

Gradient and categorically: Handshape's two semiotic dimensions in Israeli Sign Language discourse



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Abstract

The study describes certain structural modifications in handshapes as created by native signers of Israeli Sign Language. Though often iconic, handshapes are deemed categorical (and thus linguistic) meaningful units in Signed Languages. Yet some scholars claim that signers modify handshape structure to represent changes in meaning in a gradient manner. They consider such modifications as an iconic gesture 'overlay' on handshapes in discourse. Eight signers were asked to sign several scenarios. Most modified handshape structure to represent changes in size or shape in the contextual representative referent in a gradient manner. These structural modifications enriched the messages conveyed through handshapes in context. They revealed the signers' awareness of the iconicity of a handshape and its articulatory features. Most of all, they demonstrated, in our holistic point of view, the merger of gradient gestural features within the unit structure rather than the overlay of iconic gestures on discrete units: that handshapes are both gradient and categorical units. The study results thus support the claim that we should abandon the effort to separate gradient-gestures (thus, non-linguistic) from categorical (linguistic) units and develop a more comparative semiotic approach to how different types of features synchronize synergistically at the stage of utterance construction.

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1. Introduction

In the past, research on gestures was conducted in parallel with research on signed languages (SLs), yet the two were not researched together. This is mostly due to the fact that for several decades much research effort, frequently conducted within the framework of formal linguistic theory, was invested in proving that SLs are genuine languages and that any human language, regardless of its actual modalities, consists of the same type of components (i.e. arbitrary components) and are governed by similar types of rules and constraints. The aspiration to prove that SLs are languages per se led to the disqualification of any 'gestural' expression in language. Placing SLs at the extreme linguistic end of the different gestural forms described by Kendon (1988) and later arranged by McNeill (1992) along a continuum which he called 'Kendon's continuum' marked a success in the effort to prove that SLs allegedly have nothing to do with gestures. Kendon's continuum contains the following elements: Gesticulation > Pantomimes > Emblems > sign language.

For Kendon (2004:15), 'gesture' is a label for actions that have the features of manifest deliberate expressiveness. He attributes the term 'gesture' to any sort of visible action that serves in the construction of utterances: to visible actions that are used as an utterance or as part of an utterance. More specifically, Kendon (1988, 2004:104) drew attention to the

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different ways in which intentional “visible actions” can be used as a component of an utterance. He suggested that visible actions may encompass a full range, from resembling words in a language to graphic or pantomimic representations. The theoretical point he wished to emphasize was that in examining gestures (i.e. intentional visible actions) we can see how non-compositional and non-lexical forms can, in the right circumstances, become transformed into forms which are compositional and lexical.

Later, McNeill (1992) arranged the different visible actions along the continuum in order to clarify the different ways in which gestural forms relate to concurrent speech. Among all the different gestural forms set along the continuum, gesticulation gestures are considered to be the most closely tied to concurrent speech. ‘Gesticulation’ refers to spontaneous idiosyncratic visible actions produced in conjunction with words as part of one and the same act of communication (Kendon, 1972, 1980; McNeill, 1985, 1992). These actions have no semantic autonomy; they function mainly to supplement semiotic systems for meanings presented by the ‘shared-in-common forms’ (words).

Thus, progress along the ‘Kendon continuum’ from Gesticulation (the least linguistic) to SLs (the most linguistic) indicates that the obligatory presence of spoken language is reduced, as is the presence of idiosyncratic gestures, which are replaced by more language-like features and fixed social conventional forms. The placement of gesticulation and SLs at opposite ends of the continuum hence further strengthens formal linguistic theory that the two types of gestural forms are disconnected. Interestingly, McNeill (1992:40) himself stated, within the spirit of that period, that SL signals do not include the spontaneous gestures of spoken language. The foundation for such a claim was that the conventionality of forms reduces the possibility of spontaneous gestures being an integral part of SL forms.

Yet since 1980, research on co-speech gesticulation gestures has proved that gestures are an integral part of language and its functioning (Kendon, 1980, 2004; McNeill, 1992, 2000) and that discourse research must consider gestures as an integral part of the discourse. At the same time, SL research has increased the understanding that SLs are genuine languages in their own right (Stokoe, 1960; Klima and Bellugi, 1979). This inevitably raises the following two questions: do SL signers also use gestures and, if so, how is this manifested? The last two questions ironically motivate researchers to reexamine the question of ‘gestures’ within the visible gestural language.

1.1. Looking for gestural phenomena in gestural languages

The question of how gestures are manifested in SLs has received much attention in linguistic research, especially in view of the fact that certain expressional phenomena in these languages have been identified as more analog-gradient, rather than distinctive-categorical. Researchers such as Liddell (2002) have adopted the term ‘gesture’ to represent those SL phenomena that one cannot analyze in terms of categories. According to Kendon (2008:200), this has led to a broader meaning of the term ‘gesture’, defined in the past by McNeill (1992) as the spontaneous idiosyncratic hand movements that speakers make when they speak. For McNeill (1992), spontaneous idiosyncratic hand movements are a window into the mental processes that occur while using language.

The association of the term ‘gesture’ with gradient semiotic codes resulted in research efforts being directed toward the identification of ‘linguistic’ and ‘non-linguistic’ elements in SLs. Linguists following the formal model approach agree that the digital or analog signal character ought to be admitted as a criterion for identifying ‘linguistic’ and ‘non-linguistic’ components in language. While ‘linguistic’ units are considered discrete digital units and are part of a system of entities that can be itemized, ‘non-linguistic’ units are considered gestural-analog expressions that cannot be specified. That is, there is continuity in the analog system that is indivisible and gradient, consisting of numerous forms with indistinct boundaries. Scholars assume that the meaning of discrete units is set within language, while the meaning of analog aspects results from extra-linguistic sources. In the analog system, the extent to which a formal change reflects a change in meaning is influenced by cognitive-perceptual factors. Liddell and Vogt-Svendsen (2007) argue that in SLs it is particularly important to distinguish between the ‘linguistic elements’ (categorical) and the ‘non-linguistic’ elements (gradient-gestural) in light of the fact that the distinction between the articulator of linguistic input and the articulator of gestures is not as clear-cut as in spoken languages.

Several researchers have shown that in SLs, as in spoken languages, various articulators may encode and express ‘linguistic’ (discrete) and ‘non-linguistic’ (gradient) elements at one and the same time. While the hands encode the ‘linguistic’ units, the body, face or mouth may concurrently express other aspects of meaning (Emmorey, 1990; Liddell and Metzger, 1998). Emmorey gives an example of how one of the signers in her research signaled the verb: *dancing* while making at the same time a swaying movement with her trunk, analog to the swaying movement associated with dancing. Sandler (2009) noted that in ISL, signers use oral iconic gestures, such as inflating or compressing cheeks in order to represent volume or size features of referents simultaneously represented using manual linguistic forms.

Another body of research shows that in SLs, gradient elements may also be synchronized with ‘categorical units’ in such way that the various aspects of the linguistic form simultaneously encode ‘linguistic’ (discrete) units and ‘non-linguistic’ elements (Klima and Bellugi, 1979; Liddell, 2000a,b, 2003). More specifically, scholarly literature reports that in pronouns, agreement verbs and depicting forms, the hands simultaneously encode and express gestural and linguistic

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