

7. Missing the point?: On the language and gesture ‘interface’ in signed languages

There has been considerable debate in the sign language linguistics literature about the proposal by cognitive linguists that directional signs (including pronouns, agreement verbs and classifier constructions) represent fusions of linguistic and gestural elements within the one form (Liddell 2000, 2003; Dudis, 2004). Although the use of space in signed languages has traditionally been considered to be wholly morphemic in nature, Liddell (2000) has proposed that the directionality of pronominal signs and agreement verbs is not morphemic but gestural — i.e. that these signs point at locations associated with present referents, or associated with absent referents imagined to be present, in a way which is similar to pointing by non-signers. This view dovetails nicely with similar accounts of spoken language use which stress that speech and gesture are two aspects of a single cognitive process (McNeill, 1992) or are independent but tightly coupled phenomena (Kita & Ozyurek, 2002). In this paper, we discuss the evidence for and against such an analysis. For example, we explore work showing that some sign language pronouns and agreement verbs do not point and that some point less than others (Meier, 1990; Mathur & Rathmann, 2001; Cormier, 2007), suggesting that not all aspects of this system incorporate gestural elements, or that gestural elements are constrained linguistically. We also examine work that has highlighted differences between signs and co-speech gestures (Casey, 2003; Perniss & Ozyurek, 2007). On the other hand, we discuss evidence in support of Liddell’s proposal. For example, it has been suggested that the comparatively long developmental time course for the acquisition of agreement verbs and classifier constructions in signed languages supports the analysis of these forms as morphologically complex (Supalla, 1982; Meier, 1982). However, children’s production of iconic gestures appears partly dependent on their ability to produce complex speech (Nicoladis, 2002), and thus takes some time to develop. Furthermore, work by Gullberg (1998) and Mayberry and Nicoladis (2000) suggests that iconic gesture use is related to language development rather than independent from it. Therefore, because the developmental time course for iconic co-speech gesture is also quite long, this suggests that the morphological account of the acquisition of these iconic constructions in signed languages may not be the only explanation. We also explore corpus-based work on Australian Sign Language (Auslan) which indicates that agreement verbs appear to vary in their marking of agreement, suggesting that the system is not as highly grammaticalised as once thought (Johnston, de Beuzeville, Goswell & Schembri, 2007), and we discuss work on classifier constructions that shows some similarity with non-signers’ use of gestures (Emmorey & Herzig, 2003; Schembri, Jones & Burnham, 2005). We close by discussing the need for more evidence for and against Liddell’s (2000, 2003) proposal, including more investigations comparing signed languages and gesture, particularly psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic studies. Such evidence would help determine the extent to which language and gesture involve the same or separate aspects of cognition when in the same (i.e. visual-gestural) modality.

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