Exploring SELF: A copula in American Sign Language

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Meet the Authors Webinar
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Introduction

What is the function of SELF?

NOT ‘myself, herself, yourself’!

Tyranny of glossing
Previous Analyses on SELF

Reflexive anaphor

- Requires verb
- Agent doing something to itself


IX-3 DECIDE T-O FORCE **SELF-ONE**

He decided to force himself...
Previous Analyses on SELF

Emphatic

- Discourse-level emphasis
- Individuates an entity

I love steak myself...

Previous Analyses on SELF

Intensifier

- Pronominal
- Specifies an entity

IX-1 KNOW SELF-ONE HAVE P-A-R-K-I-N-S-O-N DISEASE
He knows he has Parkinson’s Disease.

Gap in the use of SELF

I FEEL BAT+MAN SELF(-ONE) #BRUCE #WAYNE
I think Batman is Bruce Wayne.

- Not a reflexive
- Not an emphatic
- Not an intensifier

Seemingly a copula!

(Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
Examples of SELF

Z-O-E-Y **SELF-ONE** 14-YEAR-OLD TECH GENIUS
Zoey is a 14-year-old tech genius...
Examples of SELF

L-E-S-T-E-R H-O-L-T SELF-ONE WRITE+AGENT...
Lester Holt is a writer [with NBC]...
Examples of SELF

EVENT SELF-ONE FREE!
And the event is free!
What is a copula?
Functions of the copula

- Establish identity \((A = B)\) & class membership \((A\) is a member of set \(B)\) of a referent
- A linker between subject and predicate
- A syntactic ‘hitching post’ for verbal inflectional categories (tense, aspect, modality)
- A predicator of lexemes that do not form predicates on their own
  - Usually lexemes that are the least dynamic, transitive, transient (i.e., nouns)

(Higgins, 1979; Mikkelsen, 2005, 2011; Pustet, 2003)
Where does the copula come from?
The copula cycle

(Katz 1996; Lohndal 2009; van Gelderen 2011)
The copula cycle

Non-existence

Ø

(Katz 1996; Lohndal 2009; van Gelderen 2011)
The copula cycle

Rooted only in physical context

Non-existence

Ø

Deixis

(Katz 1996; Lohndal 2009; van Gelderen 2011)
The copula cycle

Non-existence → Deixis → Demonstrative

Rooted only in physical context
Rooted in language and physical context

(Barrett 1996; Lohndal 2009; van Gelderen 2011)
The copula cycle

Non-existence

∅

Deixis

Demonstrative

Pronoun

Referential marker

Rooted only in physical context

Rooted in language and physical context

(Katz 1996; Lohndal 2009; van Gelderen 2011)
The copula cycle

Non-existence -> Deixis -> Demonstrative -> Pronoun -> Copula

- Deixis: Rooted only in physical context
- Demonstrative: Rooted in language and physical context
- Pronoun: Referential marker
- Copula: Linker of symmetrical relationship
- Ø: Non-existence

(Katz 1996; Lohndal 2009; van Gelderen 2011)
The copula cycle

Non-existence → Deixis

Deixis

Demonstrative

Rooted only in physical context

Demonstrative

Pronoun

Rooted in language and physical context

Pronoun

Copula

Linker of symmetrical relationship

Copula

∅
Is there evidence of the copula cycle in ASL?
Putative copulas in SLs

“Prototypical copula” \textit{PI} in Finnish SL (FSL)

\textsc{france own-2p head city \textit{PI} paris}

The capital of France is Paris.

“Non-verbal copular particle” BIDD in Icelandic SL (ÍTM)

\textsc{father bidd policeman}

My father is a policeman.

(Jantunen, 2007; Jónsson et al., 2015)
Old French Sign Language (1856)

- Predecessor of American Sign Language
- Historical Sign Language Database (HSLDB)
- Searched manually for entries with:
  - 👍 handshape
  - Anaphoric reference

(Pélissier, 1856; HSLDB; Supalla, 2019-2022; Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
Old French Sign Language (1856)

1st person singular

2nd person singular

3rd person singular

(Pélissier, 1856; Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
Why 👍? 👍 handshape indicative of person classifier

CHASE

GAME

ASSIST

(Fischer 1996; ASL Sign Bank; Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
Old French Sign Language (1856)

(Péllissier, 1856; Fischer, 1996; Lepic, 2015; Coppola & Senghas 2010; de Vos, 2012, 2015; Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
Old French Sign Language (1856)

(Péllissier, 1856; Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
Hypotheses

If the copula cycle is active in ASL then we should observe:

1) SELF used as a pronoun in Old ASL, and
2) SELF used as a copula in present-day ASL
Old American Sign Language - 1910’s

- HSLDB - National Association of the Deaf videos (1910-1915)
- Searched key term ‘SELF’
  - 86 instances by 9 signers
- Coded function depending on syntactic context
  - Pronominal
  - Emphatic
  - Reflexive
  - Copular

(HSLDB; Supalla, 2019-2022; Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
Old American Sign Language – 1910’s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pronominal</th>
<th>Emphatic</th>
<th>Reflexive</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SELF + Verb</td>
<td>Noun + SELF + Verb</td>
<td>Verb + SELF</td>
<td>Noun + SELF + Noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Noun + SELF</td>
<td></td>
<td>Noun + SELF + Adj</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Topicalized SELF</td>
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<td>SELF(res) + Noun + Verb</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preposition + SELF</td>
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(Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
Old American Sign Language – 1910’s

Out of 86 instances of SELF

Function of SELF in Old ASL

- Pronominal
- Emphatic
- Reflexive
- Copular

Out of 86 instances of SELF

(HSLDB; Supalla 2019-2022; Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
3P-SELF WONDER ABOUT(rf) THAT(2h)
... he [Lincoln] wondered about that...
Old American Sign Language - 1910’s

Deixis

∅

Demonstrative

Copula

Pronoun

(HSLDB; Supalla 2019-2022; Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
American Sign Language – 2000’s–2010’s

● Small corpus collection
  ○ National Corpus of Sign Language & Gesture Resources (Boston U. & Rutgers U.)
  ○ Publicly available videos
● 100 instances of SELF
● 18 signers of different backgrounds
● Coded using same standards as with Old ASL

(Neidle & Vogler, 2012; Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
American Sign Language – 2000’s–2010’s

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<td>Prep + SELF</td>
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(Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
Function of SELF in Modern ASL

- Pronominal
- Emphatic
- Reflexive
- Copular

Out of 100 instances of SELF

(Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
American Sign Language – 2000’s–2010’s

Function of SELF in Old ASL

Out of 86 instances of SELF

Function of SELF in Modern ASL

Out of 100 instances of SELF

(Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
The woman who is Dr. Marie Coppola
J-R-N-A-D, IX SELF-ONE++ PLACE
Jr. [Nat’l Assoc. of the Deaf] is a place...
American Sign Language – 2000’s–2010’s

Deixis

∅

Demonstrative

Copula

Pronoun

(Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
The copula cycle

Deixis

Rooted only in physical context

Demonstrative

Rooted in language and physical context

Copula

Linker of symmetrical relationship

Pronoun

Referential marker

∅

Non-existence

(Katz 1996; Lohndal 2009; van Gelderen 2011; Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
What drives the copula cycle?
The copula cycle in syntax

Topic-comment

Topicalized

Copular

(Li & Thompson 1977; Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
The copula cycle in syntax

Topic-comment

Topicalized

Copular

(Li & Thompson 1977; Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
The copula cycle in syntax

**Topic-comment**

Topicalized

Copular

(Wang-Tai  ø  wù  zhě  yě
Wang-Tai  ø  outstanding person  zhě  yě  decl.-part.
‘Wang-Tai is an outstanding person.’
(Zhu’ang-zǐ, 4th c. BCE)

(Li & Thompson 1977; Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
The copula cycle in syntax

Topic-comment

Topicalized

Copular


Topic ø Comment

(Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
The copula cycle in syntax

Topic-comment

Topicalized

Copular

(Li & Thompson 1977; Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
The copula cycle in syntax

Topic-comment

Topicalized

Copular

(Li & Thompson 1977; Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
The copula cycle in syntax

Topic-comment

Topicalized

Copular

Qiong yù jiàn, shì ren zhǐ suǒ wù yě.

‘Poverty and debasement, that is what people dislike.’

(Analect, 5th c. BCE)

(Li & Thompson 1977; Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
The copula cycle in syntax

Topic-comment

Topicalized

Copular

this is perfect for you.

F-A-I-R, SELF-ONE WILL TAKE PLACE

Topic, PRO Predicate

(Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
The copula cycle in syntax

(Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
Flicker Mode

Head Preference Principle

ALCOHOL, SELF-ONE NOT ALWAYS (1h)GOOD

(Lohndal 2009; van Gelderen 2011; Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
The copula cycle in syntax

Topic-comment

Topicalized

Copular

(Li & Thompson 1977; Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
The copula cycle in syntax

Topic-comment

Topicalized

Copular

(Li & Thompson 1977; Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
The copula cycle in syntax

Obligatory for nouns

Subject

COP

Rest of predicate

Nèi-ge ren shì xueshēng
‘That man is a student.’

(Li & Thompson 1977)

Topic-comment

Topicalized

Copular

(Li & Thompson 1977; Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
The copula cycle in syntax

Topic-comment

Topicalized

Copular

C-E-O O-F C-S-D  SELF-ONE+  C-H-R-I-S S-O-U-K-U-P

Subject  COP  Rest of Predicate

(Li & Thompson 1977; Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
Future research

- Majority of SELF use in news reports vs. narratives
  - Two person conversations?
- Increased use of SELF with nouns vs. adjectives
- When to use SELF vs. null copula?
Why is this research important?

- ASL has an overt copula, SELF, that is extensively used for sentences with noun predicates
- Grammaticalization in sign languages is the same as those in spoken languages, showing amodality of language
- Ongoing grammaticalization in older sign language

(Sampson & Mayberry 2022)
Acknowledgments

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Thank you!

Questions? Comments?

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