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Quotation in Russian Sign Language: a corpus study

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Abstract

We studied how quotation is expressed in naturalistic discourse in Russian Sign Language (RSL). We studied a sub-corpus of the online corpus of RSL containing narratives by eleven signers from Moscow. We identified 341 instances of quotation, including reported speech and reported thoughts. We annotated syntactic, semantic, and prosodic properties of the found instances of quotation. We found out that quotative constructions in RSL have the same basic structure as similar constructions in other spoken and signed languages. Furthermore, similarly to quotation in other sign languages, quotation in RSL can be marked by head and/or body movement and change in eye gaze direction. However, all of these markers are clearly optional, and a considerable number of examples do not include any of these markers. Furthermore, we found that, judging by the behavior of indexicals, RSL narratives in our dataset have a very strong preference for using direct speech. We discuss theoretical implications of the RSL data to the theory of quotation in sign languages.

Keywords: role shift, quotation, Russian Sign Language, corpus research

1. Introduction

Quotation concerns the situation when the signer or speaker conveys somebody else's words, thought, or attitudes. Quotation has been an important topic in linguistic research, as well as in philosophy of language (Brendel et al., 2011).

Much research has also been devoted to quotation (and more broadly, to both constructed speech and constructed action) in sign languages (Lillo-Martin, 1995; Janzen, 2004; Quer, 2011; Herrmann and Steinbach, 2012; Lillo-Martin, 2012; Cormier et al., 2016; Schlenker, 2017). In this paper, we add novel data by looking at quotation in Russian Sign Language (RSL): quotation in this language has never been studied before. Furthermore, we use corpus data to study how quotation is expressed in RSL to give a more objective impression of the amount of variation.

When the topic of quotation or constructed speech is discussed in sign linguistic literature, it is usually done in connection to *role shift*, that is, a specific constellation of non-manual markers that are used to convey somebody's speech or actions. These markers typically include head and/or body turns, eye gaze change (looking away from the addressee), as well as emotional facial expressions attributed to the author of the quote and not the signer. However, while these non-manuals seem to be frequent markers of quotation (Herrmann and Steinbach, 2012) and constructed action, some authors also note that they are not obligatory (Janzen, 2004; Cormier et al., 2016).

There are thus at least two ways that one might approach studying quotation in a sign language. One way is to study the properties of quotative constructions involving role shift, thus defining the construction in question both functionally and formally. Another way is to study the properties of all quotational devices, both with and without non-manual marking, thus only using the functional definition. We consider the latter approach as more prudent in studying quotation in RSL for two reasons. Firstly, since quotation in RSL has never been studied before, we cannot a priori presume that this language also uses role shift for quotation. Secondly, and more importantly, we think that

the properties of quotation with role shift and the nature of role shift itself—which is an issue of many debates (see below)—can only be studied in the context of other quotational devices (if such are available in a sign language).

When studying quotation in sign languages, several theoretical questions are usually raised. One important point discussed by many researchers was the question of whether quotations marked by role shift are direct or indirect speech. Several researchers have argued against the intuitively appealing idea that quotation marked with role shift is direct speech. For instance, Lillo-Martin (1995) provided a number of arguments against analyzing role shift in American Sign Language (ASL) as a marker of direct speech, including evidence of syntactic subordination of the quote (but see also Lee et al. (1997) for arguments against this position), and the fact that role shift is not only used for constructed speech/dialogue but also for constructed action. In some sign languages, such as German and Catalan Sign Languages, quotation with role shift appears to show mixed behavior of some indexical elements, thus not conforming to the definition of either direct or indirect speech.

A related issue is the nature of the role shift itself (in both quotation and constructed action). Some researchers analyze it as a context-shifting device (Quer, 2011; Schlenker, 2017); some also point out similarities between role shift and agreement (Herrmann and Steinbach, 2012), while some analyze non-manual markers as demonstration, akin to emotional use of intonation and gestures in direct quotation in spoken languages (Davidson, 2015).

As will become clear, it is not possible to fully discuss these theoretical issues as applied to quotation in RSL due to usual limitations of corpus data. However, we will show that the properties of quotation in RSL that we observe in our corpus are at least indicative of certain approaches.

The paper is structured as follows. In section 2. we outline the methodology of our study. Section 3. contains the main results of the study. Finally, in section 4., we summarize the findings and discuss the consequences of RSL data for the general theoretical debates.

2. Methodology

We used a sub-corpus of the corpus of RSL (Burkova, 2015). We selected free narratives (personal stories) produced by 11 RSL signers from Moscow. We chose to investigate the narratives because this genre is most likely to contain quotation. Furthermore, we decided to only investigate signers from Moscow to avoid possible regional variation. However, this also means that our conclusions are only generalizable to the Moscow variant of RSL, and specifically to the narrative genre, if at all.

All signers in this sub-corpus live and work in Moscow, and this is also where the data has been collected in 2012. Three of the signers grew up in other regions and moved to Moscow as adults, so they might introduce some amount of regional variation. The signers include 7 females and 4 males, aged 30-58. 6 of the signers have deaf signing parents, but all have acquired RSL early in life.

The sub-corpus includes approximately 8000 signs (estimated by the number of glosses on the right hand tier) and 1200 sentences. Despite the modest size of the sub-corpus, it contains a large number of instances of quotation. We found and annotated 341 such instances, including 277 instances of quoted speech.

We annotated each instance of quotation in ELAN (Crasborn and Sloetjes, 2008) according to a number of features: (1) *Type of quote*: speech/thought/attitude; (2) *Predicate of quotation*: is there an overt predicate introducing quotation, and if so, which predicate? (3) *Author*: is the author of the quote the signer him/herself in the past or another person? (4) *Overt author*: is the author of the quote overtly mentioned? (5) *Non-manual markers*: eye gaze direction and body turns; (6) *Indexicals*: are there any indexical elements in the quote, and if so, is there reference shifted or non-shifted? (7) *Markers of subordination*: is there any evidence of syntactic subordination of the quote? (8) *Direct vs. indirect speech*: are there any signs of direct or indirect speech, such as the use of a complementizer?

We have also tried to annotate emotional facial expressions and head movements. However, this resulted in very low inter-rater reliability, so we did not analyze these annotations further. Furthermore, as Cormier et al. (2016), among others, have shown, emotional facial expressions are clearly not obligatory in quotation and also clearly occur outside of quotational contexts, and head movements also have a large number of functions unrelated to quotation. The question of how exactly these non-manuals interact with quotation in RSL thus awaits further research.

3. Results

3.1. Basic properties of quotation

Quotational constructions in spoken and signed languages have several constituents, some of them optional. An instance of quotation necessarily contains *the quote*, that is, the words or thoughts that are being quoted, and it can also contain *the introductory clause* which in turn consists of mentioning *the author* and *the predicate of quotation*, that is, a verb of speech or thought (1). In addition, some quotational constructions contain a marker of quotation, such as *like* in English (2).

(1) [She]_{author} [said]_{predicate of quotation}: [“I’m so tired!”]_{quote}

(2) She was [like]_{marker of quotation}: I’m so tired!

This basic structure is clearly applicable to quotational constructions in RSL. Consider example (3): the sign IX-1 ‘I’ is the author, the sign SAY is the predicate of speech, and the rest of the clause is the quote. In addition, the quote can be marked by certain non-manuals which can be considered a marker of quotation; however, as we discuss below, the non-manuals are not obligatory and analyzing them as a marker of quotation might be unwarranted. Example (3) does not contain any head or body movement or eye gaze change that could be analyzed as marking quotation.

(3) IX-1 SAY IX-1 YES THROUGH MOSCOW TRAVEL
‘I said: Yes, I am traveling via Moscow.’^{1 2}

We analyzed all found instances of quotation with respect to the presence of these constituents. Similarly to spoken languages (Mathis and Yule, 1994), using a predicate of quotation and overtly mentioning the author of the quote are clearly optional in RSL. Table 1 summarizes the occurrences of overt reference to the author,³ and Table 2 summarizes the occurrences of an overt predicate of quotation.

Overt author	No author	Constructed action
160 (47%)	118 (35%)	52 (15%)

Table 1: Overt author.

The third column in Table 1 refers to the cases when an instance of quotation (constructed speech) follows an instance of constructed action by the same author. In such case it would be redundant to use an overt sign to refer to the author again, so we separated this category.

Overt predicate	No predicate	Palms Up
96 (28%)	218 (64%)	27 (8%)

Table 2: Overt predicate of quotation.

The third column in Table 2 refers to the not infrequent cases when there is not predicate of the quotation, but the quotation is introduced by the Palms Up Gesture (McKee and Wallingford, 2011), as in example (4). While this happens often enough to be noticeable, it is important to emphasize that this gesture is multifunctional (McKee and Wallingford, 2011), which is also true for RSL. Therefore, we cannot be sure that it is used specifically as a marker of quotation, and does not have another unrelated function.

(4) IX-1 PU PLANE JUST ONE HOUR CL:FLY
‘I’m like: it’s just an hour by plane to get there.’⁴

¹<http://rsl.nstu.ru/data/view/id/358/t/176300/d/179150>

²Each example is accompanied by the direct link to the on-line version of the corpus. Note, however, that (free) registration is required to access the data. We use standard glossing conventions in glossing the RSL examples. IX stands for index (a pointing sign); POSS - possessive; PU - Palms Up. Non-manual markers: eg - eye gaze, h - head, b - body, l - left, r - right.

³In this table the percentages do not add up to 100% due to the presence of a small number of unclear cases.

⁴<http://rsl.nstu.ru/data/view/id/255/t/59280/d/61730>

The most common verbs that are used as predicates of quotation are THINK, ASK, CALL, and TELL. The verb CALL is an interesting case as it is not a verb of speech or thought itself; instead it described the action of attracting someone’s attention, but it is nevertheless often used to introduce a quote (5). This example also illustrates that this predicate can also introduce questions, and not only declaratives.

- (5) CALL-A DAUGHTER POSS-2 PRESENT WHAT?
 ‘(She) asks: what should I give to your daughter?’⁵

3.2. Non-manual markers

Similarly to other sign languages, quotative constructions in RSL are sometimes accompanied with non-manual markers, specifically with eye gaze change (looking away from the addressee), and body and/or head turns (6).

- eg-l,h-l
 (6) IX-1 GOOD, FINISH
 ‘I (say): good, that’s it.’⁶

However, all these non-manual markers are clearly optional. Moreover, their scope does not always align with the quote: sometimes only a part of the quote is marked non-manually, and sometimes the predicate or even the author is also marked with the same non-manuals. Table 3 summarizes the frequency of different scopes for eye gaze, Table 4 for body movements.

No marking	146 (43%)
Whole quote	47 (14%)
Part of quote	52 (15%)
Also predicate	38 (11%)
Also author	58 (17%)

Table 3: Scope of eye gaze.

No marking	166 (49%)
Whole quote	58 (17%)
Part of quote	63 (18%)
Also predicate	22 (7%)
Also author	32 (9%)

Table 4: Scope of body turns.

The large number of examples without eye gaze (146, 42%), and without body turns (166, 49%) show that these markers are clearly optional. Moreover, in 95 cases (26%), neither eye gaze nor body turns are used to mark the quote. Note that both reported speech and reported thought (and attitude) can occur with or without non-manual marking. Table 5 shows that the frequency of non-manual marking is similar for the two types of quotes, although reported thought seems to be marked more frequently than speech. One might hypothesize that only direct speech is marked with non-manual markers in RSL, so for direct speech, these markers will turn out to be obligatory or nearly obligatory. We test this hypothesis in the next section.

⁵<http://rsl.nstu.ru/data/view/id/366/t/136490/d/140020>

⁶<http://rsl.nstu.ru/data/view/id/257/t/57810/d/58940>

Type of quote	speech	thought
Unmarked by eye gaze	122 (44%)	24 (37%)
Unmarked by body	146 (53%)	20 (31%)
Total	277	64

Table 5: Absent non-manual marking and quote type.

3.3. Direct vs. indirect speech

One of the main distinctions between direct and indirect speech is the behavior of indexical elements (Brendel et al., 2011), such as first and second person pronouns, time and place adverbs (*now*, *then*), and tense marking: in direct speech, such elements are interpreted with respect to the context of the quote itself (7), while in indirect speech they are interpreted in the context of the main utterance (8).

- (7) John said to me yesterday: “I am tired now.” (I=John, now=yesterday, present tense=past interpretation)

- (8) John said to me that I was tired then. (I=the speaker)

Therefore, we found all indexical elements in quotes in our data set, and annotated their reference. It turned out that the majority of examples (196, 57%) do not contain any indexicals. Furthermore, in a large number of examples, the author of the quote is the signer him/herself in the past (as in example (3)), so a first person pronoun refers to the signer irrespective of the context of interpretation. Such examples are ambiguous between direct and indirect speech.

Looking at examples with indexicals, the absolute majority (86 out of 91, 95%) contain indexicals interpreted in the context of the quote (shifted indexicals), so these examples can be characterized as direct speech.

For several sign languages, including German and Catalan, mixed behavior of indexicals has been reported (Quer, 2011; Herrmann and Steinbach, 2012). Specifically, while personal pronouns, such as IX-1 are interpreted as referring to the author and not the signer, an adverb like HERE within the same quote can be interpreted as referring to the situation of the main utterance. In our data set, we found two quotes with potentially mixed behavior of indexicals, but both instances involved multiple clauses which makes it possible to analyze them as sequences of direct and indirect quotes. We did not find any examples of a single clause with indexicals showing mixed behavior. However, the absence of such examples in our data set does not exclude the possibility that they are in fact grammatical. Further research is needed.

Since most examples with indexicals can be characterized as direct speech, we further studied non-manual markers in these examples. Contrary to the hypothesis mentioned in the previous section, these examples are not obligatorily marked with non-manual markers. Specifically, we found 31 examples (36% of all examples with shifted indexicals) not marked by eye gaze, 30 examples (35%) not marked by body movements, and even 15 examples (18%) not marked with any of these non-manual markers. We conclude that these non-manual markers are clearly not obligatory markers of direct speech.

We also discovered one clear marker of indirect speech in RSL, namely the complementizer THAT (9); we found 9

such examples produced by 4 signers. This complementizer is likely to be borrowed from Russian, as also indicated by the fact that in both languages it is homonymous with the question word meaning ‘what’.

- eg-r,b-r
- (9) TELL-3 THAT IX-1 PU LAMP IX-1 NO
‘I told her that my lamp was missing.’⁷

3.4. Syntactic subordination

For some sign languages, it has been claimed that quotes marked with role shift are syntactically subordinate (that is, they are clausal arguments of the predicate of quotation (see e.g. Lillo-Martin (1995), but also Lee et al. (1997)). Corpus data is not well suited to investigate this issue for RSL. We did find one clear piece of evidence that some of the quotes are subordinate clauses, namely the use of complementizer THAT (9): note that one cannot use this complementizer in a main clause. However, for the absolute majority of cases, we find no evidence of syntactic subordination of the quote. Specifically, we did not find clear cases of topicalization or wh-movement from the quote or center embedding of the quote. However, since such processes are not very frequent in general, we definitely cannot consider the absence of evidence here as evidence of ungrammaticality. Elicitation of acceptability judgments is necessary to further investigate this issue.

4. Discussion

In this study, we described basic properties of quotation in RSL based on narrative corpus data. We found out that quotative constructions have the same basic structure as similar constructions in other spoken and signed languages (3.1.). A somewhat surprising finding was that non-manual markers that can accompany the quote, while being similar to those described for other sign languages, are not obligatory and do not always align with the quote alone (3.2., compare for instance to Herrmann and Steinbach (2012)).

Another interesting finding is that, judging by the behavior of indexicals (and also by the use of the complementizer), RSL has a very strong preference for using direct speech, although indirect speech is also possible (3.3.). Note, however, that this can only be generalized to the genre we investigated, namely informal personal monologue narratives. It might be the case that, for instance, in more formal genres, more indirect speech would be used.

Finally, we found no clear examples of mixed behavior of indexicals (3.3.) and no evidence of subordination of quotes not containing the complementizer (3.4.). However, no strong conclusions about these issues can be based on corpus data alone, so they are left for future research.

The non-obligatory and not very systematic nature of non-manual markers which we observed does have some theoretical consequences. Specifically, it is difficult to analyze these non-manuals as context shift operators or as agreement markers (Quer, 2011; Herrmann and Steinbach, 2012), because there are clear examples of shifted indexicals in the absence of one or all of the markers.

We would argue that the nature of non-manual markers accompanying quotes in RSL is better captured by the demonstration theory proposed by Davidson (2015). Informally, non-manual markers are the signer demonstrating or re-creating certain behaviors of the author producing the quote. They are akin to emotional intonation and gestures that speakers of spoken languages can also use in quotation.

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⁷<http://rsl.nstu.ru/data/view/id/259/t/89000/d/91051>