Relative Clauses in German Sign Language: Extraposition and Reconstruction

Relative constructions are subject to typological variation (Keenan 1985). Parameters along which they may differ cross-linguistically include (a) use of head-internal vs. head-external constructions (e.g. Diegueño vs. English); (b) clausal vs. nominal relative construction (English vs. Turkish); and (c) availability of relative pronoun(s) (German vs. Japanese). However, as is commonly the case, the available typological investigations only consider spoken languages. In this paper, we shall present a syntactic analysis of relative constructions in German Sign Language (DGS) and we will illustrate, that sign languages may differ from each other at least with respect to the parameters (a) and (c).

We will first show how DGS relative constructions are realized and in how far their realization differs from the patterns that have been described for ASL. Relative clauses (RCs) in ASL are head internal. They are obligatorily marked by a nonmanual signal (eyebrow raise and backwards head tilt) which accompanies the head noun and spreads over the entire RC. Furthermore, they optionally contain a manual marker, the sign THATa, which follows the subject and functions as a relative conjunction (cf. Liddell 1978). As opposed to RCs in ASL, RCs in DGS are head-external and the use of a relative pronoun is obligatory. Consider the object relative clause (ORC) in (1a) where the RC which constitutes a prosodic constituent and is introduced by the relative pronoun REL-1 follows the head noun MANN (‘man’). Interestingly, DGS has two relative pronouns: while REL-1 is only used with animate referents, the pronoun REL-2 is obligatory with non-animate head nouns (1b). While the latter sign is phonologically identical to definite determiners and personal pronouns, the former is different in orientation. As opposed to REL-2, REL-1 includes the person classifier. A further contrast to ASL is that in DGS RCs are not marked by a non-manual signal. Rather, it is only the relative pronoun which is accompanied by a non-manual marker, namely topic marking (eyebrows up). We therefore assume that the DGS relative pronouns move from their base-position to a RC-internal topic position (i.e. Spec of TopP) where they check a topic feature and receive the nonmanual marking.

Secondly, we will consider syntactic properties of the DGS relative construction, in particular the possibility of extraposition. The basic word order in DGS is SOV. It turns out that ORCs are readily extraposed, this movement operation, however, being optional, as is illustrated in (1ac). This is in contrast to finite complement clauses (FCCs) which are obligatorily extraposed, as shown by the ungrammaticality of (2a). We adapt Büring & Hartmann’s (1995) analysis of extraposition in German. They claim that the reason for this distribution is an S-structure filter, which requires that finite sequences are not governed by the functional head Tense. Consequently, FCCs in DGS are extraposed and adjoined to TnsP. In contrast to that, extraposition is optional for ORCs, since the DP-shell containing the RC preserves it from government by Tns. In this respect, DGS patterns with German where FCCs, too, have to be extraposed while extraposition of ORCs is optional.

With respect to the extraposition of subject relative clauses (SRCs), however, DGS clearly differs from German. In German, extraposition of SRCs is possible with all kinds of intransitive predicates (3ab). By contrast, SRC extraposition with transitive predicates is much less acceptable when the intervening object NP is also accessible for the extraposed RC, cf. example (3c). In principle both arguments are accessible when they have the same gender feature. The unavailability of the SRC interpretation in (3c) can be related to a reconstruction effect at LF. It is generally assumed that extraposition, like all other instances of A’-movement, has to be reconstructed (Huang 1993). In example (3c), the subject, the object, and the relative pronoun are masculine. Hence, two possible D-structure positions are available for the extraposed RC, the object position der Mann and the subject position der Jungen. Since the direct object is closer to the extraposed RC, the structure based on reconstruction into object position is more optimal than the alternative structure with reconstruction into subject position. As a consequence, in (3c) the extraposed RC must be interpreted as an ORC. The assumption that we are in fact dealing with an intervention effect at S-structure is corroborated by the observation that the SRC interpretation in (3c) becomes more acceptable when the object is topicalized. Moreover, the SRC interpretation is also more acceptable, when subject and object differ in gender, as is illustrated in (3d). In contrast to German, DGS does not show this asymmetry between extraposed ORCs and SRCs. The examples in (4) illustrate that in DGS the relative pronoun always uses the R-locus which has been introduced for subject and object by their respective indexical signs, i.e. reference of relative pronouns in DGS is always unambiguous. Therefore, DGS RCs can easily be reconstructed into subject and object position and no preference for the ORC interpretation arises.
(1) Object relative clause (RP = relative pronoun)

a. INDEX₁ MANN (INDEX₃a) [REL-I₃a HUND STREICHEL] SEH
   I man INDEX RP dog stroke see
   ‘I see the man who is stroking the dog.’

b. INDEX₁ BUCH (INDEX₃a) [REL-2₃a INDEX₂ KAUF] KENN
   I book INDEX RP you buy know
   ‘I know the book that you bought.’

c. INDEX₁ MANN INDEX₃a SEH [REL-I₃a HUND STREICHEL]
   I man INDEX see RP dog stroke
   ‘I see the man who is stroking the dog.’

(2) Object complement clause

a. * INDEX₁ [MANN INDEX₃a HUND STREICHEL] WISS
   I man INDEX dog stroke know
   ‘I know that the man is stroking the dog.’

b. INDEX₁ t CP WISS [MANN INDEX₃a HUND STREICHEL] CP
   I know man INDEX dog stroke
   ‘I know the man who is stroking the dog.’

(3) Subject relative clause in German

a. Der Mann, der den Hund streichelt, lacht
   The.MASC man RP.MASC the dog strokes laughs
   ‘The man who is stroking the dog is laughing.’

b. Der Mann lacht, der den Hund streichelt
   The.MASC man laughs RP.MASC the dog strokes
   ‘The man who is stroking the dog makes the boy laugh.’

c. [Der Mann t₁] hat [den Jungen t₂] getroffen, [der den Hund streichelt] *₁/₂
   The.MASC man has the.MASC boy met RP.MASC the dog strokes
   ‘The man has met the boy who is stroking the dog’
   *‘The man who is stroking the dog has met the boy’

d. ? [Der Mann t₁] hat [die Frau t₂] getroffen, [der den Hund streichelt]₁/₂
   The.MASC man has the.FEM girl met RP.MASC the dog strokes
   ‘The man has met the girl who is stroking the dog’
   ?‘The man who is stroking the dog has met the girl’

(4) Subject/object relative clause in DGS

a. MANN INDEX₃a FRAU INDEX₃b MAG [REL-I₃a HUND STREICHEL]
   man INDEX woman INDEX like RP dog stroke
   ‘The man who is stroking the dog likes the woman.’

b. MANN INDEX₃a FRAU INDEX₃b MAG [REL-I₃b HUND STREICHEL]
   man INDEX woman INDEX like RP dog stroke
   ‘The man likes the woman who is stroking the dog.’

References


