

## The Selflessness of Providence Island Sign Language:

### Personal Pronoun Morphology<sup>1</sup>

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0.0 Introduction. Providence Island Sign Language (PROVISL), an isolated sign language in the Caribbean, is an atypical language for a number of reasons and, as such, offers an unusual testing ground for hypotheses about universal and unique characteristics of human LANGUAGE. (See Washabaugh, Woodward, and De Santis 1976 for a discussion of a number of the atypical characteristics of PROVISL.) This short sketch of PROVISL personal pronoun morphology<sup>2</sup> discusses 1) the use of indexing in PROVISL, 2) real world conditions and pronominalization, 3) person, 4) number, 5) gender, 6) inclusivity, and 7) case in PROVISL with explicit comparisons to other researched sign languages, primarily American Sign Language (ASL) and to oral languages where applicable. Data on PROVISL have been collected from deaf and hearing signers from each village where

deaf people reside. Data was collected from over one-half of the deaf population currently living on Providence. The summary and conclusion will attempt categorization of those features of PROVISL personal pronoun morphology that are similar to other languages and those that are quantitatively or qualitatively different.

1.0 Indexing in PROVISL. PROVISL, like other researched sign languages, makes use of indexing for personal pronominalization. (See Friedman 1975 for a discussion of pronominal indexing in ASL.) However, indexing in PROVISL differs slightly from what has been observed in other sign languages. PROVISL makes use of both point index (index finger extended toward referent, may also have other fingers extended) and flat index (open palm extended toward referent.) Point indexing normally occurs when the location of the sign is not on the signer's body, while flat indexing can occur on the signer's body. Following this general principle, all non-first person pronouns are point indexed in PROVISL, while first person pronouns may be point or flat indexed. Also following the general handshape principles in PROVISL, point indexing may be done with a surface G (index finger extended), L (index finger and thumb extended), B (all fingers extended but not spread), or 5 (all fingers extended

and spread) handshape.<sup>3</sup> All of these handshapes may be oriented palm up, contra, or down; and all fingers extended point towards the referent. For point indexing in PROVISL, it is thus important only that the index finger point towards the referent. It is extraneous as to whether the other fingers are all extended or all not extended.

In contrast to PROVISL, in FSL related sign languages, e.g. French, American, and Danish sign languages, point vs. flat indexing forms a systematic morphological distinction between non-possessive (point, normally with a G handshape, palm contra) and possessive (flat, normally with a B handshape palm towards referent). In addition, in ASL, point indexing with a B handshape (tips of fingers, not palm, pointing towards referent), when found, has a slightly honorific connotation, while in PROVISL this is not the case.

2.0 Real world conditions on Pronominalization. If a person is visible, that person will be pronominalized in PROVISL by direct pointing to the individual. This is exactly what happens in ASL (Friedman 1975) and other researched sign languages. Whenever a person is not present, s/he is pronominalized in PROVISL by pointing to the location where the person lives or, if the addressee does not know where the referent lives, by describing

the location where the person lives, and then pronominalizing by pointing to that general location. Thus personal pronominalization in PROVISL is highly context dependent (cf. Washabaugh, Woodward, and De Santis 1976). One has to be an enculturated insider to easily understand personal pronominalization. This is in contrast to pronominalization of non-present persons in ASL which is understandable to outsiders, as long as they understand the language. That is, to understand who is being referred to in ASL, one does not have to understand local geography and living arrangements of members of the society.

This is not to say that PROVISL signers do not pronominalize by "setting up a person in space" as in ASL (see Friedman 1975). However, such context-independent pronominalization is extremely rare in PROVISL.

3.0 Person. PROVISL, like other sign and oral languages, distinguishes first person (communicator), second person (addressee) and third person (that which is discussed). This distinction is made through the direction of pointing in three dimensional space: towards signer (1st person), towards addressee (2nd person), towards referent who is not signer or addressee or away from signer and addressee (3rd person).

4.0 Gender. Also, unlike other researched sign languages and some oral languages, such as Chinese, PROVISL makes no morphological gender distinctions.

5.0 Number. PROVISL, like other sign and oral languages, distinguishes between singular and plural pronouns. Singular PROVISL personal pronouns require one index. Plural personal pronouns require more than one index.

PROVISL, unlike ASL (and perhaps some other sign languages as well) does not make use of number incorporation (cf. Woodward and Markowicz 1975) as a grammatical device in personal pronominalization. Number incorporation has been rarely observed in PROVISL pronouns, and then only with the number TWO. This number incorporation seems at present to be assimilation due to phonological (formational) processes. PROVISL signers, unlike ASL signers, when asked about to make intuitive grammatical judgements, reject pronouns involving number incorporation.

6.0 Inclusivity. PROVISL, like some oral languages, such as Palaung (Burling 1970); ASL; and perhaps other sign languages, makes use of inclusive and exclusive 'we.' PROVISL has two variants for 'inclusive we,' ALL + ME or indexing all third person referents, the addressee, and the signer. 'Exclusive we' involves indexing all third person referents and the signer, i.e. omitting the addressee.

7.0 Case. PROVISL has one grammatical form for each pronoun. Thus PROVISL, unlike other reported sign languages, does not morphologically inflect for possession. However, no problem of ambiguity results from this, since PROVISL like a number of other languages makes use of syntactic juxtaposition to represent possession. It is interesting to note that the historical shift in some varieties of non-mainstream English is towards loss of possessive inflections, at least for nouns (Wolfram 1969).

Much more interesting than non-inflection for possession, however is non-inflection for reflexives. PROVISL, unlike FSL related sign languages,<sup>5</sup> and to the author's knowledge, oral languages, does not have a morphological or syntactic reflexive form for any pronoun. Again, however, no ambiguity or difficulty in communication results. A sentence like 'John hit John' could never be ambiguous in PROVISL, since no name sign is used for more than one person. The indexes in the sentences 'John hit him' and 'John hit himself' could never be ambiguous in PROVISL as to whether the index referred to John or someone else, since each referent has a separate index in PROVISL (and other sign languages). It is possible to have as many third person pronouns as people present in all observed sign languages, and perhaps up to five third person pronouns

for non-present referents, without ambiguity for ASL (Friedman 1975). At present, it is not known how many non-present third person referents can occur without ambiguity in PROVISL.

8.0 Summary and conclusion. This paper has briefly sketched the morphology of personal pronouns in PROVISL. Like all observed languages, PROVISL makes morphological distinctions in person (1st, 2nd, 3rd) and number (singular and plural). Like all observed sign languages and some oral languages, such as Chinese, PROVISL makes no morphological distinctions in gender for personal pronouns. Like all observed sign languages and some oral languages, such as Palaung, PROVISL has inclusive and exclusive 'we.' Like all observed sign languages, PROVISL makes use of indexing for pronominalization, although unlike at least some of these languages, PROVISL makes no distinctive use of flat or point indexing and often uses handshapes other than G for point indexing. Also, as in all observed sign languages, in PROVISL referents that are visible are pronominalized by indexing the referent.

However, in contrast to ASL and perhaps other sign languages, PROVISL depends much more heavily on real world conditions in actual conversation for non-present referents. Thus, while pronominalization in all languages is context dependent, i.e., understanding of pronominalization depends

on the linguistic and non-linguistic environment, pronominalization in PROVISL seems to be particularly context dependent. (The heavy degree of context dependency of PROVISL in other ethnosemantic domains such as color, wh questions and kinship [Washabaugh, Woodward, and De Santis 1976, Woodward 1976] has already been documented.)

Also in contrast to what has been observed in other languages, PROVISL has no separate form for reflexives. Thus, while number and person distinctions may be universal for pronouns, reflexive transformations are not universal for human language, but only for those languages where potential ambiguity for 3rd person pronouns occur -- non-three dimensional human languages, oral languages. The occurrence of reflexives in some sign languages may be a natural development or quite possibly may have occurred from contact with oral languages, probably in educational settings, since all previously researched sign languages have been used or passively accepted in some educational establishments, all of which have also been strongly concerned with teaching the oral language. If further sign language research in a variety of other communities shows reflexive forms only in those sign languages that have been used in or around educational settings, it seems reasonable

to accept the hypothesis that reflexives in sign languages are primarily the result of contact with oral languages, whose channels apparently demand reflexives to avoid ambiguity.

#### NOTES

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<sup>2</sup>As the term 'sketch' implies, this treatment is preliminary and far from complete. This paper does not cover such important areas as non-manual pronominalization and syntactic constraints on pronominalization and noun phrase deletion. The data that have been collected are unfortunately not yet sufficient for a treatment of these and other areas.

<sup>3</sup>G and L handshapes are not distinctive in PROVISL. B and 5 handshapes are not distinctive in PROVISL.

<sup>4</sup>This discussion does not cover constraints on non-human pronominalization, which may be different. For example, Washabaugh (1977) has pointed out that first person agents in PROVISL are deleted more frequently than second person agents, which are deleted more frequently than third person agents. Within third person agents, animate are deleted more frequently than non-animate agents.

<sup>5</sup>ASL and FSL, for example, use an A handshape (fingers closed into a fist, thumb extended up, palm contra) for reflexives.

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