Youngju Choi
Chosun University, Gwangju, Republic of Korea

Composite Utterances and Perspective Blending in Korean Sign Language Narratives

Introduction: Recent developments in cognitive linguistics have highlighted that linguistic meaning involves not only symbolic reference but also depictive strategies that simulate experience. Notably, Clark & Gerrig (1990), Clark (2016) propose that quotations function as demonstrations, and Verhagen (2021, 2023) argues that utterances often combine symbolic description with iconic depiction, forming composite utterances. These theories show how speakers embed performative elements—such as gestures, prosody, and embodied enactments—to simulate a character's voice or emotion. While such insights have been extensively explored in spoken language, they remain underapplied to sign languages, where the division between manual and nonmanual articulators structurally foregrounds this symbolic-iconic integration. This study addresses that gap by applying Verhagen's depiction theory to Korean Sign Language (KSL) narratives, focusing on how composite utterances and perspective blending are realized in signed storytelling.

Research Methodology: This study analyzes a Korean Sign Language retelling of *The Lion and the Mouse,* performed by a native Deaf signer as part of a project supported by Korea Disability Arts & Culture Center. The performance was segmented into key narrative scenes, and still frames were extracted to examine manual and nonmanual articulators. Each frame was coded for: (i) symbolic description, (ii) iconic depiction, (iii) perspective orientation (narrator vs. character), and (iv) utterance structure (depiction alone, description alone, or composite co-presence). This approach allows for a systematic application of Verhagen's theory within the visual-gestural modality of KSL, focusing on how symbolic and iconic strategies combine and how perspective is maintained, altered, or blended.

Analysis: The analysis of Korean Sign Language (KSL) narrative performance reveals a range of strategies through which signers construct composite utterances and manage perspective blending. This abstract introduces four particularly illustrative types that demonstrate how KSL integrates symbolic and depictive resources to express meaning and viewpoint simultaneously. First, scenes of pure iconic depiction rely solely on facial expression and bodily enactment without symbolic signs, as shown in (1). Second, instances of symbolic description make use of conventional classifier constructions to encode referents and their spatial relations, as shown in (2). Third, split-modality perspective blending occurs when the signer's hands represent one character's actions while the face conveys another character's emotional stance, as shown in (3). Finally, in fused perspective blending, both hands depict different character roles within a single construction, while the face reinforces one of the character's internal states, as shown in (4). These strategies illustrate how the visual-gestural modality of sign languages enables layered, multidimensional utterances. The simultaneous deployment of manual and nonmanual articulators allows for fine-grained coordination between external action and internal experience, making KSL an especially revealing site for exploring how meaning and viewpoint co-emerge through multimodal interaction.

Conclusion: By applying the theory of composite utterances to signed narratives, this study shows that Korean Sign Language (KSL) does not merely illustrate but fully embodies the layered communicative architecture theorized by Verhagen and others. The division between manual and nonmanual articulators, combined with spatial structuring and embodied simulation, allows signers to orchestrate symbolic description, iconic depiction, and perspective-taking simultaneously—not sequentially. This enables immediate and dynamic shifts between characters, perspectives, and emotional stances, often within a single utterance. This capacity for concurrent viewpoint construction is far more structurally explicit in signed languages than in speech, making KSL and other sign languages not just compatible with the depiction-based model of meaning, but crucial empirical grounds for understanding how meaning, embodiment, and viewpoint interact in real-time communication.

(1) pure iconic depiction

The signer enacts the mouse's desperate plea for mercy using only facial expression and bodily enactment, without any conventional signs or classifiers. This moment exemplifies pure iconic depiction, where meaning is conveyed entirely through resemblance and embodied performance.

(2) symbolic description
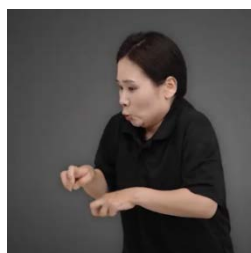
The signer uses a conventional classifier handshape to represent the cautious movement of a small animal, symbolically describing the mouse's retreat from the lion. While the facial expression may contribute to iconic simulation, the primary communicative strategy here is symbolic, relying on established classifier constructions to convey referential meaning.

(3) split-modality perspective blending

The signer's facial expression iconically simulates the mouse's fear and desperation, while the hands use classifier constructions to symbolically describe the lion's approaching claws (left) and gaping jaws (right) as viewed by the audience. This co-presence of symbolic description and iconic depiction illustrates perspective blending, in which two distinct viewpoints—external narration and character embodiment—are simultaneously enacted within a single utterance.

(4) fused perspective blending
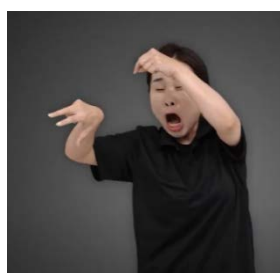
The signer's nondominant hand represents the lion gripping the mouse's tail, while the dominant hand shows the mouse's legs flailing—both expressed through classifier constructions. These coordinated movements encode two character perspectives simultaneously within the manual channel. Meanwhile, the facial expression iconically depicts the mouse's fear and desperation, resulting in a fully fused enactment of both viewpoints within a single utterance.

Selected References

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