

# Taking it PERSONally

The form and function of the case-marked pronoun OBJ-PRO in Swedish Sign Language

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## Introduction

Signed languages are often said to lack case-marking, even within the pronominal system.<sup>1,2</sup> An exception to this is the pronoun PRO<sub>[bc]</sub> used in Israeli SL.<sup>3</sup> However, more cases of case/agreement marking related to PERSON can be found in other SLs (see box on the right).

For instance, SSL features a sign, glossed as OBJ-PRO, that functions as an object case-marked pronoun. It is used by native signers of SSL, and has existed for at least 100 years. This study describes the sign's form and function, and possible grammaticalization path.

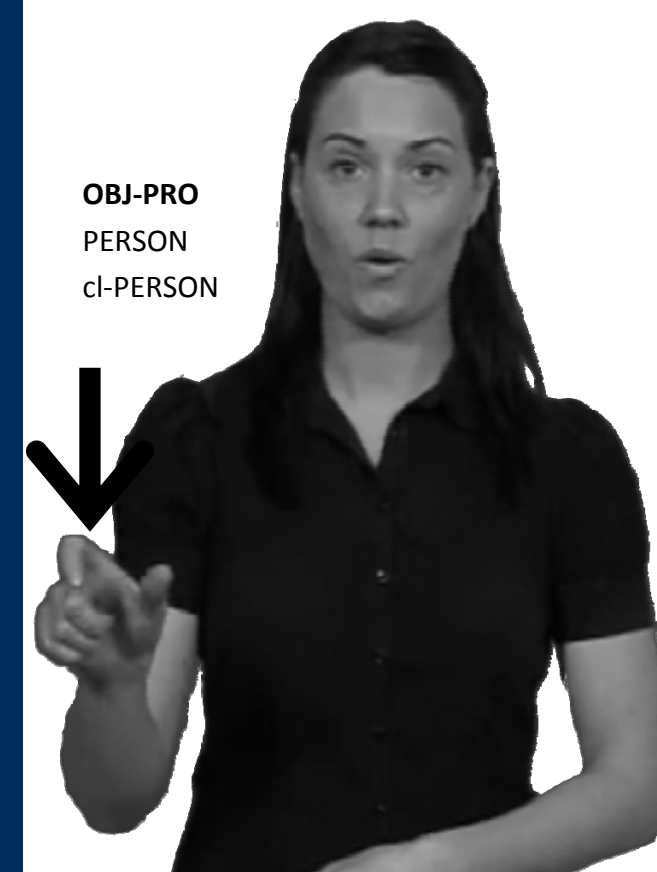
### SLs with case/agr marking related to the sign PERSON

- DGS<sup>4</sup>
- DSL<sup>5</sup>
- FinSL<sup>6</sup>
- FinSSL<sup>6</sup>
- GeSL<sup>7</sup>
- Israeli SL<sup>3</sup>
- LSC<sup>4</sup>
- NSL<sup>8</sup>
- ÖGS<sup>9</sup>
- SSL

## Form of the sign

OBJ-PRO is homonymous with PERSON, but directed in space toward its referent. Plural forms (only used for 1pl and 2pl) have a sideward/arc movement and are often oriented with a straighter wrist. Mouthings follow Swedish object forms, e.g. distinguishing gender in 3sg.

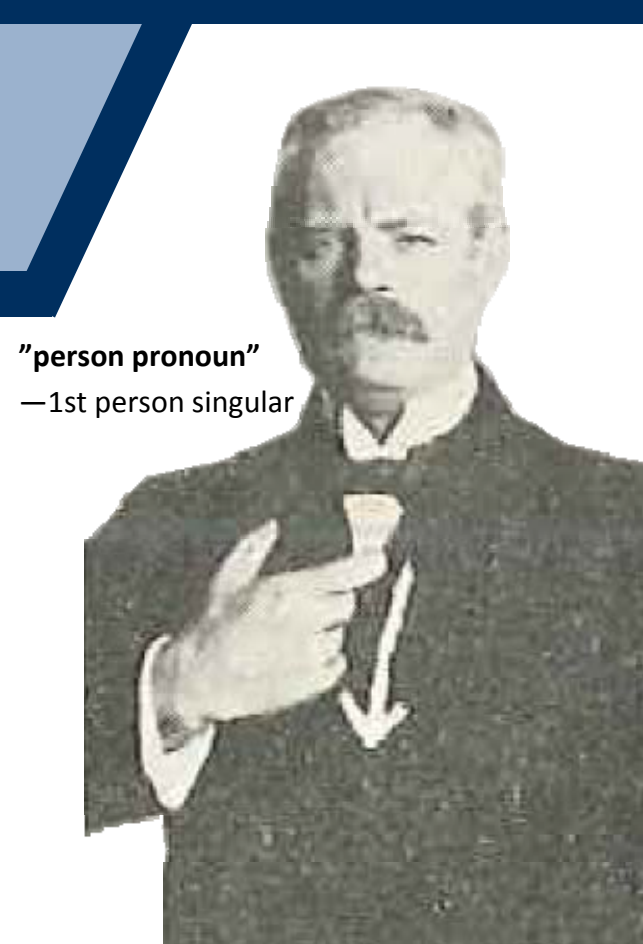
Another homonym, cl-PERSON, is used as a nominal classifier with human nouns.<sup>10</sup> PERSON and cl-PERSON may have a sideward movement for plural reference, but are not necessarily directed in space.



## History of the sign

The sign is listed already in the first SSL dictionary from 1916.<sup>11</sup> It is referred to as a "person pronoun" used for 1sg, 2sg and 3sg, alongside an index point. For plural reference, the index point alone is listed among the pronouns in the dictionary, then with a sideward/arc movement.

Although the sign is homonymous with PERSON, the sign PERSON is not listed in the 1916 dictionary, nor is it referred to with regard to the pronoun signs.



## Methodology and data

### Corpus

Data comprising 37 signers and 39,154 tokens from the SSL Corpus (SSLC)<sup>12</sup> were used. All tokens of OBJ-PRO (incl. directed/plural forms) as well as cl-PERSON were investigated with regard to form and function.

### Dictionary<sup>13</sup>

All example sentences with OBJ-PRO were investigated.

### Consultant

A native SSL signer (PSA) provided additional data.



## Results

### Functions of the sign

OBJ-PRO is used for a range of object-type roles, even with directional verbs (3), and in PPs (4).

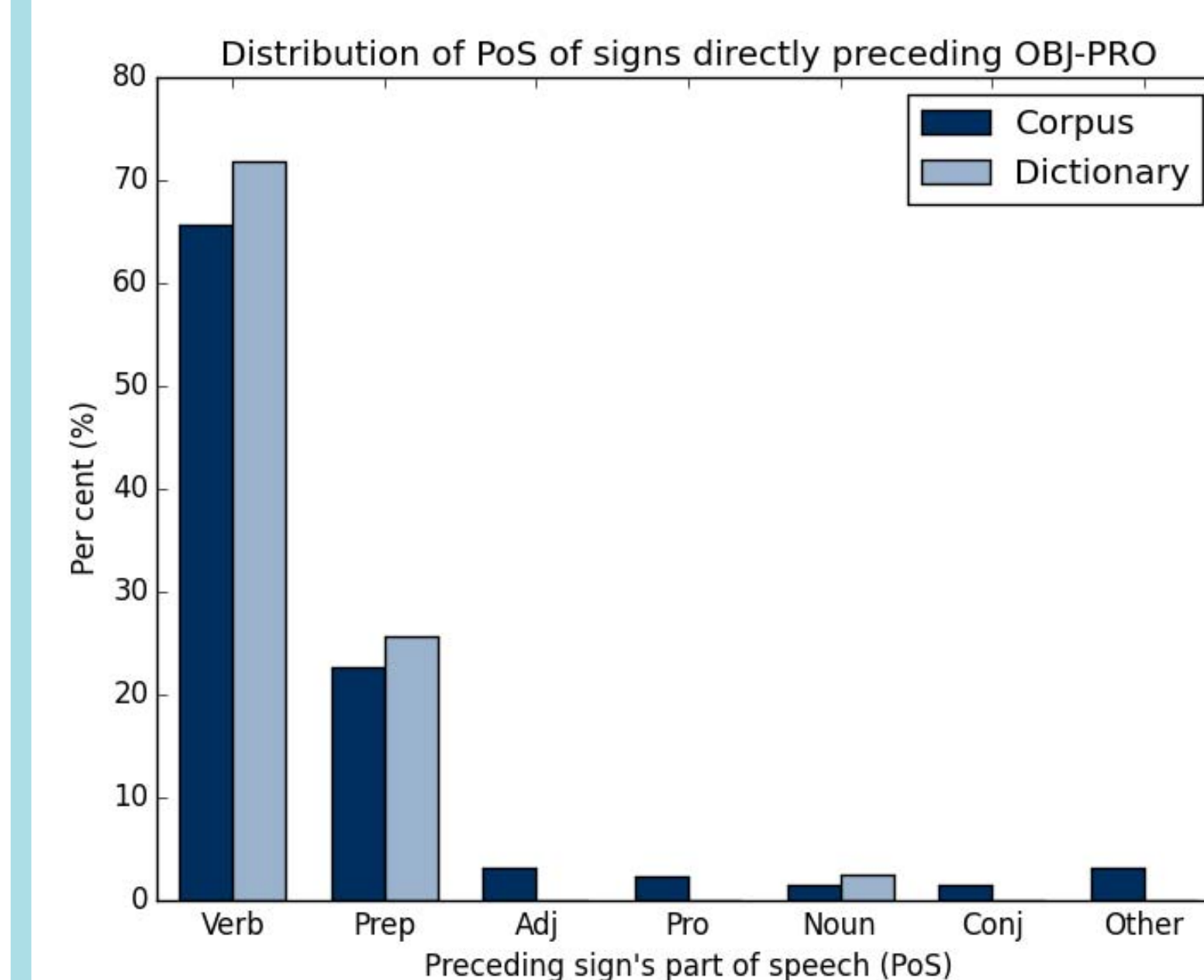
- 1) PRO MURDER OBJ-PRO  
'[...] they killed him [...]' (SSLC01\_085)
- 2) PRO-DEF TELL OBJ-PRO-1  
'[...] he told me [...]' (SSLC01\_366)
- 3) REASON <sub>1</sub>RECRUIT<sub>3</sub> OBJ-PRO-1  
'[...] because they recruited me.' (SSLC01\_103)
- 4) PRO-1 AGREE WITH OBJ-PRO-2  
'[...] I agree with you.' (SSLC01\_123)

OBJ-PRO is *not* used with [-human] referents (5) unless anthropomorphic, nor is it used with 3pl referents (compare 6 and 7).

- 5) \*POSS-2 DOG / PRO-1 SEE OBJ-PRO YESTERDAY  
'Your dog, I saw him/her/it yesterday.' (PSA, p.c.)
- 6) POSS-1 BOSS ORDER OBJ-PRO-1 WORK OVERTIME  
'My boss ordered me to work overtime (SSLD)
- 7) POSS-1 BOSS ORDER PRO-PLURAL WORK OVERTIME  
'My boss ordered them to work overtime (SSLD)

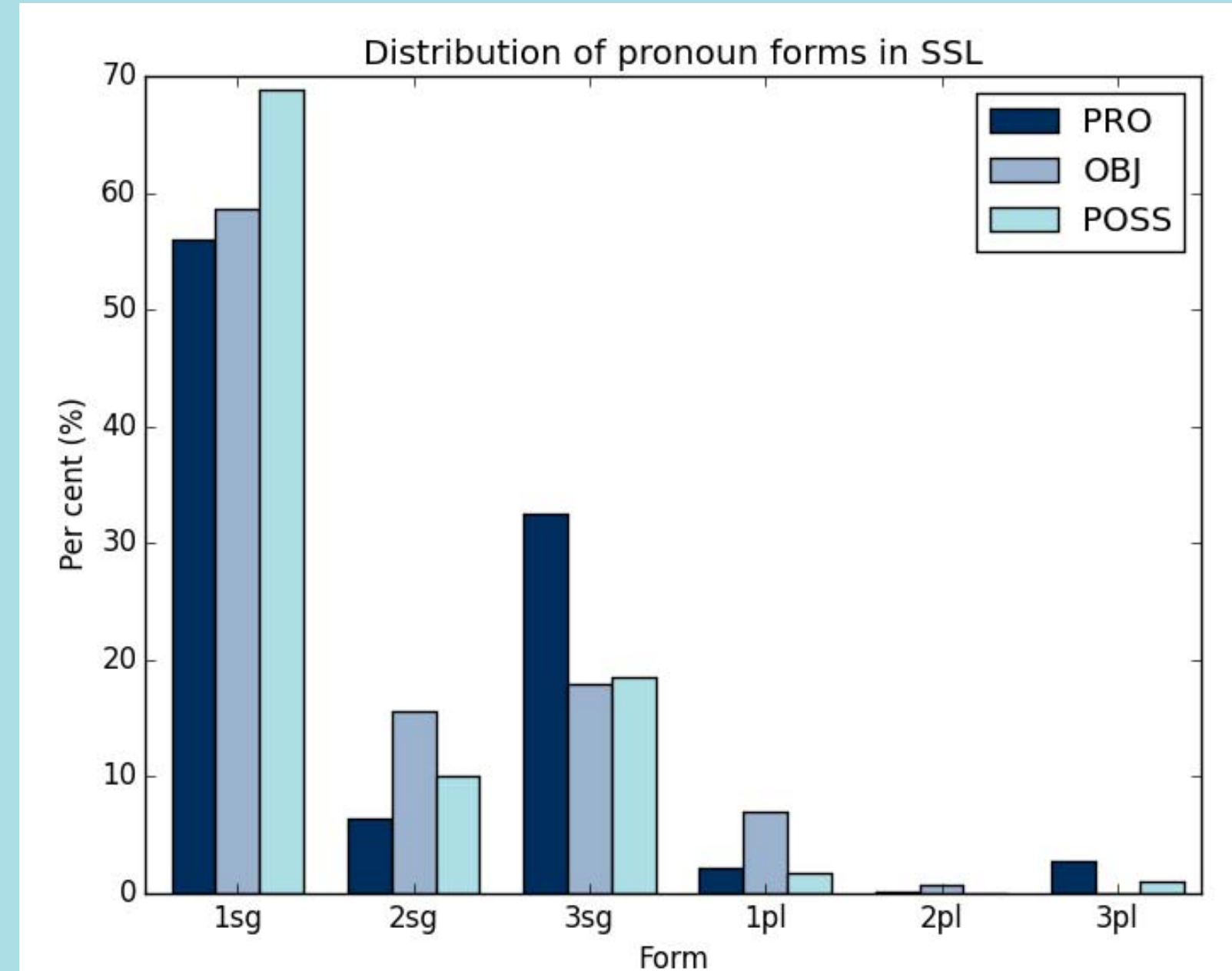
### Syntactic context

OBJ-PRO is most often preceded by a verb, either by itself or together with a preposition following the verb in calqued constructions from Swedish, e.g. indirect object phrases. This distributional trend is seen in both the corpus and the dictionary data.



### Distribution of forms

In the SSLC, the relative distribution of the forms of OBJ-PRO is similar to that of the pronoun signs PRO and POSS, with the exception that it is not used at all for 3rd person plural reference, and also that it is exclusively used with human referents.



### Mouthings

Of the 128 occurrences of OBJ-PRO in the SSLC, 86% had a Swedish mouthing

## Grammaticalization

### Has OBJ-PRO grammaticalized from cl-PERSON?

Looking at the 62 occurrences of cl-PERSON in the SSLC, most tokens are associated with a subject NP, but 14 tokens appear inside an object NP, such as:

MEET HEARING cl-PERSON+PLURAL  
'[...] meeting hearing people [...]' (SSLC01\_322)

If the head noun of the NP were to be dropped in such cases, the classifier could be reinterpreted as a pronoun, making PERSON > cl-PERSON > OBJ-PRO a possible grammaticalization path.

## Concluding remarks

### What are the most intriguing findings?

- The fact that OBJ-PRO is used exclusively for humans, and only with 1st and 2nd person in the plural, reflects prominence hierarchies known to affect case-marking.
- It is noteworthy that PERSON seems to be a common source of case/agreement marking in (European) SLs, judging from e.g. dictionary data from a variety of different SLs.
- PERSON > cl-PERSON > OBJ-PRO is a possible grammaticalization path, seeing as cl-PERSON is sometimes used with object-function NPs.

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