

Embodiment and deixis: Evidentiality in ASL

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This study looks at one of the many ways that American Sign Language users infuse their discourse with their own perspective. As people communicate, they convey information and simultaneously impart their viewpoint, opinions, and beliefs about what they say. Some utterances convey more speaker perspective than others, and thus, warrant special consideration. One such subjective linguistic device involves the use of evidentiality strategies. The discourse study presented here contributes to the growing body of literature providing an analysis of the function and structure of signed languages from the perspective of cognitive grammar (e.g. Janzen and Shaffer, 2002; Wilcox, 2002) by investigating the grammaticalization of embodied speaker perspective in ASL evidentiality.

When using an evidential the speaker makes an utterance and simultaneously indicates that there is evidence for what she is saying (de Haan 1999). Regardless of the language under investigation evidentials could easily be argued to index a prior situation, making them deictic in nature. And, importantly, evidentials denote the relative distance between the speaker and the propositional content. The deictic nature of evidentials is perhaps more pronounced in ASL in that signers embody that deictic relationship by physically pointing to and marking the relative distance between themselves and their propositional content. In the expression of reported speech evidentials, for example, signers make frequent use of constructed action as described by Dudis (2004) and others, using their bodies as a deictic center from which to situate the content they report. Signers create complex mental spaces (Fauconnier 1994) to, in essence, visually reconstruct, in physical space, the act of being told something, and their reaction to that new information. They often shift their eye gaze to that physical space, thus temporarily disengaging from the discourse and inviting their interlocutors to view the previous discourse as they, themselves, had experienced it. In this retelling, by adding their reaction to what they were told, they prime their interlocutors to agree with their assessment of the situation. The effect, then, is to point to the source of the evidence, with eye gaze, and to convey their evaluation of the relative validity of that evidence by their constructed reaction to it.

References

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