Talking about boys, dogs and frogs in the visual modality: using narrative to study Deaf people’s extended sign language

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Sign language research requires study of all the articulators working together.
Classifiers

‘G’- Pencil, person

‘5’ Permeable objects – tree, fence

‘B’ Surface contact vehicles – car, bike

‘V’ person postures – stand, jump

‘Y’ Bird, plane, helicopter

‘Bent V’ – small animal
Multiple perspectives

‘..person like wow, falls from the tree…’

*Shifted Referential Space + Fixed Referential Space*
Perspective chaining

Topological relations stimuli (M. Bowerman)

‘A hole in a towel’

BSL
TREE CL-G CL-G
TREE THIN-CONNECTED-LINE
LINE PEG-CONNECTED-LEFT-RIGHT
PEG-LEFT TOWEL PEG CL-B
TOWEL HOLE CL-F-ON-CL-B

‘there are two trees here and there and between the them there is a thin rope, on the rope there is a towel pegged here and there and on it in the middle there is a hole’
Discourse preferences

• In extended stretches of information transfer, sign languages prefer **pragmatically heavy forms** requiring inference from **previous discourse** to build up **shared reference**

• The way to study the richness of sign languages is through **discourse**
• So why is discourse analysis a minority subject compared with phonology, syntax and morphology?
• Complexity – so much is unknown: role shift, space, facial expressions, eye gaze…and combinations of all of these

• Transcription methods?
// £ DOG JUMP-UP++ TRY CATCH HIVE FALL

BOY NO-SEE £ LOOK-RIGHT SHOCKED
Impact

• Do we study sign languages in isolation from advances in spoken linguistic and gesture research domains?
• Or show how linguistic theory in general will benefit from sign language research?

• Beyond description to theoretically motivated research questions that are resonant and relevant for general linguistics
Discourse

• Connected set of utterances, beyond the sentence

• Politics, dialogue, text, rhetoric, lectures, narrative

• Anaphoric reference, organisation of plot cohesion and local event cohesion

• What are the linguistic devices at work under the control of a pragmatic system?
• Plot and local cohesion
Capturing anaphoric reference

…and the dog has lost some interest and has found something new to look at which is a beehive which he starts barking at um - while he's still barking at the beehive…
//£ DOG JUMP-UP++ TRY CATCH HIVE FALL

BOY NO-SEE £ LOOK-RIGHT SHOCKED
• Sign languages use space anaphorically and recycle space continually – how do you capture this in a gloss? How we transcribe allows us to see mechanisms at work
Sign Language narratives

Types of narrative – anecdote, picture elicitation, video all produce different structures
Cohesion

1. Pronominal points to space

DOG                                       POINT        DOG-LOOKS-AT-HIVE
2. Anaphoric use of sign space

BOY-LOOKS-THERE

WASPS

WASPS-SWARMING

TREE

BOY-LOOKS-IN-TREE-HOLE
3. Pragmatic saliency hierarchy of reference forms

High --------------------------------------------Low

Noun Phrase  Direct-discourse (Role-shift)  Classifiers (PROFORMS)
3. Pragmatic saliency hierarchy of role-shift reduces through the discourse

High  -----------------------------Low

role-shift
Study 1- Development of referencing

• Forms and functions
• Introduction, Reintroduction Maintenance
• Maxim of quantity: Do not make your contribution more informative than is required (Grice, 1967)
4 years

Information loss
10 years

More information with over-detail at local level
3. Saliency hierarchy of reference forms

High --------------------------------------------Low

Noun Phrase  Direct-discourse (Role-shift)  Classifiers (PROFORMS)
Full noun phrases

nouns

- intro
- reintro
- maint

% use

- 4-6 yrs
- 7-10 yrs
- adult

- 0
- 20
- 40
- 60
- 80
- 100
Role shift

% use

intro reintro maint

4-6 yrs 7-10 yrs adults

Role shift

role shift

4-6 yrs 7-10 yrs adults
Study 2 Comparison of direct discourse signing/speech
Direct discourse

(Galvan & Taub ASL; Hoiting & Slobin ASL and SLN)

Virginia Marchman – adult English Frogs in Childes
Morgan, 1998 Adult BSL frogs
and the dog is - is shaking the tree where the beehive is connected to. while the boy { wan - } climbs on top of the tree and starts yelling in a hole for the frog /
and the dog is - is shaking the tree where the beehive is connected to. while the boy { wan } climbs on top of the tree and starts yelling in a hole for the frog /
Study 3 - Adult signers with Ushers syndrome

- Tunnel vision starting in ‘teens’ onwards
- Difficult to understand for interpreters
- Use of reference and sign space?
Results

Scenes mentioned (maximum 24)

Classifiers

Switches between characters on face

NO DIFFERENCES
Points to sign space

Character & object placement in sign space

DIFFERENCES: Makes reference unclear
Overall conclusions

• Complexity of understanding signed discourse requires complex methods, theory and knowledge

• Kearsy Cormier & Sandra Smith: spectrum of uses of spaces

• Johanna Mesch: subtle interconnected conversation and role of pragmatics
Go beyond description to theoretically motivated research questions that are resonant and relevant for general linguistics