Defining and annotating constructed action and role shift

Kearny Cormier
Deafness Cognition and Language Research Centre,
University College London, k.cormier@ucl.ac.uk

Sandra Smith
Centre for Deaf Studies, University of Bristol, Sandra.D.Smith@bristol.ac.uk

Sign Language Discourse workshop, DGfS, Göttingen
23 February 2011

Constructing action (CA)

- Signer uses his/her eyegaze, head, face and/or body to represent what a character/referent does, thinks, feels or says
- Also known in the sign linguistics literature as “role shift”, “referential shift”
- CA may occur alone or with lexical signs or classifier constructions
  (e.g., Metzger 1995, Sallandre & Cuxac 2002, Aarons & Morgan 2003)
- Occurs in different registers
  (Quinto-Pozos & Mehta 2010)

Conflicting views? On acquisition

- CA as relatively easy
  - Use of ”role shift-like devices” in various groups (deaf, hearing, children, adults): “can be easily innovated and do not have to be learned” (Casey 2003)
- CA as relatively difficult
  - CA (“role play”) acquired after indexing of absent referents (Loew 1984)
  - CA (“reported action”) acquired later than direct quotation (Emmorey & Reilly 1998)
  - L2 acquisition of ”CA/role shift” in hearing adults is slow and protracted (Metzger 1995/Lentz 1986)
- Terminology?

PaLM project

- The Expression of Perspective, Location and Motion in BSL
  - How does age of acquisition of BSL/extent of experience with BSL affect mastery of constructed action (CA) and entity classifier constructions (CL)?
  - Aim: to compare use of CA and CL across signers with different language backgrounds (adults, children, native, non-native)
  - How do these constructions develop in children over time (ages 6 to 10)?

Tasks

- Participants were shown video clips and were asked to describe each clip to a deaf adult native signer
- Signed narratives were coded for various features using ELAN
  - e.g. CA articulators and role(s), also gloss tiers for lexical material and CL tiers for classifier constructions

DGFs Sign Language Discourse workshop
CA articulator tiers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CA Type</th>
<th>Primary Role</th>
<th>Secondary Role</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CA-eyegaze</td>
<td>Break of eyegaze with addressee for purpose of enacting referent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA-head</td>
<td>Signer's use of his/her head to represent head movement/posture of referent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA-face</td>
<td>Signer's use of his/her facial expression to represent face of referent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA-torso</td>
<td>Signer's use of his/her torso to represent torso movement/posture of referent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA-dom-arm/hand</td>
<td>Signer's use of his/her dominant arm/hand to represent arm/hand of referent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA-ndom-arm/hand</td>
<td>Signer's use of his/her nondominant arm/hand to represent arm/hand of referent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Objective? Not really…

CA with multiple articulators

CA type: none

Objective? Not really…

Role tiers

- **Primary Role (Role1)**
  - Primary role, narrator as default; otherwise, the character/referent which the signer is characterising using CA
- **Secondary Role (Role2, optional)**
  - Could be narrator (if character is Role1)
  - Could be a character (if narrator is Role1)
  - Allows for mix of narrator/character roles

Determined based on combination of:

- Identification of any other simultaneous elements
- Native signer intuitions
CA type: overt

- Role 1
- CA-face
- CA-eyegaze
- CA-head

CA type: reduced

- Role 1: man
- Role 2: narrator
- CA-face
- CA-head
- CA-eyegaze
- CA-DomHand/Arm

CA type: subtle

- Role 1: narrator
- Role 2: bad dog
- CA-face

CA articulator/role dependencies

- CA articulator tier(s) active
- Role 1/Role 2 as character (non-narrator)

- Useful for keeping native signer intuitions in check
  - E.g. Break in eyegaze as marker of CA?
  - Consider role
  - E.g. Coder intuition that signer is "in" character?
  - Consider which articulators are marking CA

What does this buy us?

- Distinguishing between types of CA could help to reconcile claims that CA/role shift/referential shift is easy, difficult, etc.
  - Use of "role shift-like devices" as easier, acquired earlier (Casey 2003)
    - Overt: Character role as primary, strong CA(?)
  - CA ("reported action") as acquired later than "direct quotation" (Emmorey & Reilly 1998)
    - Reduced: Character role as primary, with secondary narrator role, CA simultaneously with lexical signs(?)

Defining CA, CD and role shift

- Constructed action
  - The representation of actions, utterances, thought, attitudes and/or feelings of a referent other than the narrator.
    - CA may be overt, reduced or subtle
- Role shift
  - A shift between roles. This may be a shift between a period of narration and a period of non-narrator role expressed via CA, or between more than one non-narrator role (each expressed via CA).
  - Referential shift

DGsS Sign Language Discourse workshop
Constructed action vs role shift

Challenge: CA and handling

- Constructions which depict handling/manipulation:
  - Classifier constructions/depicting verbs or lexical verbs of handling?
  - Or CA of the hands/arms?
- Safest to err on the side of considering all representations of productive handling/manipulation to be CA-arm/hand
- Later, go back and look at CA-arm/hand tokens (esp with no other CA articulators) in more detail

Conclusion

- Defining CA in terms of form (e.g. articulators) and function (e.g. role) could:
  - allow for cross-study, cross-linguistic comparisons
  - help reconcile seemingly conflicting findings about CA (e.g. ease, difficulty, etc)
- CA vs role shift
  - May be more useful to distinguish than equate these
- Native signer intuitions
  - Needed for identifying primary/secondary role, presence vs absence of CA
  - Identification of CA articulators help keep intuitions about roles in check

Acknowledgements

- PaLM project (2006-2011) The Expression of Perspective, Location and Motion in BSL
- Project team
  - Zed Sevcikova
  - Martine Zwets
  - Fanny Limouzin
  - Ramas Rentels
  - Kate Rowley
  - Musab Garghuti
  - Raychel Hills
- All deaf adult participants, also child participants and their schools and parents
- More info about PaLM project: http://www.dial.ucl.ac.uk/Research/palm.html
- Thank you!!
Possible role types (not yet attested in our data)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role Type</th>
<th>Role1</th>
<th>Role2</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>CharacterA</td>
<td>CharacterB</td>
<td>CA only, with representation of two character roles simultaneously (each with different articulators), with no element of narration. Native signer intuition: “in” two different characters at the same time.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Character A as primary with character B as secondary:
may be relatively difficult, acquired later(?)
E.g. Metzger 1995 (char A punch char B); cf. Dudis 2004

Degree of CA

Two ways of determining degree of CA:
1. By CA type (relying on combinations of role):
   - Overt = strong
   - Reduced = mid-strength
   - Subtle = weak
2. By number of active CA articulators:
   - More CA articulators = strong
   - Fewer CA articulators = weak

Challenges: Determining role

- Determining role is not always straightforward, even in cartoon retellings when referents are known
- Role as a non-specific referent
  - This is not unique to reported action, also occurs with constructed dialogue, even in spoken languages (Tannen 1989: 110-114):
    - “Many people have come up to me and said, ‘Ed, why don’t you run for the Senate?’”

Short token of CA (with one sign)

CA over stretch of discourse

CA over stretch of discourse (v2)