Talking multimodally: Insights from a corpus-driven investigation of clause structure in a deaf signed language

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Speakers and signers combine speech, sign, gesture and enactment during their face-to-face interactions, yet few linguists have undertaken quantitative description of the full range of semiotic resources that contribute to these multimodal ‘composite utterances’ (Enfield 2009). The focus has typically been on describing how speakers and signers ‘tell’ meaning by using entrenched aspects of lexicogrammar such as morphosyntax and temporal sequencing. In order to achieve a holistic understanding of language use, it is also important to consider how speakers and signers use their hands and body to visually represent and ‘show’ meaning (Liddell 2003; Kendon 2004; see also Clark & Gerrig 1990; Streeck 2008).

This talk examines how deaf native signers of Auslan combine conventional language (such as lexis) with gesture (such as enactment) in clause-like utterances during their face-to-face interactions, and offers insights for the quantitative multimodal analysis of spoken languages. I draw on findings from my doctoral research on Auslan narratives archived in the Auslan Corpus, which investigated whether signed utterances can be identified and analysed from a clause-level perspective of analysis (Hodge 2014). A major finding was that one in three core arguments and predicates in 857 identified clause-like utterances were shown or inferred using a pointing sign, depicting sign or enactment – all of which are at least partly gestural and heavily dependent on spatio-temporal context for interpretation. This study supports recent empirical claims regarding the integration of gestural and conventionalised semiotics in deaf signed languages (e.g. Johnston & Schembri 2010; Ferrara & Johnston 2014), and highlights how we can compare signed and spoken languages.


**Author bio**

Dr. Gabrielle Hodge (PhD) is a researcher, writer and teacher. Her doctoral research investigated how to analyse and describe clause structure in a deaf signed language. She currently does linguistics at La Trobe University while developing Auslan resources about natural hazard emergencies at Vicdeaf. Her research interests include signed languages, gesture and talk-in-action.

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