position, demote referential agents into the *by*-phrase, disallow agent control into certain adjuncts, and allow non-human agents (4).

(4) a. A bird was chased (*by* a cat).
     b. **The vows* were given, *crying*
     d. A book was destroyed by the *car* that ran over it.

However, ASL 'passive' does not behave on a par: the reading associated with *by*-phrase (overt or not) is unavailable—the subject cannot be demoted; agent control with an adjunct is possible (5).

(___br)
(5) a. BIRD CHASE CAT
      'A bird chased a cat'
      ≠ 'A bird was chased by a cat'

(___br)
   b. BIRD CHASE
      'A bird chased (someone)'
      ≠ 'A bird was chased'

   c. DOOR OPEN
      'The door opened'

(___br)
   d. * DOOR OPEN MARY
         'The door was opened by Mary'

   e. PROMISE TEND HEAR CRY
     * 'Vows are heard, crying'

We thus explore expression of impersonal active in ASL further. Cabredo-Hofherr (2003, et seq.) identifies a number of contexts in which impersonal constructions occur cross-linguistically. To express the relevant meaning, languages employ several tools: generic human '*people,' 'they,' 'you'*; indefinite *'someone'*; potentially a special lexical item; and a null subject, particularly licensed by a locative (time/space). Here we present the strategies employed by ASL and conclude that ASL prefers its impersonal subjects to remain silent in various contexts: specific

existential (6), vague habitual (7); corporal existential (8); corporal habitual (9); speaker/addressee included and excluded (10); but not in inferred existential cases (11), even with a locative.

(6) CAN'T SLEEP BECAUSE NEXT-TO BUILDING IX Ø FIGHT+ ALL-NIGHT
  'I can't sleep bc in the building next door (they/someone) were fighting all night'

  ‾‾t
(7) CAR WORRY NOTHING, HERE Ø SEE[watch-over]
 'As far as your car goes, don't worry. Here (they) will watch over it.'
(8) Ø BUILD IX CHURCH 10 CENTURY
 '(They) built this church in 10th century'
(9) MOTHER TELL-1IX Ø MUST TRY IX MONDAY
 'Mother told me that {I/everyone} must try the food there on Mondays'
(10) IX LAB Ø UNDERSTAND SIGN-LANGUAGE
 'In this lab (we$_{incl}$/they$_{excl}$/people) understand sign language'
(11) *Looking at the wall with a footprint on it:*
 *(SOMEONE / PERSON) KICK   'Someone (must have) kicked (the wall)'

 None of these environments, however, allow IX$_{arc-up}$ – what Barberà (2012) labels an impersonal pronoun in Catalan Sign Language (LSC). According to Barberà, the upper area of the signing space is 'reserved' for specific indefinite entities – a characteristic suggested to be true of sign languages in general. This does not appear to be the case in ASL: *IX$_{arc-up}$* in ASL has the reading Cabredo-Hofherr's (2003) calls the *expert (encyclopedia) interpretation*.

(12) a. IX$_{arc-up}$ TELL-STORY 1-IX ENTER COLLEGE GET JOB IMPOSSIBLE
  'They say that it will be impossible for me to get into college and get a good job'
  = experts[ironic]; ≠ people in general
 b. IX$_{arc-up}$ SPEAK SPANISH HERE
  'They speak Spanish here'
  = experts; ≠ people in general

 These data also pose a problem for Davidson and Gagne (2014), who argue that the rise along the vertical plane of the signing space signals increase in size of the quantificational domain.
 The data lead to two independent conclusions: (a) the lexical item IX common to a number of sign languages and – in the absence of empirical evidence to the contrary – often assumed to behave similarly in typologically related languages (like LSC and ASL) actually does not; (b) ASL 'passive' is actually impersonal active, akin to similarly deceiving structures in other languages (e.g. Icelandic, Irish, Polish, Ukrainian). Language internally, a generalization arises: ASL prefers a null argument in both generic and indefinite context except in inferred cases which require an overt subject. The latter tends to involve movement, thus, *appearing* to be object promotion—i.e. passive.

SELECTED REFERENCES: [1]Barberà, G. 2012. *The meaning of space in Catalan Sign Language (LSC). Reference, specificity and structure in signed discourse.* Doctoral dissertation. Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona. [2]Davidson, K. & Gagne, D. (2014). Ertical representation of quantifier domains. In *Proceedings of SuB 18,*pp.110-127. [3].VKeenan, E. &. Dryer, M. 2007. Passive in the world's languages. In *Language typology and syntactic description. Vol. I: Clause structure*, ed. Timothy Shopen, 325–361. Cambridge University Press.[4]Maling, J.& Sigurjónsdóttir, S. (2002) The New Impersonal Construction in Icelandic, *Journal of Comparative Germanic Linguistics* 5:97-142. [5] Maling, J. (2006) From passive to active: syntactic change in progress in Icelandic. In Lyngfelt & Solstad (eds.) *Demoting the Agent: Passive, middle and other voice phenomena*, John Benjamins, pp. 197-223