Accessibility and Space in Sign Language Discourse

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Background

• In a signed discourse, entities being talked about are localized in sign space. This location is used for coreferential purposes.
• There are doubts about the grammatical status of spatial locations since the location may depend on the actual position of present entities [LID].
• General assumption: For all instances of intended coreference within a discourse, signers pick up the same R-loci.

Main claims

• What is the status of spatial locations with respect to pronouns?
→ Locations are morphologically attached to links.
• How are locations associated with meaning?
→ Locations indicate an overt association with a discourse referent.
• How are R-loci set, given the dynamic nature of discourse?
→ Discourse accessibility of referents can override R-locus setting.

Spatial locations are morphologically part of the link and the overt manifestation of file-cards

Morphophonological function: links

• A point in space (p) is a form morphologically mapped with the semantic meaning individual (x) [WIL].
• Indexes are complex forms formed by the manual sign and the spatial morpheme.
• The spatial morpheme is part of the link, i.e. linguistic material which denotes a discourse referent [VAL].

Semantic function: file-cards

• Locations are associated with discourse referents (x) from the discourse model.
• They are the overt manifestation of a file-card, i.e. an abstract discourse referent where the information about the propositional content of the sentence is entered [HEI].
• The actual location is the link to a potentially infinite number of discourse referents (depending on the variables present in the discourse model).

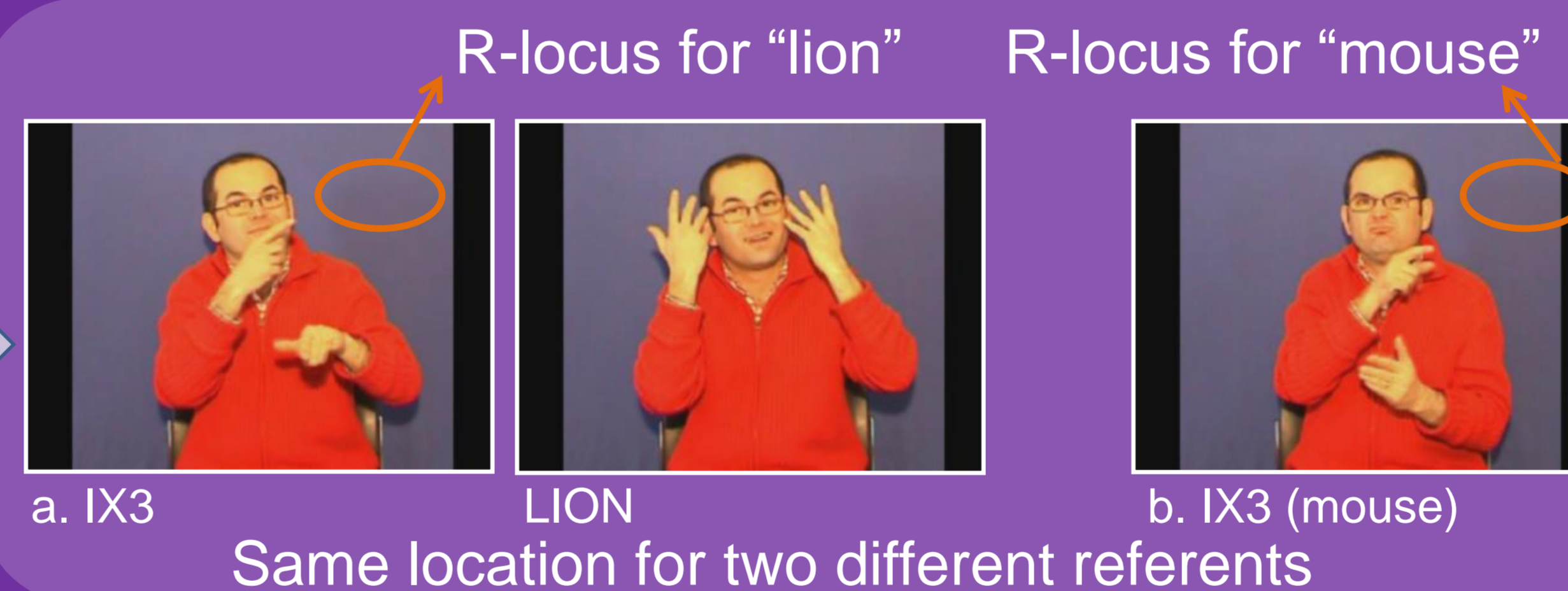## Accessibility

• Entities that enter the discourse are encoded differently according to their referential status. Referring expressions instruct the addressee to retrieve a certain piece of information from his consciousness by indicating how accessible (i.e. prominent) this piece of information is at the current stage of discourse [ARI].
• Form-function correlations based on overlapping criteria: More accessible entities are retrieved by emptier forms, i.e. less informative, less rigid, and more attenuated forms.
• Pronouns retrieve accessible entities, while definite descriptions retrieve non-accessible ones.

Based on annotated data in Catalan Sign Language (LSC)

Locations must be incorporated in an accessibility account

### 1. Little information load in locations
Two referents can be localized at the same side of sign space without affecting the propositional content of the sentence.
The interpretation is obtained due to accessibility reasons.

2. Few rigidity in locations
The same referent can appear at different sides in highly accessible contexts. Its R-locus can be shifted when the referent is accessible and it is the expression of the discourse topic [ASH].
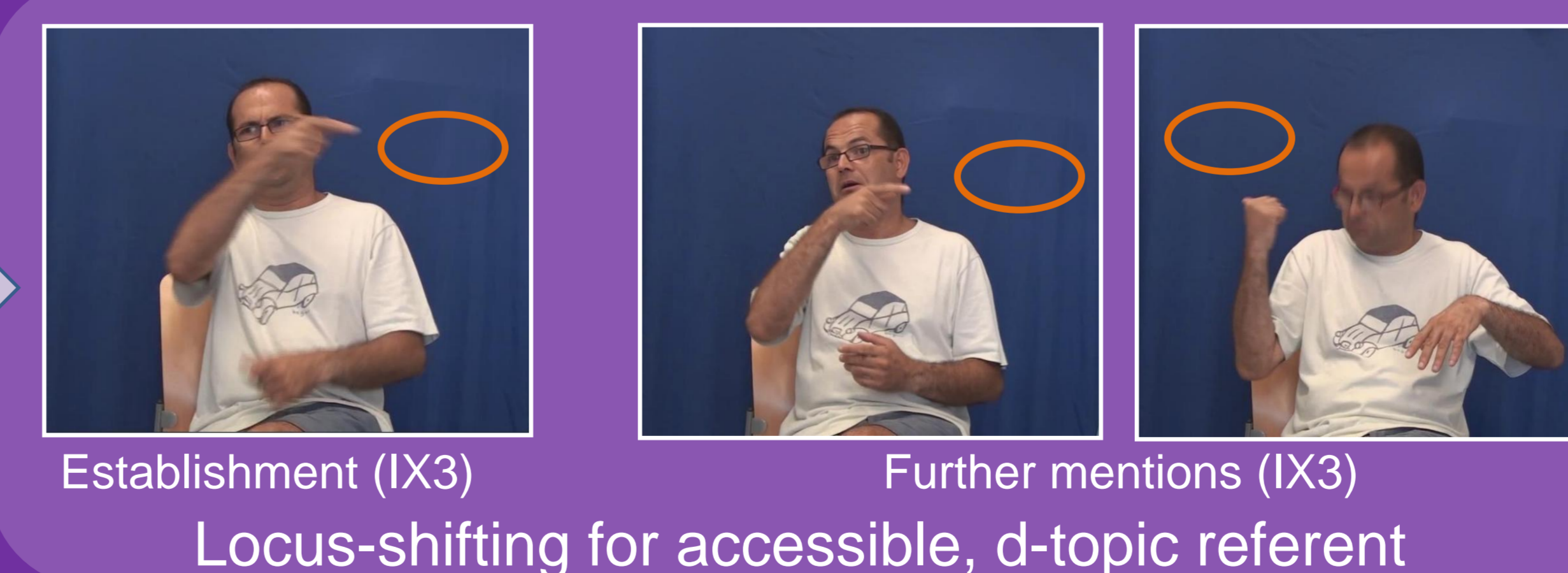
3. Attenuation in locations
Short and lax index signs are used when denoting accessible entities. The direction in space gets blurred and in anaphoric contexts indexes are directed to an area rather than to a point in space.

R-locus for "lion"   R-locus for "mouse"

a. IX3   LION   b. IX3 (mouse)

Same location for two different referents

SO MOUSE ALREADY 1-FAVOR-3lt IX3lt LION.
BEFORE 1-TELL PROMISE.
IMAGINE LION DIE ALMOST IX3lt 3lt-SAVE-3rt ABLE
"And so the mouse had favoured the lion.
Before he had promised so.
Imagine! The lion almost died,
but he (mouse) was capable to save him (lion)"

Establishment (IX3)   Further mentions (IX3)

Locus-shifting for accessible, d-topic referent

Index signs referring to the same discourse referent

Selected references

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