

Mouthing Constructions as Social Indexes of Gender in ASL Pronouns

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This paper describes a preliminary study that focuses on the nonmanual markers, precisely mouth actions, produced in tandem with pronominal references in American Sign Language (ASL). While it has become a common belief far and wide within the ASL community and the field of signed language linguistics that ASL pronouns are “genderless” or unmarked in terms of gender (Liddell 2000; McBurney 2002; Sakel 2005), this paper provides evidence to the contrary for third-person singular ASL pronouns by way of mouthing constructions. Very recently, mouthing constructions have been observed to serve morpho-phonological, morpho-syntactic, and other linguistic functions across signed languages (Bismath, in press). Rather than taking a stand on the specific linguistic convention that mouthing constructions seen produced with ASL pronouns may be, the author provides evidence these constructions serve as social indexes of gender while presenting rationale as to the significance the presence that such social indexes may have on ASL discourse, especially for transgender and gender non-conforming signers.

In recognizing the reality that Deaf, hard-of-hearing, and hearing ASL signers are often multimodal and multilingual (Emmorey et al. 2008; Allard & Chen-Pichler 2018) the presence of these mouthing constructions seems to result from signers’ employment of their full semiotic repertoires. In other words, these mouthing constructions are the result of translanguaging practices in ASL communities (Kusters 2021). Further, using the tenets of sociocultural and trans linguistics, this paper observes that mouthing constructions co-articulated on third-person singular pronouns function as social indexes of gender (Hall & Bucholtz 2005; Zimman 2018; Zimman 2021). In noting this, the author advocates for a moral obligation to recognize the social indexing of gender in ASL pronouns as a mechanism of gender affirmation and potentially gender-based linguistic violence (i.e., misgendering).

In this preliminary investigation, the author conducted analysis of four open-source ASL videos, three of which were produced by Gallaudet University and one by MELIMIRA. While three videos were analyzed in their entirety, the fourth video was analyzed for up to four minutes of content. 20 mouthing constructions tokens co-articulated over third-person singular pronouns were annotated in ELAN using Johnston and Van Roekel’s (2012) mouth action coding schema. The findings revealed that complete articulations of M-type (mouthing) mouth actions often accompany ASL pronouns (especially for third-person singular), with some interesting exceptions observed. This study highlights a typical combination where the manual pronominal reference is unmarked in terms of gender, but the mouthing construction completely articulates the gender of the referent, thereby socially indexing the gender identity of the respective referent. To illustrate this point, Figure 1 shows the most typical example.

The author utilizes sociocultural and trans linguistics principles (Zimman 2017) to argue for the ethical foundation of acknowledging the social indexing of gender in ASL pronouns to prevent linguistic abuse of marginalized communities. This paper offers a unique perspective on the intersection of sign language linguistics, semiotics, and gender studies, beginning the conversation regarding the actual and potential gender-affirming and gender-invalidating language practices that affect transgender, nonbinary, gender-diverse, Deaf, and signing communities. This also brings implications for the need of ASL pronoun acknowledgment, introduction, and practice.



Fig. 1: The most typical example where the signer uses a gender-marked mouthing construction to indicate that the referent of the clause is a man.

MouthGesture F	MouthGesture M
M-type, complete, [hɪz]	His
<i>Socially Indexes</i>	<i>A man</i>

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