

SIGN VS. GESTURE

Маша Кюсева, НИУ ВШЭ  
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# What is sign?



# What is sign?

Simple answer:

Linguistic units used by deaf and hard-of-hearing in sign languages



# What is sign?



# What is gesture?



# What is gesture?

Simple answer:

Body and hand movement used by hearing people in the process of speech



# What is gesture?



# sign vs. gesture

- Degree of conventionalization  
“form” – “meaning” relationship



# sign vs. gesture

- Degree of conventionalization
  - “form” – “meaning” relationship
- Decontextualization

# sign vs. gesture

- Degree of conventionalization  
“form” – “meaning” relationship
- Decontextualization
- Continuous vs. categorical nature
  - gesture: differences in form correspond to differences in meaning in a continuous fashion
  - sign: many different articulations of a word are linked to the same conventional meaning (Okrent 2002)

# Problems

- Gestures which act like signs

## Emblems



# Problems

- Signs which act like gestures  
    Sign and Shape Specifiers



# Questions

- Can signers gesture?
  - Yes => what is gesture in sign languages?
- Do audial gestures exist?



# Different definitions of gesture

# S. Wilcox (2004)

“a functional unit, an equivalence class of coordinated movements”

Very broad definition, it:

(1) does not distinguish gestures from signs or words;

(2) is neutral with regard to the type of function which is performed;

(3) does not include or exclude data on the basis of articulatory apparatus



## A. Kendon (2004)

“visible action used as an utterance or as a part of an utterance”

gesture is any action, which, according to the addressee, is produced to transmit information





# Kendon's continuum

gesticulation

speech-  
linked gest.

emblems

pantomime

signs

**Gesticulation** stands for the motion that embodies a meaning relatable to the accompanying speech



# Kendon's continuum

gesticulation

speech-  
linked gest.

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**Speech-linked gestures** are parts of sentences themselves



# Kendon's continuum

gesticulation

speech-  
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emblems

pantomime

signs

**Emblems** are conventionalized signs



# Kendon's continuum



- **Pantomime** is a dumb show, a gesture or sequence of gestures conveying a narrative line, produced without speech



# Kendon's continuum

gesticulation

speech-  
linked gest.

emblems

pantomime

signs

- **Signs** are lexical words in a sign language



# Kendon's continuum

gesticulation

speech-  
linked gest.

emblems

pantomime

signs

speech accompaniment



language properties



# Diachronic interpretation

Some (if not all) sign language signs are believed to originate from gestures

Wilcox, 2004:

- a gesture enacting upper body strength -> lexical meaning 'strong' -> grammatical function of the modal verb 'can';
- a gesture enacting looking in the mirror -> a lexeme 'mirror' -> a modal verb 'seem'.



# Some phonological changes a gesture undergoes when becoming a sign

- two-handed forms tend to become one-handed;
- movement patterns become simplified to one- or two-phrase movements;
- hand movements are performed within a relatively restricted, centralized space, typically immediately in front of the person's upper chest;
- in the transformation from elaborate depiction or enactment to a reduced sign, features from the original enactment are only retained if they remain in contrast with features of other gestures in the system





# A. Okrent (2002)

- gesture is any sort of action which is not linguistic
- a modality-free notion of gesture:  
gesture exists not only in a signed, but also in a spoken form.



# Spoken gestures

- It was loooooong time



# Spoken gestures

- It was loooooong time
- The bird flew up [high pitch] and down [low pitch]



## A. Okrent (2002)

The Okrent's interpretation of the term "gesture" allows for gestures to be produced simultaneously with linguistic elements on the same articulators.



Can signers gesture?



# Can signers gesture?

1. Gestures as manual actions which are interspersed with the sign stream

WHY WAKE-UP EARLY *gesture* ASK *gesture*

‘Why does he wake up early? Ask him’

(Marshark 1994; Emmorey 1999)



# Can signers gesture?

## 2. Gestures as nonmanual actions

\_\_\_\_\_looking \_\_\_\_\_smiling

LOOK-AROUND

SMILE

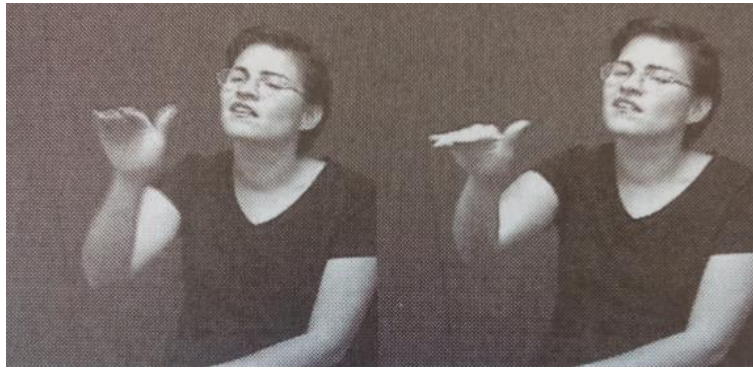
‘He looked around and then smiled’

(Emmorey, 1999; Metzger, 1995)

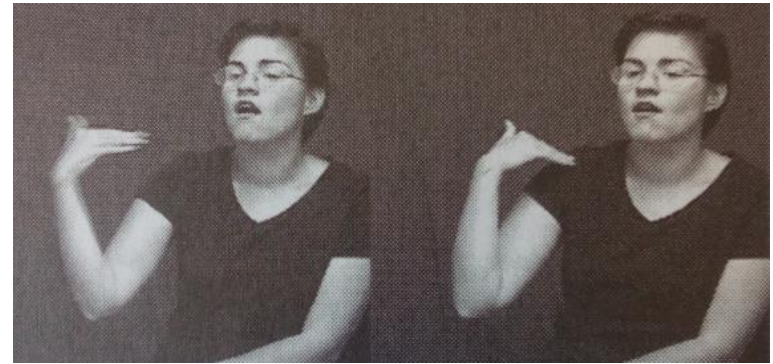


# Can signers gesture?

## 3. Gestures as parts of signs



I-remind-you



you-remind-I

Handshape  
Orientation  
Movement  
Location



lexical

gestural

(Liddell, 1995)





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