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Quotation in Russian Sign Language: insights from corpus and elicitation

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Abstract

This paper describes the basic properties of quotation in Russian Sign Language (RSL) using corpus and elicited data. Quotation constructions in RSL consist of source indication (optional), a predicate of speech (optional), and the quote itself. The quote as well as the other constituents of quotation constructions can be marked by non-manual markers (also known as role shift), namely by eye gaze change, head turns, and body turns; however, these markers are optional. Judging by the behavior of indexicals, quotation in naturalistic RSL narratives mostly involves direct speech. Mixed behavior of indexicals is also possible. Interestingly, non-manual marking does not correlate perfectly with the behavior of indexicals. We also find evidence that at least quotes with shifted indexicals are not syntactically embedded. The properties of RSL quotation constructions seem to present problems for some current accounts of role shift in other sign languages.

Keywords: quotation, role shift, non-manual marking, Russian Sign Language

1 Introduction

Natural languages have means for the speaker to convey another person's words or thoughts, that is, quotation constructions. Such constructions have been a topic of much research based on both spoken and signed languages (Brendel, Meibauer, and Steinbach 2011). They are of considerable interest to linguists as well as philosophers of language.

In sign languages, quotations are typically marked by role shift – a combination of several non-manual markers, such as eye gaze, and head and body turns or leans (Lillo-Martin 2012). Importantly, role shift is used not only in quotation (when somebody's words are cited) but also in constructed action (when somebody's actions are depicted).¹ Different analyses of role shift and its relation to quotation exist (see the next section).

While quotation constructions, and, more broadly, role shift, has been described for many sign languages, it has not been studied for Russian Sign Language (RSL) until recently. In a recent paper (Khristoforova and Kimmelman 2018), we describe basic properties of quotation constructions in RSL using corpus data. However, corpus data alone does not allow investigating some of the important features of quotation in RSL, so we also conducted elicitation of judgments. In this paper, we report our findings from both sources. We recapitulate

¹In the rest of this paper we use the term *quotation* to only refer to quoting someones speech or thought, excluding constructed action.

the findings discussed in Khristoforova and Kimmelman (2018), and add novel elicited data. We show that some properties of RSL quotation constructions are relevant to general theories of quotation and role shift.

Note that we use the terms *quote* and *quotation construction* to refer to both direct and indirect discourse throughout the paper (see Section 2 for further details).

In Section 2, we briefly summarize existing research on quotation construction in signed and spoken languages. Section 3 describes the methodology, and Section 4 reports the results. We discuss theoretical implications of our findings in Section 5.

2 Quotation in spoken and signed languages

Much linguistic and philosophical research has been devoted to quotation, so we will make no attempt to do justice to it in this paper (see e.g. Brendel, Meibauer, and Steinbach (2011) for a recent overview of quotation in general, and Lillo-Martin (2012) for an overview of research on sign languages). Instead, we focus on features of quotation which are relevant for the following discussion of quotation constructions in RSL.

Quotation in general means conveying somebody's words or thoughts. Researchers often distinguish direct and indirect quotation. Direct quotation means quoting someone more or less verbatim;² direct quotes are not syntactically embedded, and, importantly, in direct speech, indexical elements shift their reference (e.g. in (1) *I* refers to John and not to the speaker). This indexical shift is often modeled in formal semantics as context shift (Schlenker 2017). In contrast, indirect quotation means summarizing someone's words in your own words; indirect quotes are usually dependent clauses (as shown by *that* in (2)), and indexical elements do not shift (e.g. in (2) *I* refers to the speaker).

(1) John said: "I am tired."

(2) John said that I was tired.

It has been also shown that the division between direct and indirect speech is not always strict. For instance, mixed quotation is possible within a single clause, as in (3) from Brendel, Meibauer, and Steinbach (2011, 4). In this example, the pronoun *their* has a non-shifted reference while the pronoun *us* is shifted.

(3) Their accord on this issue, he said, has proved "quite a surprise to both of us".

Quotation in sign languages has been described by many authors (Engberg-Pedersen 1995; Lillo-Martin 1995; Quer 2011; Herrmann and Steinbach 2012; Davidson 2015; Schlenker 2017). A crucial feature of quotation in sign languages is that it is commonly marked by role shift (4).³ Importantly, role shift is used not only for reported speech, but also for reported (aka constructed) action. A formal analysis of role shift and its relation to quotation has thus become a central question for sign language researchers.

(4) WIFE SAY $\frac{\text{rs:wife}}{\text{YOU FINE}}$
 'The wife says: "Are you fine?">' (Lillo-Martin 2012, 369)

²In fact, it is well known that the verbatim requirement is very lax in direct quotation, and much divergence from the actual quoted speech are allowed (Brendel, Meibauer, and Steinbach 2011).

³**Glossing conventions:** Per common practice, signs are glossed in SMALL CAPS, non-manuals are placed above the glosses. Personal and spatial modification is indicated via subscript. Abbreviations: eg - eye gaze, h - head turn, b - body turn, l - left, r - right, rs - role shift. In examples from other sources we use original notation.

A most common analysis of role shift is that it is an overt expression of context shift. Note that different implementations of this type of analysis exist (Lillo-Martin 1995; Quer 2011; Schlenker 2017); we are not going to discuss the differences between these implementations as they are not relevant for the analysis of RSL data. The basic idea is that indexical elements are interpreted with respect to the context of speech, but role shift introduces a new context in which these elements are interpreted, which results in the shifted interpretation. A competing account of role shift is developed by Davidson (2015) who connects it not to context shift, but to demonstration. In this approach, role shift non-manuals are more similar to intonation that can be used in quotation constructions in spoken languages.

Note that several researchers, starting with Lillo-Martin (1995), have also argued that quotations marked with role shift are not instances of direct speech, even though indexicals get a shifted interpretation both under role shift in sign languages and in direct speech in spoken languages. First, direct speech interpretation is not compatible with role shift used to mark constructed action, as nobody's speech is quoted in this case. Second, in some sign languages, mixed reference of indexicals in a clause marked by role shift is possible (Quer 2011; Herrmann and Steinbach 2012). Typically, a first person pronoun would receive a shifted interpretation (referring to author of the quote and not the signer) while a temporal or spatial adverb would receive a non-shifted interpretation.

Finally, some researchers also argued that, unlike direct speech, quotations in American Sign Language (ASL) marked with role shift are syntactically embedded (Lillo-Martin 1995; Schlenker 2017). This is illustrated by (5) which shows that *wh*-movement from the quotation marked with role shift is possible. Note, however, that others have argued against the embedded status of quotes marked by role shift and in favor of the direct speech analysis (Lee et al. 1997).

- (5) WHO WOMAN_a $\overline{\text{IMAGINE ___ PLAY PIANO}}$ ^a
 'Who did the woman imagined played the piano?' (Davidson 2015, 501)

To sum up, while there is no clear consensus on the analysis of quotation and role shift in sign languages, some common topics can be identified. First, role shift is usually analyzed as context shift. Second, there are some arguments, including syntactic embedding, against analyzing role shift as just a marker of direct quotation. In the rest of the paper we demonstrate that RSL data is interesting and relevant for both issues.

3 Methodology

3.1 Corpus study

We used a sub-corpus of the online RSL corpus (Burkova 2015). Specifically, we selected only personal narratives (and excluded dialogues and retellings of cartoons) by signers from Moscow. The data thus comes from 11 signers and contains approximately 8000 sign tokens forming approximately 1200 sentences. Fortunately, quotation constructions turned out to occur very frequently in the corpus, so we identified 341 instances of quotation. Note that we included both quoted speech, quoted thought, and quoted attitude, which we distinguished based on the context.

We annotated each instance of quotation in ELAN (Crasborn, Zwitserlood, and Ros 2008) according to a number of parameters: type of quotation (speech/thought/attitude), matrix

verb, source of quotation (is the speaker/signer whose words are quoted mentioned), non-manual markers (eye gaze direction, head turns, body turns) and their scope, indexicals and their interpretation, and markers of subordination.

Some of the questions we were interested in turned out to not be possible to investigate using corpus data alone. For instance, as discussed in Section 2, some sign languages allow mixed behavior of indexicals under role shift. In the corpus, we did not find clear examples of mixed indexicals in a single clause, but, due to the relatively small size of the dataset, we could not conclude that it is impossible in RSL. Furthermore, while very little evidence of subordinate status of quotes were found in the corpus, we wanted to use specific syntactic test to investigate this issue further. Finally, as we describe in 4.2 below, we found that, in corpus data, non-manual markers do not seem to distinguish direct and indirect speech clearly. However, due to the small number of examples of unambiguously indirect speech, we additionally collected judgments on this issue.

3.2 Elicitation

We elicited judgments in two stages. First, the second author of the paper elicited judgments in person from four native signers by signing examples in RSL and asking for syntactic and semantic judgments and (if necessary) correction of these examples. The elicitation sessions were recorded on video and transcribed. For one of the questions (syntactic embedding) the signers were unanimous and very confident of their judgments, so we decide that informal elicitation was enough and did not elicit additional data on this issue (see Section 4.4).⁴

Second, for the issues of mixed indexicals and non-manual markers, we asked another native signer to sign the stimuli we constructed, and recorded it on video. We then collected judgments from eleven native signers (different from the four signers in the first stage, and the signer who produced the stimuli) via an on-line questionnaire. The task was a semantic judgment task: the signers were asked to decide which referent a pointing sign referred to (see examples in Sections 4.2 and 4.3). For the issue of the relation between non-manual markers and indexical shift (Section 4.3), we also asked the signers to provide a binary judgment on whether the sentence was acceptable.

The design of the task can only be described as semi-experimental. We have collected judgments from eleven signers, and each construction of interest was represented by three items with different lexicalizations. However, we did not include any fillers and did not randomize the order of presentation of the items.

4 Basic properties of quotation construction

4.1 Constituents

Similar to quotation constructions in other spoken and signed languages, the basic structure of quotation constructions in RSL consists of the indication of the source (or author of the quote), a predicate of speech or thought, and the quote itself (6). We also found that the Palms Up sign (PU) often introduces the quote in the absence of a predicate, especially if the signers quotes his/her own speech or thoughts in the past (7).

⁴While this might not be always appropriate, one can use very small samples if the results are very clear (Myers 2009).

- (6) INDEX₁ source SAY predicate [INDEX₁ YES VIA MOSCOW GO.BY.TRAIN] quote
 'I say: yes, I am traveling by train via Moscow.' (video)⁵
- (7) INDEX₁ PU PLANE JUST ONE HOUR FLY
 'I'm like: it's just an hour by plane to get there.' (video)

The first two constituents do not always occur in quotation constructions. In fact, in the corpus data, the source is mentioned in 160 (47%) of cases, and the predicate is present in 123 (36%) of cases. Note that quotes without explicit author indication or a predicate of speech/thought are also attested in spoken languages (e.g. Mathis and Yule 1994).

Another optional constituent of the quotation construction is the conjunction THAT (see (11) below), which we discuss in Section 4.4. For more discussion of the basic structure of quotation construction based on corpus data see Khristoforova and Kimmelman (2018).

4.2 Non-manual marking

Similar to other sign languages, quotation in RSL is often marked by non-manual markers, namely by eye gaze change (looking away from the addressee), head turns, and body turns (8). These are the non-manuals commonly analyzed as role shift in other sign languages.

- (8) INDEX₁ eg-l,h-l
 GOOD FINISH
 'I say: good, that's it.' (video)

Note that we did not analyze emotional facial expressions as potential markers of quotation, because the facial expressions are a part of the quote itself: the signer quotes the facial expression of the author (Herrmann and Steinbach 2012). Nevertheless, we did observe that emotional facial expressions do occur on quotes in the corpus, which is also the case in (8).

The behavior of non-manual markers in the corpus is summarized in Table 1.⁶ Two important observations can be made. First, these non-manuals are all optional: in fact, eye gaze change and body turns occur in approximately half of the quotes found in the corpus; head turns are more frequent. Second, these non-manuals do not always mark the quote alone, and sometimes they mark only the other constituents (this is the *other* category in the table). Most strikingly, while head turns are very frequently present, they mostly mark both the quote and the author indication. In fact, in almost all cases where the author is mentioned, it is marked by a head turn.

In Khristoforova and Kimmelman (2018) we also demonstrate that the presence of non-manual marking does not correlate with the type of quote or with whether the author of the quote is the signer him/herself or someone else. Furthermore, as we discuss in the next section, it does not look like non-manual marking is explained by the direct vs. indirect speech distinction, or, more specifically, by the behavior of indexicals.

⁵Each example from the corpus is accompanied by the direct link to the on-line version of the corpus. Note that free registration is required to access the data.

⁶The numbers in this table deviate slightly from the ones reported in Khristoforova and Kimmelman (2018) because in the other paper we mistakenly collapsed the *other* category with some of the categories above. This table represents our current best analysis of the data.

Table 1: Presence and scope of non-manual markers.

scope	eye gaze	body turn	head turn
absent	146 (42%)	166 (49%)	54 (15%)
quote only	47 (14%)	58 (17%)	62 (18%)
part of quote	53 (15%)	63 (18%)	62 (18%)
quote + predicate	25 (7%)	18 (5%)	31 (9%)
quote (+ predicate) + author	30 (9%)	23 (7%)	100 (29%)
other	40 (12%)	13 (4%)	32 (9%)

4.3 Behavior of indexicals

As discussed in Section 2, the behavior of indexicals is a core issue in the study of quotation in spoken and signed languages (Brendel, Meibauer, and Steinbach 2011). Very much simplifying, in direct speech, indexicals have shifted reference: they are interpreted within the quoted context, and not within the context of speech, but in indirect speech, they are not shifted. In both spoken and signed languages cases of mixing of direct and indirect speech are possible, and, in sign languages specifically, mixed behavior of indexicals within quotation marked by role shift is attested (Herrmann and Steinbach 2012; Quer 2011).

In our RSL corpus data, we identified all indexical elements (personal and possessive pronouns, agreeing verbs, temporal adverbs like *NOW*, spatial adverbs like *HERE*, and tense markers) and determined whether their reference was shifted. In 196 (57%) of cases we found no indexical elements. In addition, there were many cases where the author of the quote was the signer in the past, so a first person pronoun within the quote would have the same reference whether it is analyzed as shifted or not: the signer is the first person both in the context of speech and of the quote. We ended up with 91 instances of indexicals to analyze.

Out of the 91 indexicals in our data, 86 (95%) have a shifted reference. If we equate shifted reference of indexicals with direct speech, and generalize the pattern also to the cases with no indexicals, we can attest a strong preference for direct speech in RSL personal narratives.

We did not find any clear examples of single-clause quotes showing mixed behavior of indexicals in the corpus data. However, given that most examples with indexicals contained only one such element, we could not conclude that mixed behavior of indexicals is ungrammatical. We therefore conducted elicitation, as discussed in Section 3.2.

Specifically, we constructed examples modeled after Quer (2011) containing a clearly shifted first person pronoun, and an adverb *HERE* which we hoped might be non-shifted even within a quote, as in (9). Note also that the quote is clearly marked by role shift. The participants of the experiment were told that this sentence was uttered in Moscow, and then asked what *HERE* referred to: St. Petersburg, Moscow, or both interpretations are possible.

- (9) INDEX_a WOMAN PST ST.PETERSBURG TELL_b MAN INDEX_b $\overline{\text{INDEX}_1 \text{ WORK HERE}}^{\text{eg-r,h-r,b-r}}$
 ‘A woman when she was in St. Petersburg told a man: “I work here”.’

If *HERE* was interpreted within the context of the quote, it should refer to St.Petersburg. However, in the experiment, 17 out of 33 times the participants said that *HERE* referred to Moscow or that both interpretations are possible. We conclude that this provides evidence in favor of mixed behavior of indexicals being possible in RSL quotations. Note that almost half of the judgments were that only the shifted interpretation is possible, so mixed behavior is not obligatory, as adverbials like *HERE* clearly can shift with the context.

Having identified the cases with shifted indexicals in the corpus, we investigated whether there is a clear relation between their behavior and non-manual marking. We hypothesized that examples with shifted indexicals will be more likely to be marked by non-manual markers (or even obligatorily marked). However, we found 31 cases (36%) without eye gaze change, 30 cases (35%) without body turns, and 8 cases without head turns (9%). While the percentage of absent non-manuals is slightly lower in examples with shifted indexicals than in the corpus overall, it is still quite high, showing that these non-manuals are still optional.

Thus, in the corpus, we found good evidence that a quote with shifted indexicals can be unmarked by non-manuals. We also wondered whether the opposite holds: is it possible to have non-shifted indexicals in the presence of non-manual marking? Our corpus data contained very few examples with non-shifted indexicals, so we elicited additional judgment data. We constructed examples where a third person indexical was used within a quote clearly marked non-manually. Importantly, this indexical pointed to the location associated with the author of the quote (10).

- (10) FATHER INDEX_a SAY $\frac{\text{eg-r,h-r,b-r}}{\text{INDEX}_a}$ TIRED
 ‘The father says: “I am / He is tired.”’

The participants were asked to judge who was tired: the father or some other person. If indexicals have to shift when non-manuals are used, we expect that INDEX_a cannot refer to the father. First, the locus *a* should have a different interpretation within the shifted context. Second, the first person pronoun INDEX₁ should be used instead to refer to the author of the quote if shifted reference is obligatory.

Surprisingly, 19 of the 33 times the participants judged the pronoun within the quote as referring to the author of the quote, and 14 of the 19 times they considered the sentence with this interpretation grammatical. We have to conclude that non-manual marking is neither necessary nor sufficient for the shifted interpretation of indexicals.⁷ We will return to this issue in Section 5.

4.4 Syntactic embedding

One important debate concerning quotes marked with role shift is whether they are embedded clauses or not (see Section 2). In the corpus, we found some examples that very likely involve embedded quotes. These examples contain a subordination conjunction THAT (11). We consider such quotes to be embedded because it is ungrammatical to use the conjunction THAT in the beginning of a main clause.⁸ Notice also that, interestingly, the clearly embedded quote in (11) is accompanied with non-manual markers; if non-manual markers were markers of direct speech, this would be unexpected.

- (11) $\frac{\text{eg-r,h-r,b-r}}{\text{TELL}_a \text{ THAT INDEX}_1 \text{ PU LAMP INDEX}_1 \text{ NO}}$
 ‘I told her that my lamp was missing.’(video)

Thus, some quotes in RSL are subordinated. However, we only found 9 examples with THAT in our corpus data, so this strategy is quite rare. We turned to elicitation.

⁷After we finished this study, we have learned that in fact Koulidobrova and Davidson (2018) found the very same pattern in ASL: non-shifted third person pronouns under role shift are possible there, too.

⁸In fact, this sign can be used in a main clause but then it will be interpreted as the wh-sign WHAT.

Following previous research (Lillo-Martin 1995; Schlenker 2017), we decided to test if quotes clearly marked with role shift and containing shifted indexicals show signs of syntactic subordination. We applied two tests: *wh*-movement from the quote (12) and center embedding of the quote (13). If the quote is embedded, both should be possible. We asked four signers to judge acceptability of such examples, and they were unanimous in considering them completely unacceptable.

(12) $\frac{\text{wh } \text{eg-r,h-r,b-r}}{*WHO MOTHER SAY INDEX_2 LOVE}$
 Intended interpretation: ‘Who did mother say that I love?’

(13) $*MOTHER SAY \frac{\text{eg-r,h-r,b-r}}{INDEX_1 TIRED YESTERDAY}$
 Intended interpretation: ‘Mother said yesterday: “I am tired”.’⁹

Note that what such examples demonstrate is as follows: if a quote is clearly direct speech judging by the behavior of indexicals, we fail to find evidence that it is embedded, contrary to what has been found for ASL (but remember that there are contradicting claims regarding this issue).¹⁰ These examples do not show that role shift (non-manual marking) is a marker of direct speech, as we have clearly shown that it is not the case in the previous sections.

5 Discussion

While our results should be considered preliminary – our corpus study is quite small-scale, and we only tested some aspects using judgments – some features of quotation constructions in RSL are clearly relevant for the analysis of quotation and role shift in sign languages.

First, quotation constructions in RSL are not typologically unusual. We found that similar to other signed and spoken languages, quotes in RSL can be introduced by mentioning the author and a predicate of speech or thought, but that these introductory elements are optional. Furthermore, judging by the behavior of indexicals, and also by the non-subordinate status of quotes, quotation in RSL narratives mostly involves direct speech. Such preference for direct speech has also been described for oral discourse in spoken languages (Longacre 1976). Similar to some sign languages, RSL allows for mixed behavior of indexicals.

The most interesting findings concern the behavior of non-manual markers in relation to other properties of the construction. First, the non-manual markers (at least the ones we investigated) are optional. Second, they do not always perfectly align with the quote; moreover, the most frequent non-manual marker – head turns – most frequently marks the whole construction including the source. Third, non-manual markers might be present even when a subordinating conjunction *THAT* is used, which is unexpected if the markers are used for direct speech only. Finally, there is no clear relation between the presence of non-manual markers and indexical shift: indexicals can shift in the absence of non-manuals, but they do not have to shift even when non-manuals are clearly present (recall example (10)).

As discussed in Section 2, a dominant theory of non-manual marking used for quotation (role shift) is that it marks context shift (Lillo-Martin 1995; Quer 2011; Schlenker 2017). The

⁹This sentence is grammatical if *YESTERDAY* is considered a part of the quote.

¹⁰Interestingly, Koulidobrova and Davidson (2018) use the possibility of non-shifted third person pronouns under role shift in ASL to argue for the embedded status of the quotes. We think that the issue of indexical shift is independent of the status of the quote as syntactically embedded, as at least in RSL.

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