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## ***Grammar, discourse and the body in Brazilian Sign Language***

For both theoretical and methodological reasons, questions concerning the relation of gesture to grammar and gesture to discourse have only fairly recently begun to constitute a coherent research agenda. Sign language linguistics may occupy a particularly important role for studies in this area, owing to the modal proximity of what traditionally is considered gestural versus what is best considered verbal: how do signers blend discrete/sequential/combinatorial features of bodily movement with gradient/simultaneous features to produce a thoroughly visual-gestural natural language? In this talk, I will report on research at the University of São Paulo which studies the relation between “verbal” and “gestural” in conversational interaction and narrative in Brazilian Sign Language.

In the area of conversational interaction, the goal has been to identify the formal resources employed by signers to segment the flow of signed discourse into information packages, assuming that such segmentation is fundamental for both our cognitive and social life (Langacker, 2001; Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974). Data were taken from semi-spontaneous conversations between pairs of deaf friends, primary users of Brazilian Sign Language. Analysis was done on the basis of the video record, transcribed using ELAN, controlling for eye gaze and eyeblinks, body and head movement, and, most crucially, demarcation of the gesture phases (McNeill, 1992; Kita et al, 1997) for each manual sign and non-sign gesture. The search for the markers of discourse segmentation proceeded from the analysis of simpler, single-unit turns, to increasingly complex yet still highly structured turns, such as lists (Jefferson, 1990) and contrasts (Atkinson, 1984). Results show that gestural modulations of signs, along with eye-gaze, body and facial expression, are all implicated in the process of segmenting sign language discourse into minimal coherent language chunks.

Along with conversation, narrative is one of the leading candidates for a universal genre of language use. It is the site of at least two layers of intersubjectivity: that at which the narrator interacts with the narratee and that at which subjects within the narrative interact among themselves. In oral or signed narratives, this first layer of intersubjectivity is necessarily embodied in the face-to-face presence of the participants in the enunciative act. In oral languages, within this initial, embodied, physically grounded enunciative setting, the second layer of virtual narrative intersubjectivity is constructed through the medium of language. Through such linguistic devices as tense and modality, the narrator builds virtual spaces in which the narrative world is put onstage while backgrounding its rootedness in the current telling; and through linguistic embedding, voices are able to interact through the medium of other voices. In signed languages these functions of virtualizing the story space and narrative interaction are not performed only through verbal means, but also and principally by using the same physically present body in the same physical space in which the primary level of intersubjectivity is grounded and enacted. The mediation between the two layers of intersubjectivity is achieved in the gestural structuring of physical space by means of such analog media as postural shift, bodily tension, facial expression and eye gaze, building on gestural resources that are massively available in the non-linguistic performance of coordinated activity.

Curiously, as almost primitively central as the concepts of embodiment, intersubjectivity, and grounding are to the semiotic enterprise, they all appear to bear the marks of correction and re-direction: embodiment to correct a philosophy of disembodiment; intersubjectivity to remind us of the natural habitat of the subject; and grounding to re-root symbols and discourse in the life-world from which they derive their meaning. The study of signed language narratives engages us in a kind of home-coming, rediscovering the meaningful wholeness of our intrinsically embodied, intersubjective, grounded experience.