

Gradient and Iconic Features in ASL*

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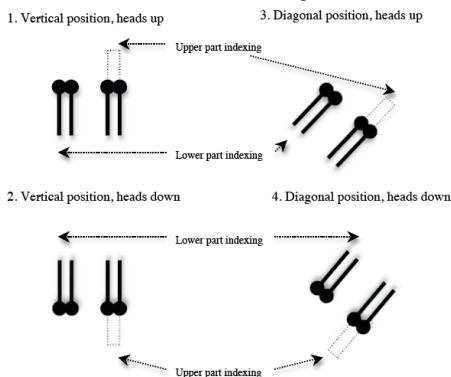
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September 28, 2013

In ASL and other sign languages, high loci can be used to refer to tall, powerful or important entities. It was argued in Schlenker et al. 2013 and Schlenker 2013 that in ASL (i) these features can have an iconic semantics, which requires the establishment of a structure-preserving map between some geometric properties of signs and some properties of their denotations; and that (ii) high features display the grammatical behavior of *phi*-features in being 'erasable' in ellipsis and focus-sensitive constructions. Iconicity and erasability were correlated in (1), where the elided VP (**boxed**) was taken to be copied from the antecedent VP (in **bold**), but with the high features erased, as these are incompatible with the intended denotation of the elided *SELF* (which refers to a short individual). It was further shown that iconicity was crucially involved: depending on the position of the individuals referred to, the classifiers were rotated as shown in (1), and the pronoun denoting a tall person indexed the upper part of a structured locus rather than a position that was invariably high in signing space.

- (1) HAVE TWO ROCKET PERSON [ONE HEIGHT]_a [ONE SHORT]_b. THE-TWO-a,b PRACTICE DIFFERENT VARIOUS-POSITIONS [positions shown]. IX-a HEIGHT IX-b SHORT, CL_a-[position]-CL_b-[position]. IX-a_upper_part LIKE SELF-a_upper_part. IX-b_lower_part NOT LIKE SELF-a_upper_part^{elided}.
 'There were two astronauts, one_a tall, one_b short. They trained in various positions [positions shown]. They were in [] position. The tall one liked himself. The short one didn't.'
 (17, 178; 17, 179; 17, 180; 17, 181) (Schlenker 2013)

Positions of the the two-finger person classifiers representing a short and a tall astronaut in various positions



Ratings on a 7-point scale (7 = best), from Schlenker 2013 (all the readings were bound variable)

1. Vertical, heads up	2. Vertical, heads down	3. Diagonal, heads up	4. Diagonal, heads down
6	5.5	6.5	6

While these data could suggest that high loci display a genuinely iconic semantics, there is an alternative interpretation (David Adger, p.c.): maybe the classifiers are responsible for the iconic and gradient effects we see in (1), while height specifications of loci only allow for a small number of discrete distinctions (e.g. high vs. low), computed *relative to the position of the classifier*. To control for this possibility, we explored examples in which (i) near-gradient height distinctions could be drawn, and (ii) iconic effects were displayed in the absence of any classifiers. Point (i) is established by (2), where the pronouns index 4 different heights. (2)c shows that these height specifications are 'erased' in the course of ellipsis resolution, for otherwise the elided occurrences of *SELF* taking IX-c and IX-a as antecedents would have the 'wrong' feature specifications – which in turn should yield deviance, as in the control sentence in (2)b ((2)a is a control with overt reflexives at the 'right' heights). Ratings were obtained by the 'playback method' (Schlenker et al. 2013, Schlenker 2013) from repeated judgments by a native ASL signer [Deaf child of Deaf, signing parents] on a 7-point scale, with 7 = best.

- (2) SHOW HAVE 4 GYMNAST STAND BAR ORDER HEIGHT.

a. *SELF* signed at various, appropriate heights

[6.3] IX-d PRESENT SELF-d WELL, IX-c MAYBE NOT PRESENT SELF-c WELL, IX-b UNCLEAR, IX-a DEFINITELY NOT PRESENT SELF-a WELL.

b. *SELF* signed at a constant, low height

[3.3] IX-d PRESENT SELF-d WELL, IX-c MAYBE NOT PRESENT SELF-c⁰ WELL, IX-b UNCLEAR, IX-a

DEFINITELY NOT PRESENT SELF-a⁰ WELL.

c. *SELF* signed low, only once (with ellipsis of the the second and fourth VPs)

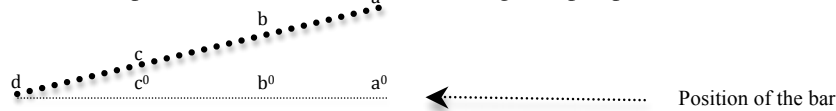
7 IX-d PRESENT SELF-d WELL, IX-c MAYBE NOT, IX-b UNCLEAR, IX-a DEFINITELY NOT.

=> bound variable reading

'During a show, four gymnasts were standing on a bar, ranked by height. One [a short one] presented himself well; the second [taller one] possibly didn't present himself well; for the third [still taller] one, it was unclear; and the fourth [still taller] one definitely didn't present himself well.'

(19, 253¹; 19, 254; 19, 265; 19, 282; 3 judgments)

Schematic representation of the loci from the signer's perspective



Point (ii) is established by the examples in (4), which are each comprised of four sentences, the second of which is analogous to (2)a, with four distinct height specifications. The third sentence establishes that the gymnasts operated a vertical rotation, and as a result the fourth sentence introduces additional heights below the position of the bar to represent the gymnasts in hanging position. It is safe to assume that these further heights are introduced because the new loci map the (upper part of) the bodies of the gymnasts in hanging position, as shown in our diagram. But although these height specifications are iconic, they also display the behavior of *phi* features in being in being 'erased' in the course of ellipsis resolution: unlike (4)b (= no ellipsis but wrong heights), (4)c is acceptable (and (4)a is a control with no ellipsis but with the 'right' heights).

(4) SHOW HAVE 4 GYMNAST STAND BAR ORDER HEIGHT.

IX-d PRESENT SELF-d WELL, IX-c MAYBE NOT, IX-b UNCLEAR, IX-a DEFINITELY NOT.

SUDDENLY ROTATION. WEIRD - NOW

a. *SELF* signed at various, appropriate heights

6.5 IX-d' PRESENT SELF-d' WELL, IX-c' MAYBE NOT PRESENT SELF-c' WELL, IX-b' UNCLEAR, IX-a' DEFINITELY NOT PRESENT SELF-a' WELL.

b. *SELF* signed at a constant, low height

3.5 IX-d' PRESENT SELF-d' WELL, IX-c' MAYBE NOT PRESENT SELF-c'⁰ WELL, IX-b' UNCLEAR, IX-a' DEFINITELY NOT PRESENT SELF-a'⁰ WELL.

c. *SELF* signed low, only once (with ellipsis of the the second and fourth VPs)

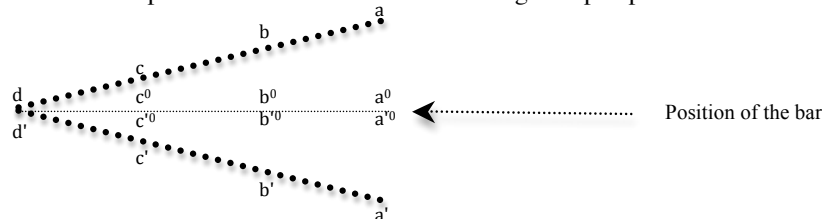
6.5 IX-d' PRESENT SELF-d' WELL, IX-c MAYBE NOT, IX-b UNCLEAR, IX-a DEFINITELY NOT.

=> bound variable reading

(19, 272; 19, 273; 19, 284. 2 judgments)

'During a show, four gymnasts were standing on a bar, ranked by height. One [a short one] presented himself badly; the second [taller one] didn't present himself badly; for the third [still taller] one, it was unclear; and the fourth [still taller] one definitely didn't present badly. Suddenly, they effected a vertical rotation. Oddly, now the short one presented himself well; the second one possibly didn't present himself well; for the third one, it was unclear; and the fourth one definitely didn't present himself well.'

Schematic representation of the loci from the signer's perspective



We conclude that ASL height specification of loci can display grammatical properties of *phi*-features while also having a highly iconic *and* gradient behavior.

¹ In each case, numbers of the form 19, 253; 19, 254; etc. refer to the videos in which the sentences were signed or the judgments recorded (the judgments were redundantly entered into a computer). The first pair of each series (here: 19, 253) refers to the video in which the sentence was signed.

References

- Schlenker, Philippe, Lamberton, Jonathan and Santoro, Mirko: 2013, Iconic Variables. *Linguistics & Philosophy* 36, 2, 91-149.
- Schlenker, Philippe: 2013, Iconic Features. Manuscript, Institut Jean-Nicod and New York University.

*Main ASL consultant for this article: Jonathan Lamberton.

Special thanks to Jonathan Lamberton, who has provided exceptionally fine-grained data throughout this research, and provided the transcriptions of the ASL videos; his contribution as a consultant has been considerable. Many thanks to David Adger for raising a question that led to this short piece. The present work was supported an Advanced Grant from the European Research Council (FRONTSEM). The ERC is not responsible for any claims made here. The research reported in this piece also contributes to COST Action IS1006.