

Signs are constructions

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Within construction grammar as a branch of cognitive linguistics, there is some debate about the status of single words in grammatical knowledge (e.g., Michaelis 2019, Goldberg 2019); are they also considered constructions? Moreover, within signed language linguistics, a structuralist division is often made between a "native" versus "non-native" lexicon, with the native lexicon including a further division between "core lexical" signs and "classifier" polymorphemic predicate signs (Brentari & Padden 2001). In both the construction grammar literature and in the sign linguistics literature, there is a question about how to best analyze the identifiable structure within words as single units.

We propose that by taking a Cognitive Construction Grammar approach, "lexical" signs can be viewed as constructions, and the variation of formal properties between signs analyzed as degrees of schematicity versus specificity. Focusing on formal and functional overlap among ASL signs, we identify families of constructions (Goldberg 2006, Bybee, 2010, Anible and Occhino 2014, Croft 2022) which have shared fixed parameters and variable schematic parameters.

Working with ASL examples collected from open online sources (Hou et al. 2020), we look at three constructions involving the two hands interacting. We identify a "transitive construction" which includes the signs PICK.ON and REMIND (Figure 1) that share a non-dominant handshape representing an argument of the verb (Dudis 2004, Janzen et al. 2001). In this sign the non-dominant hand is phonologically fixed. We also identify a "reciprocal construction" which includes the signs CHALLENGE and MEET (Figure 2) (Lepic et al. 2016, Lepic and Occhino 2018), in which the symmetrical movement of the dominant and non-dominant hands profiles the symmetrical interaction of two co-agents. In this sign, the hands share a phonological configuration, but the handshape value is itself schematic. We also observe degrees of schematicity in constructions: signs like WRITE and READ (Figure 3) represent a sub-family of transitive construction signs in which the non-dominant hand is a fixed handshape that depicts a flat written surface, a highly specified patient serving as the goal of the action.

Under this analysis, we view "lexical" signs as constructions with schematic internal structure. Instances of these signs reflect form-function mappings, and the constructions themselves are related to other larger families of constructions on the basis of these shared aspects of form and function. In this way, a construction-based approach leads to a uniform analysis of "monomorphemic" and "multimorphemic" signs. Rather than categorizing lexical signs as separate in kind from classifier constructions (or even categorizing "lexemes" as separate in kind from "grammatical constructions"), we suggest that grammatical knowledge exist on a continuum on which sign units form a network based on the degree to which they share fixed or schematic constructional slots.



Fig. 1: ASL transitive construction signs, in which one hand acts on the other: PICK.ON and REMIND (all images from <https://aslsignbank.haskins.yale.edu/>)



Fig. 2: ASL reciprocal construction signs, in which the hands move symmetrically: CHALLENGE and MEET



Fig. 3: ASL patient construction signs, in which one hand depicts a ‘written surface’: WRITE and READ

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