

Non-manual signaling of conceived time and experience in ASL discourse

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ASL has a category of verbs that depict events. During the production of these verbs, event components are construed as being present within the discourse setting. From the perspective of cognitive iconicity (Wilcox 2004; see also Taub 2001), this is made possible in part by construal operations involving the hands and movements within the phonological structure of these verbs. Aspects of the conceived event are consequently made visible and put “onstage” within the physical space inhabited by the signer’s body. The body here may also depict actions of an animate participant, being a “surrogate” (Liddell 1994), with the “constructed action” (Metzger 1995) occurring within a type of life-sized depiction labeled as “surrogate space” (Liddell 1994). Of main interest here are non-manual signals (NMS) that are key components of event depictions. They can be observed in “hand-face constructions” (Wilcox 2004), such as those glossed in (1) and (2).

- (1) [DRIVE]-th ‘Drive carelessly.’
(2) [STUDY]-mm ‘Study carefully.’

The NMS glossed as -th and -mm symbolize the manner in which the action is undertaken. They are also analyzed here as being linguistic components that function to indicate that an event is conceived of as if progressing within the discourse setting. This preliminary analysis is based on Langacker’s (1987) description of “conceived time” as an essential component of the semantic structure of verbs. Since, generally, it is through conceived time that energetic relationships are scanned or tracked, when the “hands-as-things” move, they also are necessarily tracked through this timespan. (1) and (2) also typically include facial expressions that depict the participant’s inner experience, which is one function of constructed action (Liddell and Metzger 1998). Analysis of ASL video data indicate not only a high frequency of such depictions of experience, but also variability in the degree to which the “signer as experiencing self” is manifested. In particular, the signer may use both eye gaze directionality and facial expression to depict a self being impacted by, say, something he is looking at. This depiction might be labeled as the “attending self.” However, the visibility of that self typically is reduced when eye contact with the addressee is re-established while the production of the non-manual expression continues. This is argued here to be a matter of construal pertaining to scope (Langacker 1987). Interestingly, similar non-manual expressions also are produced during the depiction of events without animate participants. These observations warrant an investigation of the use of non-manual signals in event depiction, which will be reported on in this presentation.

References

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