



Who's on First? Investigating the referential hierarchy in simple native ASL narratives[☆]

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Received 20 October 2014; received in revised form 31 March 2016; accepted 31 March 2016
Available online 6 May 2016

Abstract

Discussions of reference tracking in spoken languages often invoke some version of a referential hierarchy. In this paper, we asked whether this hierarchy applies equally well to reference tracking in a visual language, American Sign Language, or whether modality differences influence its structure. Expanding the results of previous studies, this study looked at ASL referential devices beyond nouns, pronouns, and zero anaphora. We elicited four simple narratives from eight native ASL signers, and examined how the signers tracked reference throughout their stories. We found that ASL signers follow general principles of the referential hierarchy proposed for spoken languages by using nouns for referent introductions, and zero anaphora for referent maintenance. However, we also found significant differences such as the absence of pronouns in the narratives, despite their existence in ASL, and differential use of verbal and constructed action zero anaphora. Moreover, we found that native signers' use of classifiers varied with discourse status in a way that deviated from our expectations derived from the referential hierarchy for spoken languages. On this basis, we propose a tentative hierarchy of referential expressions for ASL that incorporates modality specific referential devices.

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Keywords: Sign languages; Referent tracking; Referential hierarchy; Spatial coherence; Discourse; American Sign Language (ASL)

1. Introduction

Sign languages, including American Sign Language, use the visual-manual modality for their production and perception. Since the beginning of sign language research, much work has explored the phonology, morphology, and syntax of visual languages (Klima and Bellugi, 1979; Sandler, 1986, 2003; Padden, 1988; Brentari, 1992; Engberg-Pedersen, 1993; Bahan, 1996; Neidle et al., 2000; Lillo-Martin, 1986, 2005; Johnston and Schembri, 2007; Meir and Sandler, 2007; Perniss, 2007; Lillo-Martin and Meier, 2011; Crasborn et al., 2012). All this work has revealed language structure that in many ways bears a strong resemblance to structures found in spoken languages – evidence that signed languages are natural languages on par with spoken languages. In addition, researchers investigating sign languages have uncovered in these languages a range of more exotic and often modality specific uses of language, such as employing facial expressions for grammatical modifications, and using space for morpho-syntactic processes. Linguistic

[☆] We owe this phrase to a well-known baseball comedy routine by Abbott & Costello (first aired on the radio in 1938) where the comic elements arise from referent tracking confusion.

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domains such as semantics and pragmatics, however, have received comparatively little attention (Davidson, 2013, 2014, but see Engberg-Pedersen, 1993 for an exception). This is also the case for the study of discourse, perhaps particularly in ASL where many researchers have focused more on phonological and syntactic topics (although see Wilbur, 2012 for a discussion of work related to the discourse notions of topic and focus). The goal of the present paper is to expand our knowledge of discourse structure in one signed language by investigating the choices of referential expressions used throughout narratives in ASL. Our goal is to understand how ASL signers use the various forms of reference available to them to track reference in simple narratives and what discourse constraints these forms are subject to. Before describing the details of the present study, we first provide a selective overview of what is known about referential expressions in ASL.

2. Referential expressions in ASL

ASL signers use the hands, face and body for articulation and the eyes for perception of their language. Using the visual-manual modality, signers have access to some different linguistic devices than do speakers using the aural-oral modality. All lexical signs are of course articulated in the space surrounding the signer, or on the signer's body, but in addition, many grammatical processes rely on relative locations in this space. For example, locations in sign space can be assigned referential value in connection with predicates as well as nominals throughout the discourse (Klima and Bellugi, 1979; Lillo-Martin, 1995). To understand how signers manipulate spatial locations along with other referring expressions to construct coherent discourse, we must first consider the range of referential expressions available in ASL, starting with nominal reference, i.e. nouns and pronouns, then continuing on to reference implicit in verbs and other predicate-like expressions, i.e. constructed action, and ending with classifiers.

2.1. Nominal reference

ASL makes use of space for nominal referential purposes. This process is perhaps best explained in a description of ASL pronouns. Anaphoric pronouns are points to referential loci, that is, locations in signing space that have previously been associated with a referent. Due to the gradient nature of spatial loci, ASL can in theory distinguish an unlimited number of spatial loci, each with its specific reference (Lillo-Martin and Klima, 1990). In practice though, this process is constrained such that distinguishing more than 2 or 3 loci at once is rare (Lillo-Martin and Meier, 2011).

Spatial loci also come into play in connection with nouns, which are also used for referential purposes. As opposed to English, ASL makes widespread use of bare nouns (Sandler and Lillo-Martin, 2006: 341). With bare nouns, context is used to determine the givenness or accessibility of the referent of the noun in question. Although most nouns are lexical signs, some nouns are conventionally spelled using the hand alphabet, and other typically signed nouns may be fingerspelled at times. Be they signed or fingerspelled, nouns in ASL may occur with spatial modification. For instance, a signer may produce a point to a location in space either preceding or following a noun. Under some analyses of ASL, a point followed by a noun has been treated as a definite noun phrase, meaning that the point is analyzed as a determiner. In contrast, under the same analysis a point to a location in space occurring after a noun is not considered a determiner, but an adverbial specifying location (Neidle et al., 2000). However, the status of pre- and post nominal points is still under debate (see Meier and Lillo-Martin, 2013 for a brief overview), and the use of points in combination with nouns is possibly entirely optional in ASL, although there has been very little systematic investigation of the matter (but see Swabey, 2002, 2011).

For the purposes of this paper, we also consider as types of nominal reference nouns that are modified by a classifier, either post-nominally as in Fig. 1, or pre-nominally as in Fig. 2. In addition to localizing referents in space with pointing signs, ASL allows for articulating the noun in a specific space, which serves the same purpose. However, because we observed only two instances of this strategy in our data, we will not discuss it further. We turn now to reference implicit in predicates.

2.2. Reference implicit in predicates

Nominal references, such as the nouns and pronouns discussed above, are frequently omitted in ASL. In their place, signers can use null expressions. According to various scholars, signers may use verb agreement to identify subjects and objects (Fischer, 2009; Friedman, 1975; Coulter, 1979). ASL verb agreement takes the form of alternations in orientation or path movement through space by the verb. According to Lillo-Martin (1986), ASL displays properties of a so-called pro-drop language, primarily by allowing verbs to occur with null argument (subject and/or object) expressions. Some have suggested that this possibility is licensed by agreement features of the verb, because these features allow the identification of the covert verb arguments (e.g. Neidle et al., 2000). Thus, in this way, such predicates may carry

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