Perspective-taking, gesture spaces, and abstraction: What can signed languages contribute to cognitive linguistics?

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Some of the first published analyses of signed languages as actual languages were made over sixty years ago (e.g., Bernard Tervoort 1953 for Nederlandse Gebarentaal (NGT or Sign Language of the Netherlands); William Stokoe 1960 for American Sign Language (ASL)). While at first meeting some resistance from linguists and educators (note Charles Hockett's 1963[1966] language design feature that language is necessarily produced vocally), their acceptance in linguistics as full-fledged languages is now firmly established. This has a significant impact, however, on what we understand language to be: the articulation of language is not restricted to the vocal tract but can co-opt other body parts, including arms and hands, facial gestures and eye gaze, and head and body postures, which numerous studies have shown to contribute to phonological structure in principled ways (e.g., Brentari 1998), not unlike that for spoken language, modality differences notwithstanding.

To say simply that signed languages are expressed via multiple body parts is, however, grossly insufficient if we are to understand what language is and what signers are doing, and it brings us directly to cognitive linguistics to address this, with its interest in body actions underlying image schemas and primary metaphors, blended spaces, viewpoint, and gesture. For spoken language (gesture aside), viewpoint is often clearly understood but yet invisible, something conceptualized, ascertained within (spoken) language structure. For signers, where everything is expressed visibly through the body—which once again, we must keep in mind, is formally considered as the collection of language articulators—viewpoint has literal bodily expression and importantly, the signer's body exists in a conceptually malleable space.

This, then, raises a number of questions equally relevant for both signed and spoken languages. First, are some of the signer's intentional, communicative body actions linguistic and others not? While we might consider "viewpoint" as a broad category term, I use "perspective-taking" to identify when a signer adopts the physical or conceptual (often, abstract) perspective of a viewer on some sort of scene (Janzen, in preparation), frequently as enactments (Ferrara and Johnston 2014; Saunders and Parisot, in press) of story characters within narrative structure or demonstrations. Are these enactments linguistic or simply gestural (if gestural here implies non-linguistic)? Researchers have begun to identify principled patterns of use within enactments (Janzen 2022; Saunders and Parisot, in press), and given Kendon's (2004) and Enfield's (2009) view of composite utterances in spoken/gestured language, it appears we have to ask the same question of spoken language. Second, if perspective-taking in signed language is visible body action, and signers' bodies interact with the spaces surrounding them, what is the architecture of that body-space relationship? How is it conceptualized by the signer? And third, do speakers do what signers do? Afterall, speakers and signers have the same brains and the same bodies, so it seems reasonable to expect similarities in embodied cognition and embodied language. And in this, studies on signed language and those on gesture seem to be converging, especially within the domain of cognitive linguistics.

In this session, we examine some of the theoretical questions on viewpoint and perspective-taking in signed languages and studies that have revealed aspects of the nature of the body-space relationship (here note Sweetser, in press), and in so doing we can learn much about language and cognition. We also look at the participation of the body in speaker/gesturers' discourse, and suggest that modality differences may not be as great as they have appeared.

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