COMMENTARY

Breaking the Molds: Signed Languages and the Nature of Human Language

Dan I. Slobin

A conference organizing committee, in their invitation to me, asked for my “observations concerning the significance of sign language research on linguistics—how it has changed the very definitions of language and how it has allowed us to see and understand language in new and important ways.” I am a psycholinguist who studies child language development crosslinguistically. Ever since my early days at Berkeley—when the California School for the Deaf was still next door to us—it has been obvious to me that a full understanding of our capacity for language has to be based on both spoken and signed languages. Moreover, it has always been clear to me that we cannot understand the structures and functions of human languages without careful examination of the many types of languages that are still in use on our planet.

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Research on child language in various countries, as well as collaborations with linguists and anthropologists who study various unwritten languages, has showed me that language is embedded in use—in contexts of communicating, planning, thinking, and remembering. Our standard linguistic theories grew out of the analysis of written texts and isolated sentences. Therefore, the theories are limited to a narrow range of language use, and they leave out all of the dimensions of face-to-face interaction that are central to any study of signed languages: eye contact, facial expressions, body posture and movement, and gesture. Add to this all of the gradient phenomena that are available to signers—rate and intensity and expansiveness of movement. These dimensions are equally available to users of spoken languages in the form of intonation patterns, along with rate and intensity of vocal production. Because almost all of these prosodic devices are missing from our writing systems, they have been excluded from most linguistic descriptions of languages. At best, they are allocated to secondary categories with labels such as “extralinguistic,” “paralinguistic,” or “nonlinguistic.”

Beyond these factors, it is evident from serious study of sign language discourse that a full description and analysis require attention to a range of pragmatic factors: eye gaze, facial expression, role shift, and more. Whenever a spoken language uses an actual phonological vocal production like a syllable to express one of these pragmatic notions, it is included in the so-called linguistic description. For example, Japanese and Korean have sentence-final particles that communicate things like “this is something that will surprise you” or “this is something you and I can take for granted.” These syllables are part of the linguistic description of those languages. However, when the same thing is done by an intonation pattern in English, it is classified as extralinguistic or paralinguistic and is not part of the grammar. In addition, the facial expressions that communicate these kinds of information aren’t even considered in studies of paralinguistic phenomena. In psycholinguistic approaches to spoken languages, cospeech gestures are attracting more attention, and their role in speech production is being debated in psycholinguistics. Slowly, investigators of language are moving away from our ancient written language bias.

Sign languages are obviously relevant to all of these issues. In a
number of countries, research on the linguistics of sign language has tried to draw a line between what is “really linguistic” and the rest of the expressive devices that are available to users of a visual/manual language. Many of these devices are labeled as “nonmanual,” but that very term suggests an unexamined presupposition that the manual component is the place where essentially “linguistic” phenomena are located. I suggest that we don’t need to worry about what we categorize as “linguistic” until we have a better understanding of the range of gradient and body and facial components in both signed and spoken languages.

I am not a signer, though I speak a number of spoken languages. I came to the study of signed languages relatively late in life. In the course of crosslinguistic work—even on languages that I don’t speak—I have become fascinated by the systematic ways in which languages differ from one another. That is, my focus is on typology. Languages don’t differ from one another in all possible ways. Rather, there are interacting constraints that shape languages. When we know enough about such mechanisms, we will be able to specify the range of possible human languages. For the past decade or so I have been looking at many sign language videos and have been reading linguistic analyses of a number of sign languages. This has come about through my collaboration in Holland with Nini Hoiting, who studies the acquisition of Sign Language of the Netherlands (SLN), and through my collaboration in California with Marlon Kuntze and a group of ASL-using Berkeley graduate students working on the acquisition and use of ASL. After watching videotapes of two- and three-year-old children learning SLN and ASL, I realized how much is missing from the speech transcripts I have been studying—written transcripts of children learning languages such as English, Spanish, German, Russian, Turkish, and Hebrew. Those transcripts now seem very bare to me. Where is the child looking? What intonation pattern is being used? What are the cospeech gestures?

The Risks of Borrowing Theories

The study of signed languages draws attention to issues that have not been in the center of attention of most of the linguistic research on spoken languages. It is only by examining these issues in both spoken and signed languages that we can come to an understanding of the nature
of human language. At the same time, we must expect any linguistic theory to be equally applicable to both types of language. Until the last few years, sign language linguists have tried to reach this goal by forcing ASL and other signed languages into molds that were made for the description of spoken languages—generally English. However, now there are talented sign language linguists who are creating new ways of looking at ASL and a few other signed languages.

From the ancient Greeks we have inherited a preconception—based on Aristotle’s analysis of the Greek language—that language consists of discrete elements that belong to categories like “noun” and “verb” that are combined into “sentences” that express “predications.” This preconception remained with us throughout the twentieth century, from Saussure to Chomsky and many of the offshoots of structural and generative linguistics. Throughout most of the twentieth century, linguists were busy constructing models in which discrete elements belong to discrete categories, and in which various types of rules combine those categories of elements to produce words, phrases, clauses, and sentences, including various sorts of “invisible” abstract structures that were necessary for systems of formal notation and analysis. But this rigid, ancient heritage is now under serious revision by followers of many different kinds of approaches. We have cognitive grammars, construction grammars, usage-based models, mental space grammars, and more. Moreover, we have serious investigations of cospeech gesture, deixis, and intonation. At the interface of linguistics, philosophy, and anthropology we have pragmatic models of presumptive meanings and common ground and discourse structure. In cognitive science we have prototype theories and computer-based connectionist models of distributed information without discrete categories. The revolutions in sign language linguistics are part of this contemporary movement to expand and enrich the domain of investigation of both spoken and signed languages.

As researchers in the language sciences, we have a choice to begin with one or another of two basic strategies, which I refer to as “theories in search of data” and “data in search of theories.” I maintain that the first approach, which begins with an established theory based on spoken languages, keeps us from seeing deeper into the nature of signed languages and ultimately into the nature of human languages in general. The second approach—*data in search of theories*—is the one that is
leading us to new insights. It is an approach that can have a deep impact on linguistics—now that we’ve passed beyond the stage of demonstrating that signed languages are “real languages.” At this stage in history we do not have a full or adequate model of human language in general or of any particular language. The models from the past are based, as I mentioned, to a large part on written languages—or at least, on the languages of literate societies. Furthermore, many of the models are based on a narrow range of types of such languages. When linguists have described typologically diverse spoken languages, they have generally attempted to fit them into inappropriate molds. What we need in our era are many detailed descriptions of phenomena of language structure and use that go beyond the models we have inherited from European and American linguistics.

The Modality Issue

Beyond the general movements that are changing and enriching linguistic science, the issue of modality—auditory/articulatory and visual/body—poses another level of generalization. It is significant that this issue has become the topic of conferences and books in the past few years. A landmark is the 2002 publication by Cambridge University Press of a collection with the title *Modality and Structure in Signed and Spoken Languages*, edited by Richard Meier, Kearsy Cormier, and David Quinto-Pozos. That volume confronts the presupposition that there are no essential structural differences between signed and spoken languages. This is, in my opinion, now an open question.

Linguistic research at Gallaudet—by Scott Liddell, Sarah Taub, Paul Dudis, and others—treats signed languages in their own right rather than as a priori reflections of spoken languages. Liddell has challenged the dictum that “in order to demonstrate that something is linguistic, one must show its categorical nature” (2003, 70). Anyone familiar with sign language is well aware of modulations of face, posture, and rate of intensity of motion. These modulations are expressed on continua that cannot be broken up into discrete categories.

With regard to data in search of theories, it is not our task to decide what is “linguistic” or not. That is a sociological or institutional or ac-
ademic question; however, it is not an intellectual question. What we
do have to figure out is the proper description of acts of commu-
nication and comprehension.

What are the problems of taking the opposite approach: *theories in
search of data*? Let me begin with a very basic example from the history
of linguistics. When European explorers encountered strange languages
in the course of building their colonial empires, their linguistic tools
were based on the classical grammars of Greek and Latin, and they tried
to describe languages like Mayan or Malay in categories that they were
familiar with. For example, Table 1 shows part of a paradigm of Latin
noun declensions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nominative</td>
<td>amicus</td>
<td>amici</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genitive</td>
<td>amici</td>
<td>amicorum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dative</td>
<td>amico</td>
<td>amicis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accusative</td>
<td>amicum</td>
<td>amicos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocative</td>
<td>amico</td>
<td>amici</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ablative</td>
<td>amico</td>
<td>amicis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Colonial linguists would sort morphemes of so-called exotic lan-
guages into categories like these, and the method wasn’t only applied to
exotic languages. To give you an idea of how it worked, Table 2 shows
the way that English (not an exotic colonial language!) was presented in
an 1809 Portuguese grammar:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nominative</td>
<td>a king</td>
<td>kings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genitive</td>
<td>king’s, of a king</td>
<td>of kings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dative</td>
<td>to a king</td>
<td>to kings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accusative</td>
<td>a king</td>
<td>kings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocative</td>
<td>O king!</td>
<td>O kings!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ablative</td>
<td>with, from, or by a king</td>
<td>by kings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now we laugh at such attempts, but are we doing the same to signed
languages? We read descriptions of ASL, for example, with linguistic
terms like “subject” and “object” and are generally not surprised. Yet linguists disagree about whether spoken languages such as Chinese and Tagalog even have subjects and objects.

We face serious risks when we begin with a theory that comes from another language or when we take a set of categories that were well justified in the systematic description of that language. Categories have to be justified with regard to the language one is studying. For example, there is no justification for treating English expressions such as “with a king” or “by a king” as instances of the ablative singular case. The risk of starting with a theory from another language or type of language is that you’ll find what you’re looking for—or convince yourself that you’ve found what you were looking for.

Take a very simple example: the ASL utterance she LOOK-AT me. The verb moves from the spatial location of the looker to the spatial location of the looked-at. If ASL grammar is similar to that of spoken languages like English, one could argue that the spatial loci of looker and looked-at are pronouns, and the starting and ending points of the verb are agreement inflections on the verb. Furthermore, some linguists might describe this verb as a sentence with a subject, SHE, a verb, LOOK-AT, and an object, ME. And because the verb moves from subject to object, this is a sentence with subject-verb-object word order. So we could say that the verb agrees with the subject and the object. And so we can conclude that ASL has the same basic grammatical elements and organization as English: subjects and objects, verbs that inflect for agreement, and a basic word order. But where are all of these linguistic elements in the sign? All we really have is a handshape that refers to looking or seeing (a horizontal V-sign) and a movement from the source to the goal of that activity. Note, too, that this utterance won’t work unless the signer is also looking in the right direction, but since standard linguistic descriptions have no equivalent of gaze direction, gaze doesn’t figure in the syntactic description. Later, I’ll propose an alternate linguistic description—one that puts ASL in a different typological category than English.

Clearly, ideas can be conveyed in a visual language by uses of location and motion that are simply not available to an auditory language. We don’t have a “revolution in sign language linguistics” if we begin with knowing what we’re looking for—and then find it.
My favorite way of thinking about the risk of finding what you’re looking for comes from my friend Wolfgang Klein, who is a German linguist who has worked on Chinese. He points out that linguists must be careful about expecting to find familiar grammatical categories in unfamiliar languages. He disagrees with the general assumption of Western linguists that Chinese must have verbs because we are used to languages with verbs. He suggests that Chinese doesn’t make a clear noun/verb distinction (based on linguistic arguments that go beyond this paper). In a striking analogy, Klein suggests that Germans know that every cuisine includes potatoes, so it is no surprise to find that the Chinese cuisine also relies on potatoes. It’s just that their potatoes come in small grains and grow differently! Rice can be made to fit into the category of potatoes—but only if you ignore everything else that you know about rice.

In other words, we cannot assume that signed languages will have all of the categories and processes of spoken languages, or we must at least find the right level of comparison. Certainly, German and Chinese cuisines have some kind of basic carbohydrate, but rice is not a kind of potato—that is, the two cuisines must be compared in terms of a less specific category than “potato.” Part of our revolution must be directed at determining the level of comparison that leads to a general understanding of human languages, as well as the special characteristics of signed and spoken languages.

The Tyranny of Glossing

One major challenge is to free ourselves from what I call “the tyranny of glossing.” Because ASL is used in an English-speaking country, we write our descriptions of ASL in English. We’ve gotten used to a shorthand method of writing English words in capital letters to indicate ASL signs. Similarly, German linguists writing about German Sign Language (DGS) use capital letter German words as glosses and so forth. Partly this is because there is not yet an accepted standard—like the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)—for transcribing signed languages. Moreover, even if examples are presented using notations in a system like HamNoSys (http://www.sign-lang.uni-hamburg.de/projects/HamNoSys.html), or even if pictures or videos are included,
the analyses make use of the capital-letter shorthand, with various additions to indicate things like gaze, scope of nonmanual features, directionality, and so on. This practice makes it difficult to compare signed languages and even more difficult to compare signed and spoken languages.

Consider several examples of the dangers of implicitly analyzing glosses rather than the signs that they are believed to represent. Take something very simple: an ASL verb that might be glossed as WALKforward (inverted V-handshape, wiggling fingers, moving forward). The gloss gives the impression that there is a verb of manner-of-motion that corresponds to the English verb “walk.” However, if a Spanish-speaking linguist were writing a paper in Spanish about this same ASL verb, a different kind of gloss would be used. In Spanish, the main verb indicates direction: avanzar (“move forward”), and the manner of motion has to be a subordinate verb: avanzar caminando (“advance walking”). So a capital letter gloss of the ASL verb in a Spanish-language publication would be AVANZARcaminando, that is, MOVE.FORWARDwalking. But the ASL verb means neither “walk” nor “move forward.” It is a simultaneous combination of path (forward) and manner (walk), and either component by itself is not a linguistic item (wiggling fingers in place, inverted V-handshape rigidly moving forward). Looking at the capital letter glosses, an American linguist could decide that ASL has English-like path-manner constructions, and a Mexican linguist could decide that ASL has Spanish-like path-manner constructions.

Returning to the practice of capital-letter glossing, this method of representing a signed language—even with the additions of various diacritic markings and comments in a written language—seems to me to be a strange, almost neocolonialist acceptance that the spoken language of the surrounding community is somehow relevant to a linguistic analysis of the local signed language. No linguist would dream of using English words in capital letters to describe Navajo, for example, simply because the surrounding dominant language is English. It is even more misleading to read an article written in English about a sign language from another country—say Germany—and find capital-letter glosses in German, as if DGS were a form of German. To make things more confusing, such German words are often followed by capital-letter glosses
in English, which could present a rather different interpretation of the DGS signed example. For instance, what if a Mexican linguist had written an article about ASL in which the verb meaning “walk forward” were first glossed in English as \textit{WALK}forward and then glossed in Spanish as \textit{AVANZAR}caminando? What could that linguist reasonably conclude about the nature of ASL verbs of motion? The only approach would be to ignore the glosses and find some other means of transcription.

When linguists who study a spoken language write about that language, they have several advantages: They can use a standard notation on the phonological level (the IPA), and they can also make use of standard orthographical ways of representing morphemes and words. Most important for linguistic analysis, there is an agreed-upon system of indicating grammatical morphemes that can be used across languages. A German linguist and an American linguist writing about Navajo can describe their data in ways that are independent of whether they are writing in German or English. We need to work toward a similar level of transparency and crosslinguistic comparability for the study of signed languages.

One possibility would be a system of transcription at the level of meaning components, such as the system that we have been developing at Berkeley. This system—which we call the Berkeley Transcription System (BTS)—has a standard notation for representing meaning components, applicable across signed languages (Hoiting and Slobin 2002; Slobin et al. 2001). Very briefly, the verb meaning something like “walk forward” would look like this at the level of morphological transcription: pm”TL-pst’ERC-pth’F-mvt’WIG. This verb has four parts in a standard notation and is independent of either English or ASL.

The system uses what we call a \textit{property marker} (what has misleadingly come to be called a “classifier” in sign language linguistics), abbreviated TL for “two legs.” This property marker is in a particular \textit{posture}, abbreviated ERC for “erect.” There is a \textit{path}, indicated by F for “forward.” There is also an internal \textit{movement} indicated by WIG for “wiggling.” Even though BTS is not the ultimate solution, I think we need something like it if we are ever going to systematically compare the morphological structures of signed and spoken languages.
So far, it might appear that the risk of glossing is only a matter of being aware that English words are not exactly the same as ASL signs or that German words are not exactly the same as DGS signs. However, the problem is deeper because words carry with them not only their meanings but often the grammatical constructions in which their meanings are expressed as well. Consider the much-discussed ASL verb INVITE (open palm moving from recipient to signer). This has been described as a “backwards” verb (Meir 1988; Padden 1988), but what is backwards about it? The English verb “invite” has a subject (the inviter) and an object (the invitee): “I invite you,” for example. But is this what ASL 1SGINVITE2SG means? If so, it does appear to be backwards since I am the actor (or subject—note the confusion between the semantic role of actor and the syntactic role of subject) and you are the affected person (or object). Therefore, it is backwards for my hand to move from you to me because my action should go from me to you. The problem is that there is no justification for glossing this verb as INVITE. If instead, for example, we treat the verb as meaning something like “I offer that you come to me,” then the path of the hand is appropriate. Note, too, that the open palm is a kind of offering or welcoming hand and that the same verb could mean WELCOME or even HIRE. My facial expression, posture, and gaze direction are also relevant. In fact, this is probably a verb that indicates that the actor is proposing that the addressee move towards the actor and that the addressee is encouraged to do so. We don’t have an English gloss for this concept, so we are misled by whatever single verb we choose in English.

There is a long argument to support these contentions, but I would expect that—at the end of the day—it will be apparent that ASL does not have agreement, does not have subjects and objects, and does not have backwards verbs. The contribution to linguistics in general, of course, would be that the categories of this sort of theory are apparently not linguistic universals. (For detailed argumentation for this position see, for example, Liddell 2003; Taub 2001.)

The Problem of Typology

One reason that many sign language linguists have expected to find English-like categories in ASL is that they assume that—at some deep
level—ASL is the same type of language as English. The growing field of linguistic typology, however, suggests that signed languages may belong to a quite different type of language (Slobin 2005). The typological distinction that I have in mind is not determined by modality but by a very basic division of languages on grounds of linguistic expression of verbs and their arguments.

English is a “dependent-marked” language, and ASL is a “head-marked” language. This typological dimension was introduced by Johanna Nichols (1986, 1992), who is a linguist at Berkeley. It plays an important role in her typological and historical explorations of spoken languages. To simplify the matter, think of the verb in an utterance as the head and the associated noun or pronoun arguments as dependents. In the sentence “he sees me,” then, the head is “see,” and the dependents are “he” and “me.”

Across languages, syntactic relations such as subject or object can be morphologically marked on either the dependents (that is, the nouns or pronouns) or the head (that is, the verb). In the English example, the forms of the pronouns make it clear that “he” is the subject (otherwise, it would be “him”) and that “me” is the object (otherwise it would be “I”). You can check this by reversing the arguments, and the forms of the pronouns change: “I see him” versus “he sees me.” The verb doesn’t tell you who did what to whom; it indicates only some inherent characteristics of an argument: in this case, the number and person of the subject. English, therefore, is a dependent-marked language because the forms of the dependents, rather than the form of the head, tell you who did what to whom.

If we consider all of the countries in which signed languages have been systematically studied, it turns out that the surrounding spoken language is always of the dependent-marked type. This is true of all of the European languages, as well as languages that are as different as Turkish, Hebrew, Arabic, Japanese, and Chinese. In all of those languages, it is the marking of the dependent nouns (and frequently also the order of the dependent nouns) that signal the relations of those nouns to the verb. Thus it is not surprising that linguists unquestioningly expected the same to be true of the diverse sign languages in all of those countries.

In the opposite type of language—head-marked languages—
markers on the verb itself indicate the role of the associated noun arguments. In addition, because all of the information about who did what to whom is evident from the verb, nouns and pronouns play a much less important role in discourse in head-marked languages. Head-marked and dependent-marked languages are found in comparable numbers worldwide, but most of the head-marked languages are found among the native languages in the Americas and the Pacific. This is probably why they are off the radar screen of most sign language linguists.

Here is how our model sentence, “he sees me,” is formed in a Mayan language, Yucatec, spoken on the Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico. All of the grammatical indicators of argument roles—who did what to whom—are elements of the verb

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
  k & -uy & -il & -ik & -en \\
  HAB & -3SG.ACTOR & -see & -INCOMPL & -1SG.UNDERGOER
\end{array}
\]

The verb root, \(-il\), is surrounded by morphemes that perform the same function as the English pronouns “he” and “me.” There is no grammatical gender or number here. The verb means that some third-person actor is in the process of seeing some first-person undergoer. There is nothing that we have to call “subject” or “object,” and there is nothing that we have to call “agreement.” The two morphemes, \(-uy\) and \(-en\), do not take these forms because of some other nouns or pronouns in the sentence. This verb, like an ASL verb, can be a full sentence.

In fact, the corresponding ASL construction is formally parallel to this Yucatec Mayan construction. It consists of a horizontal V-handshape, which indicates the gaze and moves from a locus established for a third person (in discourse or the physical setting) and towards the face of the signer. The third-person locus does not have to be linguistically indicated at all, though it can be. It is only required that it be identifiable from the discourse or the physical setting. This is what Liddell calls an \textit{indicating verb}, defined as a verb that is “capable of being meaningfully directed in space toward entities, directions, or places” (Liddell 2003, 97). In these terms, the ASL verb is an indicating verb that is directed toward the entity that is being seen. Unfortunately, beyond what
I have just said in English words, there is no standard way of notating such a construction in publications on sign language linguistics. What we find are variants of he-LOOK-AT-me and/or pictures.

To make the comparison with Yucatec Mayan more explicit, the following is a sketchy way of notating the ASL verb:

\[
\text{LOCUS3} \quad -V\text{GAZEHANDSHAPE-ORIENTATION-}V\text{ROTATE+MOVE-TOWARD-SELF} \\
3\text{SG.ACTOR} \quad -\text{look} \quad -1\text{SG.UNDERGOER}
\]

This attempt at notation is clearly inadequate, but it is sufficient to show that ASL and Yucatec are both head-marked languages that use polycomponential verbs that indicate the roles of arguments without the use of pronouns that carry grammatical marking of those roles and without “agreeing” with other elements in a sentence.

In fact, in Yucatec Mayan, if you want to provide the name of the person who is doing the looking, you have to use a topic marker rather than anything that could be called a “subject.” Similarly, in ASL, it could be argued that identifying the actor—by a name, a noun, or a point—simply serves to put that participant on the stage, rather than to integrate the referent into a grammatical sentence. As Todd (2007) has pointed out, such participants can be introduced with or without an explicit topic marker in ASL, while being structurally separate from the main clause. In my understanding, such a referent serves as topic in the broad sense. Thus both Yucatec Mayan and ASL seem to get along without independent grammatical subjects, marking the actor—when necessary on discourse grounds—as a sort of topic, and otherwise relying on head-marked structures to identify argument roles. On another typological dimension, then, signed languages are topic-prominent languages rather than subject-prominent languages such as English or Arabic.

We must be careful to find ways of describing signed languages that make it possible to meaningfully compare them with spoken languages. This brief example is only part of a much larger endeavor—an endeavor that will have to first pay full attention to the gradient and iconic dimensions of signed languages and will then have to search for possible parallels in spoken languages.
Carrying Out the Revolution

Finally, in order to successfully carry out the revolution, sign language linguists need to present linguistics generally with new ways of analyzing signed languages. It is no longer enough to try to find ways in which signed languages are the same as spoken languages. Consider, in conclusion, two brief examples of revolutionary linguistic concepts, continuing with verbs of looking and seeing. First, Paul Dudis (2004) shows that the signer’s body can be partitioned to indicate characteristics both of the person who is looking and the person who is being looked at. Dudis demonstrates a signed report that someone was glaring at the signer. The ‘look’ sign points back at the signer’s face, indicating that the signer is the object of a gaze. At the same time, the signer’s angry facial expression takes on the role of the person who is glaring. The face is thus partitioned: as an object, it is the signer’s own face, while as an expression, it shows the affect of another person. This is one example of a challenge to linguistics generally: How can such phenomena be incorporated into a general theory of human language?

The second example is Scott Liddell’s notion of surrogate, which goes beyond simple characterization of a third-person locus. The vector of the path of the verb will vary in accordance with the relative heights of the looker and the target. For example, the ASL sign for ‘look’ is generally directed at eye level, but if one is reporting that a child was the object of looking, the sign will be directed downward, as if an actual child were present in signing space. That is, a life-sized virtual referent can be established as part of signed discourse. Surrogates are essential to the linguistic description of languages like ASL. Do they have parallels in spoken languages?

As a psycholinguist I have been most excited by the many new concepts that have been appearing in the sign language literature in recent years. These new concepts come with new linguistic terms: body-partitioning, surrogates, buoys, ion-morphs, iconic mapping, indicating verbs, interacting and noninteracting handshapes, richly grounded symbols—and many more. (For ongoing discussion of such new notions, see the pages of journals such as Sign Language & Linguistics, Sign Language Studies, and
Cognitive Linguistics.) Others are borrowed from new approaches to linguistics in the postgenerative era: metaphorical mapping, blended spaces, constructional meanings, trajectory and landmark—and many more. Sign language linguists have begun to create tools with which to arrive at a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of human language, human cognition, and human social interaction. Indeed, old paradigms are fading and revolutionary new ideas are growing up across disciplines, languages, and countries. The habitual molds are being broken and new molds are beginning to be formed. It is a time for flexibility, ingenuity, and innovation.

References


