

Complex stances in ASL narratives: Intersubjective stance-building from past and present spaces.

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The complexity of stance-taking is explored in American Sign Language (ASL) narratives when the signer builds an overall stance with evaluative stance markers within the past narrative expressed by story characters, along with those in the utterances of the narrator in the present intended for the addressee(s). Our questions are:

- 1) Do characteristics of stance-marking within the past narrative (on the part of story characters) and those of stance-marking in the present (e.g., evaluative comments about past story events) differ? If so, in what ways?
- 2) Do past-oriented and present-oriented stance markers work together to intersubjectively build a resulting “stacked” stance (Dancygier 2012) shared between storyteller and addressee?

Data for this study come from two conversational ASL corpora: conversations of ASL-signing dyads recorded in both the US and Canada in 2005 (Shaffer), and a conversational corpus recorded in Canada in 2000 (Janzen). In this study we focus on narrative passages that emerged spontaneously in the conversations.

Janzen (2019) notes that in ASL narratives, past and present spaces overlap in many ways, for example through body partitioning (Dudis 2004) a signer may relate a past event and while maintaining one hand’s positioning in space, look at the hands/space from the perspective of the narrator and comment on it by signing with the other hand or with facial gestures (or both). By this we understand that elements of past and present spaces can be simultaneously represented.

This study, then, explores the ways that past stances of story characters and present stances of narrators are expressed, and whether there are differences in their expression. To do this, we look at spatial and body positioning, the spaces where signs are directed, and the direction of eye gaze. For example, it appears that for story characters, stance-marking signs can be directed toward other entities positioned around the shared space but never toward the addressee, with eye gaze patterning in a similar way. However, stance-markers originating with the (present) narrator can be directed toward these same positions or toward the addressee, with eye gaze more often toward the addressee.

A complicating factor, however, is that there may be ambiguity regarding whether the stance expressed is that of a past story character or present narrator. In one example, a signer tells of being shocked by seeing someone in handcuffs and ankle shackles, escorted by prison guards in a hospital emergency room. It is unclear whether the stance expression ‘oh f*ck!’ was actually signed (or thought) by the character, or whether it is a present-time choice made by the narrator and imposed on the character, which would suggest that this element of the story is a present construal of the event and not a factual re-telling.

Finally, we explore cases where multiple stance expressions exist and how they “stack” to create an overall stance that is more than a single stance expression can achieve. Results show that narrators may at times “plant” stances in enacted story characters’ discourse that are intended intersubjectively for the present-time addressee.

References

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