Gradient and gestural dimensions permeate the use of spoken language. If I want to indicate that a lecture was exceptionally fascinating, I have to draw out the appropriate part of the appropriate word—in English, the stressed vowel of the adjective—along with a particular intonation contour: “That was a faaaaaascinating lecture!” There are other conventional intonational devices to turn these words into a sarcastic dismissal of the lecture, and so forth. Or if I want you to attend to a particular person in a group, I can’t simply say “Look at her”; rather, I have to either point, or catch your eye and then direct my gaze at the woman in question. Due no doubt to the history of writing systems, these many everyday aspects of language use have not entered our grammatical descriptions, and are marginalized with terms such as “paralanguage” and “co-speech gesture.” (Of course, when expressive and deictic meanings are expressed segmentally by elements such as particles and demonstratives, they “count” in grammatical descriptions.) Ready-made categorizations of “linguistic” and “nonlinguistic” are not available for the description of signed languages. Indeed, all attempts to reduce such languages to some kind of notation system cannot omit dimensions of gradience and gesture, and must represent simultaneous use of manual and nonmanual means of conveying information.

Signed languages have only been recognized as full-fledged human languages for the past several decades. In the United States the opening began with William Stokoe’s now classic 1960 book, Sign Language Structure: An Outline of the Visual Communication System of the American Deaf. From the present perspective, it is striking to be reminded that language designations such as “ASL” did not yet exist some 40 years ago. For the first decades of sign language research, the academic struggle was to gain the linguistic validity of sign languages by aligning them as closely as possible with grammatical descriptions of spoken languages—primarily the spoken languages of surrounding hearing communities in which sign languages had developed. Having won the battle for linguistic recognition, the debate now turns to particular factors of expressive modality—vocal or “corporeal”—in constraining the forms of linguistic systems. In the process, well-worn grammatical categories are facing new challenges. I introduce the term “corporeal,” because sign languages involve simultaneous performance of the hands, limbs, torso, and many parts of the face. Corporeal expressions, of course, have spatial characteristics that are not possible for vocal expressions. It is part of the strength of the book under review that all of these elements of signed languages are treated as part of an integrated system, rather than a familiar partitioning of signed communication into a “linguistic” system with various “expressive” overlays.

Scott Liddell is a professor at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC—the only Deaf university in the world—where he chairs the Department of Linguistics. Gallaudet has recently instituted a PhD program in sign language linguistics, thanks in great part to L’s pioneering efforts. He is from the first generation of American linguistic explorers of ASL, beginning with a ground-breaking 1977 doctoral dissertation on ASL syntax from the University of California at San Diego. He has made continuing major contributions to the field ever since, culminating in this monumental, rich, beautifully documented, and carefully argued monograph, Grammar, Gesture, and Meaning in American Sign Language. The book is packed with insights—for the description and analysis of both signed and spoken languages. The reader encounters far-
reaching and innovative revisions, presented thoughtfully and non-combatively. Little by little, the attentive reader will come to understand that ASL can be described without the familiar machinery of such traditional concepts as “agreement,” and “classifiers”; that categories such as “subjects,” “objects,” and “pronouns” take on special characteristics in this type of language; and that even the status of “morpheme” and the distinction between “inflection” and “derivation” can be questioned. In place, we are given a twenty-first century approach to language, heavily influenced by Langacker’s cognitive grammar and Fauconnier’s mental spaces, and situated in functional and usage-based theories. The new analyses are supported by meticulous data and argumentation. The sign language linguist will have to learn new concepts, skillfully introduced and demonstrated by L, and anchored to new linguistic terminology: “surrogates,” “buoys,” “depicting verbs,” along with new compound concepts, such as “surrogate blends” and “token blends.”

L is known for many valuable grammatical analyses of ASL using more traditional categories. In the book under review he is frank in reporting and justifying his own reorientation. In an important discussion of “the boundaries of grammar and language” (pp. 137-140), he states:

> A few years ago the issue of whether something was “linguistic” or not seemed like an important question to me. It no longer does. The entire issue is based on the idea that structured (grammatical) arrangements of words carry the meaning being expressed and can somehow be abstracted away from their actual use in a specific context. Important theoretical advances during the 1980s and 1990s have shown that a speaker’s meaning is not constrained in this way” (p. 138).

A major determinant of the structure of a signed language is the fact that hands and bodies can move in space, and that movements and locations can acquire symbolic significance. That is, the spatial dimension is central; furthermore, the use of space is schematized and conventionalized, and not simply iconic or mimetic. As L summarizes: “One cannot know ASL without knowing how to direct each sign capable of being meaningfully directed in space” (p. 139). This is clearly a modality factor: “It is not that speakers of vocally produced languages are unable to provide such clues, but rather, that the tongue is unable to provide such clues when articulating words” (pp. 139-140). The book, then, is centrally concerned with space—that is, with location and movement as systematic dimensions of languages like ASL. (Although the book deals only with one sign language, it is clear that the framework is applicable to signed languages in general. All of the sign languages that have been studied thus far demonstrate the same kinds of lexical and grammatical devices described by L.)

In order to make the many complex points clear, Cambridge University Press has been generous in including hundreds of high-quality still photos from videoclips, allowing the reader to follow, and even personally simulate, the major points of the examples. There is also an abundance of useful diagrams that make the mental space analyses evident to the eye. The text includes not only isolated examples, but some extended discourse, particularly an entire chapter devoted to a single narrative example (Chapter 10 – “Five Brothers”). The pictures are essential, since there is no standard way of notating sign language phonology (and the several available methods would be opaque to all but the specialized reader). The examples are supported by L’s modification of the traditional practice of using upper-case glosses for signs, supplemented by some innovative notations that are necessary for the analysis. These conventions are set forth in a valuable introduction: Chapter 2 – “A sketch of the grammar of ASL.” This sixty-page chapter is, in itself, a great asset to sign language linguists. To give a simple example: the notation PRO→x indicates a point directed towards an entity—what L refers to as pointing conceptually toward a referent. This definition turns out to be important, because, as argued later, so-called “pronouns” are sensitive to a range of conceptual features of their intended referents. The same
notation, and the same issues, can be applied to verbs, such as \textit{ASK-QUESTION}^{x\rightarrow y}, indicating that a question is directed from one location (say the signer) toward a second location (another person). Spinning out the consequences, erstwhile “agreement verbs” and “spatial verbs” can be accommodated in a framework of “indicating verbs,” using space in the same ways as erstwhile “pronouns.” In similar sweeping reanalyses, L replaces fixed loci with various uses of space that carry both lexical and referential significance. For example, \textit{ASK-QUESTION}^{x\rightarrow y} requires a particular handshape, directed at the chest level of the recipient; accordingly, the height of an absent recipient, established at a locus, must be implicit in the directionality of the sign. For example, signing that an adult asked a question of a child requires a downward direction, while reporting that a child asked a question of an adult requires an upward direction. The standard term “locus” is thus replaced by “surrogate,” which allows for dimensional conceptual reference to a location, as well as by “token,” which is simply locational (e.g., establishing a point in space as New York).

L’s powerful machinery to deal with conceptual reference points and directionality comes from the theory of mental spaces, and he makes elaborate use of different kinds of “blended spaces,” in which conventional handshapes and locations are situated with relation to the signer’s body, the physically present world, and conceptual worlds. It becomes clear that these three components of space—signer, actual entities in communicative space, and conceptual entities established in signing space—must be distinguished and analyzed in interaction. Signed messages constantly shift perspective and granularity, such that parts of the signer’s body and locations in space can rapidly shift referential meaning, in accordance with the linguistic conventions of the particular sign language. Because meanings are expressed by such composite means, L is reluctant to describe all meaning as “morphemic” or ASL as “polysynthetic.”

Rather:

I suggest an approach in which some meaning comes from identifiable morphemes, some meaning is associated with the full lexical unit itself, and meaning is also constructed by means of mental space mappings motivated by the variable and gradient ways that the hand is located and oriented (pp. 273-4).

The analysis of “blended spaces” is the freshest part of the endeavor—still quite green and needing of more precision and formal representation—but already liberating sign language linguistics from formalisms based on spoken languages of a quite different type.

Following a brief orienting introduction in Chapter 1 (“American Sign Language as a language”) and the grammatical sketch of ASL in Chapter 2, seven chapters introduce the new terms and analyses in detail: 3 – “Pronouns and real space,” 4 – “Indicating verbs and real space,” 5 – “Surrogates,” 6 – “Directing signs at locations and things,” 7 – “Tokens,” 8 – “Buoys” (stationary configurations of the nondominant hand providing referential continuity through a stretch of discourse), and 9 – “Depicting verbs.” Chapter 10, as already mentioned, is a detailed narrative analysis. Finally, Chapter 11 (“Grammar, gesture, and meaning”) sums up L’s position, with applications to the linguistics of both signed and spoken languages. On the last page (p. 362), L takes issue with “the predominant views of what constitutes language.” He concludes that although signed languages might be organized in different fashion from spoken languages:

It is much more likely that spoken and signed languages both make use of multiple types of semiotic elements in the language signal, but that our understanding of what constitutes language has been much too narrow.
L’s non-polemical and carefully reasoned argumentation is a welcome relief in an overheated field. For example, at a point where he could be tempted to enter into a debate, he simply says: “…the intention of this book is to present new analyses rather than criticisms of previous analyses…” (p. 269). The lucidity of presentation and the cogency of the new analyses lead the reader into exploring rich new territory, rather than into quarrels about assessments of established domains. In the end, I expect that readers of various theoretical persuasions will have a number of “aha-experiences” as they slowly come to understand and appreciate L’s re-mapping of the territory. This is a major contribution to sign language linguistics, and to linguistics generally.

REFERENCES


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