

# Gradient and Iconic Features in ASL\*

Philippe Schlenker

(Institut Jean-Nicod, CNRS; New York University)

July 10, 2014  
To appear in *Snippets*

We argue that ASL 'high' loci can simultaneously display a behavior which is:

- (i) iconic [= loci may stand in geometric relations that reflect the geometric arrangement of their denotations];
- (ii) quasi-gradient [= when two loci are interpreted iconically, a third one can be 'sandwiched' between them, with the expected interpretation];
- (iii) *phi*-feature-like [= height specifications can be disregarded – possibly under agreement – by ellipsis and focus-sensitive constructions];
- (iv) irreducible to the behavior of co-occurring and possibly non-featural elements, such as classifiers.

Schlenker et al. 2013 and Schlenker 2013 established points (i) and (iii), but not points (ii) and (iv).<sup>1</sup>

In (1), the pronouns index 4 different heights that reflect the height of [the heads of] their denotations, which begins to establish Points (i) and (ii). (1)c shows that these height specifications are disregarded in the course of ellipsis resolution, for otherwise the elided occurrences of *SELF* taking *IX-b* and *IX-d* as antecedents would have the 'wrong' feature specifications – which in turn should yield deviance, as in the control sentence in (1)b, which contrast with (1)a; this establishes Point (iii), and the absence of classifiers establishes Point (iv). Acceptability ratings were obtained by the 'playback method' from repeated judgments by a native ASL signer [Deaf child of Deaf, signing parents] on a 7-point scale, with 7 = best.<sup>2</sup>

## (1) SHOW HAVE 4 GYMNAST STAND-CL BAR ORDER HEIGHT.

a. *SELF* signed at various, appropriate heights

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

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

3.2 IX-a PRESENT SELF-a WELL, IX-b MAYBE NOT PRESENT SELF-b<sup>0</sup> WELL, IX-c NOT CLEAR, IX-d DEFINITELY NOT PRESENT SELF-d<sup>0</sup> WELL.

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

7 IX-a PRESENT SELF-a WELL, IX-b MAYBE NOT, IX-c NOT CLEAR, IX-d 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.'

Schematic representation of the loci from the signer's perspective



The first sentence of (2) is analogous to (1)a. The third sentence establishes that the gymnasts operated a vertical rotation, hence *additional* heights, but now below the position of the bar – which reinforces Points (i) and (ii); Points (iii) and (iv) are preserved as in (1).

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

IX-a PRESENT SELF-a BAD, IX-b MAYBE NOT, IX-c NOT CLEAR, IX-d DEFINITELY NOT.

SUDDENLY STAND-CL HANG-CL. WEIRD - NOW

<sup>1</sup> The crucial examples involved 3 levels only [high, normal, low], as well as classifiers in various positions, which could be taken to be responsible for the iconic effects that we observed.

<sup>2</sup> References of the videos in which sentences were signed and assessed: (1) = 19, 253; 19, 254; 19, 265; 19, 282; 19, 293 (4 ratings). (2) = 19, 272; 19, 273; 19, 284; 19, 294 (3 ratings)

a. *SELF* signed at various, appropriate heights

6.3 IX-a' PRESENT SELF-a' WELL, IX-b' MAYBE NOT PRESENT SELF-b' WELL, IX-c' NOT CLEAR, IX-d' DEFINITELY NOT PRESENT SELF-d' WELL.

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

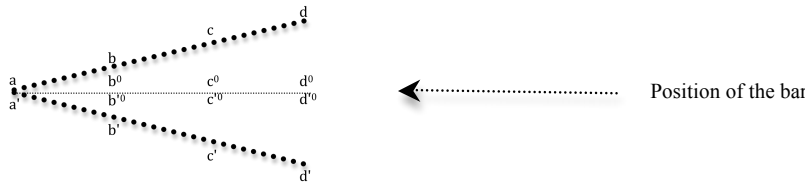
3.7 IX-a' PRESENT SELF-a' WELL, IX-b' MAYBE NOT PRESENT SELF-b<sup>0</sup> WELL, IX-c' NOT CLEAR, IX-d' DEFINITELY NOT PRESENT SELF-d<sup>0</sup> WELL.

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

6.3 IX-a' PRESENT SELF-a' WELL, IX-b' MAYBE NOT, IX-c' NOT CLEAR, IX-d' DEFINITELY NOT.

=> bound variable reading

'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.'



Arguably, then, height specifications of loci display grammatical properties of *phi*-features and a highly iconic/gradient behavior.

## References

- Schlenker, Philippe, Lamberton, Jonathan and Santoro, Mirko: 2013, Iconic Variables. *Linguistics & Philosophy* 36, 2, 91-149.
- Schlenker, Philippe: to appear, Iconic Features. To appear, *Natural Language Semantics*.

---

**\*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 and checked 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 research leading to these results received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP/2007-2013) / ERC Grant Agreement N°324115–FRONTSEM (PI: Schlenker). Research was conducted at Institut d'Etudes Cognitives (ENS), which is supported by grants ANR-10-IDEX-0001-02 PSL\* and ANR-10-LABX-0087 IEC. The research reported in this piece also contributes to COST Action IS1006.