

Universality and Variation in Sign Language Comparatives

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*Spoken languages vary in strategies of comparison, sign languages do too!
How can sign languages enrich the typology of comparative expressions?*

Recent work by Wilbur, Abner, Wood, & Koulidobrova (2018), Kentner (2020), and Koulidobrova, Martinez Vera, Kurz, & Kurz (2023) discuss ASL in light of the typology of comparison expressions; we gain insight by separating the iconic comparison from other forms which vary cross-linguistically, as in spoken languages

Universality in the incorporation of co-sign gesture crosslinguistically

Some gradable predicates (e.g. TALL) express comparison iconically (Aristodemo & Geraci 2018). We observe a strong tendency across sign languages to incorporate co-speech gestures in order to express comparison involving iconic gradable predicates.

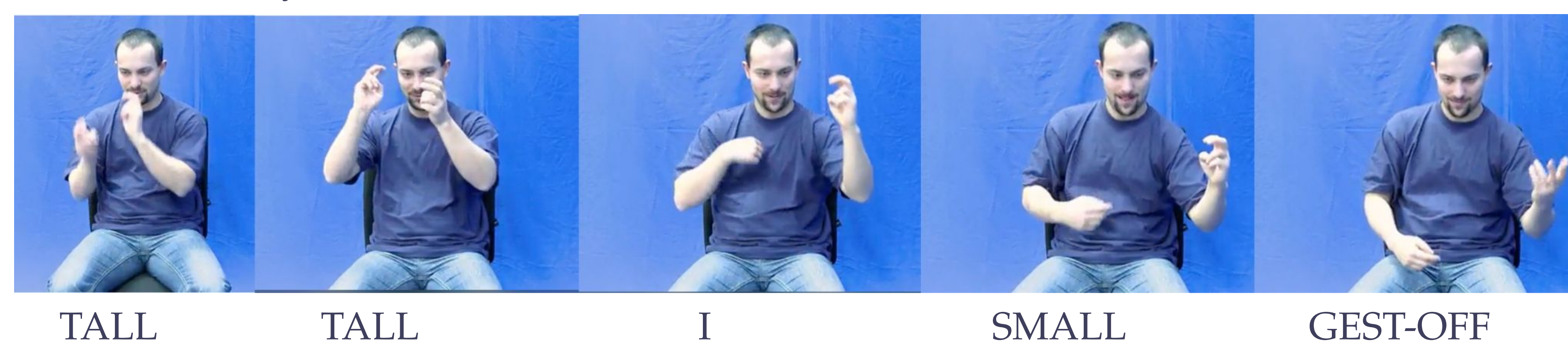
(1) ASL: "Mary is taller than Gianni"



(4) Spoken English with co-speech gesture : "Both Alex and Jo are tall, but Jo is very tall"



(2) DGS: "Everyone was taller than me, I was too short" (Konrad et al 2020)



Aristodemo and Geraci (2018) raise the intriguing idea that sign languages represent the abstract notion of a *degree* via these iconic comparatives with evidence from LIS (3).

Under this view, it is surprising that iconic expression is not more widespread across the lexicon (restricted to size and shape predicates like TALL). Moreover while comparison is expressed this way in SLs we also see similar expressions of comparison in spoken languages (4)

(3) LIS : "Maria is taller than Gianni. This one (Gianni's degree is 1m 70 and that one is 1m 80.)" (Aristodemo and Geraci 2018)

MAN TALL- α POS β WOMAN TALL β ICONIC-MORE γ . IX β 1 METER 70. IX γ . 1 METER 80

Variation in strategies of comparison

Stassen (2013) typology of comparative constructions in spoken languages

Locational comparatives
She is tall from him (eg. Hindi)

Exceed comparatives
She exceeds him in height (eg. Thai)

Conjoined comparatives
She is tall but he is short. (eg. Motu)

Particle comparatives
She is taller than him.(eg. French)

Sign language typology of comparative constructions

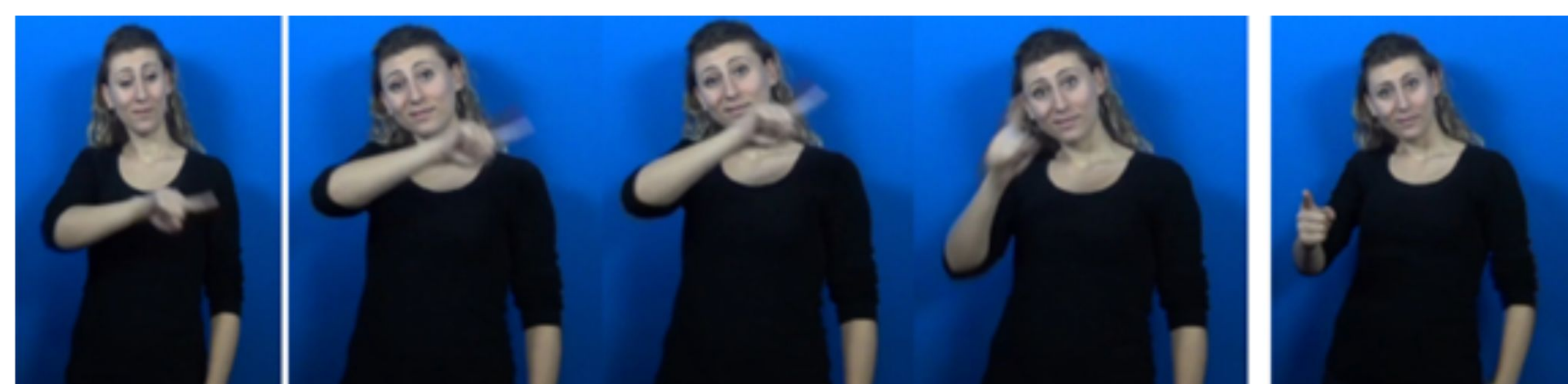
ARC comparatives

BEAT comparatives

Conjoined comparatives

Iconic comparatives
(see section above)

(5) TiD: ARC/ Locational comparative (Özsoy and Hünere (2018)



IX Standard ARC movement IX Comparee

(7) RSL: Conjoined comparative (Akesenov 2019)

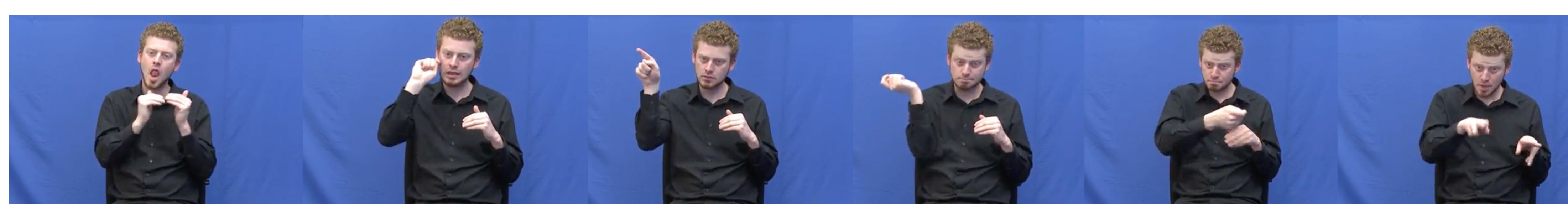


HOUSE TREE-HIGHER

Looking at sign languages, we naturally add iconic comparatives to the typology of comparative constructions.

We predict that this is available as a strategy across spoken and sign language, depending on the iconicity of the gradable predicate involved.

(6) DGS: BEAT comparative (discussed for ASL in Wilbur. et al. 2018, Kentner(2020), DGS data from Konrad et al 2020)



COMPARISON BERLIN THERE BERLIN TO-BEAT PARIS

However, sign languages show cross-linguistic variation in other non-iconic strategies of comparison, just as we see in spoken languages.

Existing literature notes BEAT comparatives as a strategy in ASL, we find similar constructions in DGS corpus data (6).

Discussion:

- To the extent that sign languages look similar and iconic in their expression of comparison for some especially iconic predicates, we propose that this is due to co-sign gestures. We see a similar phenomenon in spoken language with co-speech gesture (Thalluri and Davidson 2024, Proceedings of SuB28)
 - This approach to co-sign gesture can be extended beyond comparatives to other sign language phenomena as well (Thalluri and Davidson 2024, FEAST)
- To the extent that sign languages look different from each other, this variation in the linguistic expression of comparison seen in sign languages mirrors the kind of variation we seen in spoken languages in the expression of gradability (Beck et.al 2009). Languages allow multiple, non-iconic strategies of comparison!
 - Understanding the distribution/typology of these different expressions would make for interesting future work, building off existing work on RSL, LIS & TiD.
 - We see the basis for a typology based on the SLs presented here. Locational comparatives have been attested only in TiD. Meanwhile, we see BEAT strategy used in ASL and DGS, do we find it in other SLs, especially those related to LSF?