SHOWING AND SEEING: ENACTMENT IN BRITISH SIGN LANGUAGE CONVERSATIONS

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It is widely accepted that investigations of enactment (non-conventional, improvised, bodily depictions of events) are integral for understanding the origins and evolution of language (see e.g. Żywiczyński, Wacewicz & Sibierska, 2018). However, there is significant disconnect in how enactment in spoken and signed languages is understood and analysed, which inhibits cross-modal comparability and investigation of the role of deaf signed languages in evolutionary theory. Here we take the position that both signers and speakers use non-conventional bodily enactment with and without more conventionalised semiotic strategies to mimetically depict the actions, utterances, thoughts and feelings of themselves, other people, animals and things (Tannen, 1989; Metzger 1995). Proficient use of enactment in deaf signed language ecologies is vital for understanding others and making oneself understood (see e.g. Cormier, Smith & Zwets, 2013; Ferrara & Johnston, 2014). Indeed, enactment is just one of several strategies for depicting in face-to-face communication, which are tightly integrated with strategies for describing and indicating (Clark, 1996; see also Ferrara & Hodge, 2018). However, unlike with spoken languages (e.g. Hakulinen & Selting, 2005), little is known about signed conversations, and the role of non-conventional semiotics during these interactions. One question is how signers use bodily enactment to visibly depict a referent while indexing other 'invisible' referents in the signing space around them. This enables signers to 'show' one referent with their body while simultaneously 'seeing' another (Winston, 1991; Engberg-Pedersen, 1993; Liddell, 2003). Here we describe how deaf signers of British Sign Language (BSL) do this during dyadic conversations, in order to highlight the coordinated complexity of depiction and indexicality within enactments occurring in everyday interactions between deaf signers of an established signed language.

Using conversations between ten deaf native and near-native signers from one geographical region (Bristol) documented in the BSL Corpus (Schembri, Fenlon, Rentelis & Cormier, 2014), we investigated: (a) who or what these signers visibly enacted with their bodies; (b) whether actions, thoughts, and/or utterances were depicted; and (c) what invisible referents were indexed via the visible enactment. For example, Figure 1 demonstrates how a deaf signer modified a manual conventionalised sign LOOK within an enactment of herself as a young child expressing a sense of surprise and wonder on seeing (for the very first time) other deaf children using signed language (represented by the white stick figures).

Manual sign:	LOOK--
Visible enactment:	signer looking at other children signing--------------------------------------
Invisible referent:	other children signing--
Literal translation:	*me looking (in wonder at the other children signing)*
Free translation:	'I was gobsmacked looking at the other children signing.'

Figure 1. Example of visible and invisible referents (BL03F70WHC, 01:55.636-01:57.576)

We examined ~1,300 multimodal clause utterances (Enfield, 2009). Almost one-fifth of these utterances included enactment (*n*=246). Signers mainly used enactment (of varying strengths) to visibly depict their own actions, but also those of other people, and occasionally a non-human referent such as the local council. Signers also used enactment (to a much lesser extent) to depict utterances and thoughts (cf. 'reported speech' and 'direct speech'). Within this set, one fifth also included invisible referents (*n*=50), mostly indexing humans other than the signer, but also organisations (e.g. the Catholic Church) and objects (e.g. a movie projector, a window). In addition to facilitating creative performance (e.g. Hodge & Ferrara, 2014) and referential cohesion (e.g. Hodge, Ferrara & Anible, 2019), these results suggest that signer's use of enactment enables a fundamental aim of language use: to situate individual signers 'as themselves' within the context of the discourse, and to index the world from this perspective. We discuss these findings in light of embodied approaches to language evolution that consider multimodal strategies for indexing and depicting as a foundation of human communication (e.g. Levinson & Holler, 2014; Perlman, 2017).

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