The grammaticalization of embodied action:
Is constructed action gesture or language?

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Constructed action in signed languages has been defined as reporting (usually via a demonstration) of another's actions. One issue that sign linguists often struggle with is the linguistic status of constructed action. On one hand, it is a common utterance type, especially in narratives, and is regarded by signers as the acceptable way to describe the actions of others, to be obligatory (Quinto-Pozos 2007). On the other hand, constructed action appears not to be describing at all — that is, rather than using language to describe an actor's actions, constructed action seems to be depicting those actions, and thus to be gesture and not language (Liddell & Metzger 1998).

In this paper, we will examine a range of constructed action utterances across signed languages, including data from American Sign Language, Italian Sign Language, Brazilian Sign Language, and Chinese Sign Language. We suggest that asking whether constructed action is gesture or language is the wrong question. Relying on a cognitive grammar (Langacker 2008) analysis of the data, we propose that constructed action is a schematic grammatical construction. This grammatical schema sanctions instantiations along a continuum, from more conventional depictions which have lexicalized as signs and thus appear fully linguistic, to more novel, multi-sign utterances which retain which retain their gestural quality. In each case, however, constructed action is an instantiation of a grammatical scheme and thus always a part of the grammar and fully linguistic. We also show that while constructed action may be a preferred way to report another's action, signers within the same language may use other, more conventional ways to express the same information.

References

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