

Modality effects or rhetorical style: What are signed languages good at?

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It has been claimed that the visual-gestural modality of signed languages has no impact on their structure (Lillo-Martin 2002 on pronouns and verb agreement), but that the modality is reflected in frequencies of language use and psycholinguistic processes (Emmorey 2002 on spatial description). Differences in frequencies due to different grammars have been called *rhetorical style* (Slobin 1996). It is an aspect of language use that colours discourse extensively and may grammaticalize as structural features.

Natural languages differ from information systems created for specific purposes such as the “language” of arithmetic (e.g., $2 + 3 = 5$) in that, in a natural language, you can explain everything that can be expressed in any language. In this sense signed languages are natural languages. But an important addition to this definition of natural languages is that natural languages do not express specific semantic content with equal ease. Since signed languages are perceived and produced in the visual-gestural modality, we may ask whether this modality affords the expression of specific meanings, or, on the contrary: Is there semantic content that is less easily expressed in signed languages?

I shall present research on two different semantic-pragmatic areas which both appear to show a complex picture of affordances (Gibson 1979). One is topic-comment – or foreground-background – relations (Engberg-Pedersen 2011). This relationship can be expressed in signed languages both manually and nonmanually by exploiting the possibility of using different articulators to represent different semantic-pragmatic content simultaneously. The other area is epistemic modality. Here the nonmanual articulators and the manner of movement of signs provide a formal means that can be compared to prosodic expression of epistemic modality in spoken languages (Wilcox & Shaffer 2006). But for manual expression of epistemic modality, we see a much more complex picture of more or less grammaticalized signs, some are forms developed out of gestures and some of which are calques based on spoken language forms (Akahori et al. 2013; Herrmann 2013; Janzen & Shaffer 2002; Wilcox 1996; Wilcox & Shaffer 2006).

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