

# **The Department of Linguistics & TESOL at UT Arlington Dissertation Defense**

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## **American Sign Language Verb Categories in Constructed Action**

### **Abstract**

"This research analyzes instantiations of Constructed Action (CA) in American Sign Language. ASL has existed as a standardized sign language in the U.S. since the early 19th century, though it has only been studied linguistically for the past 40 years. The CA construction, also commonly known as "role-shift", superficially resembles mimic forms, however unlike mime, role-shift is a type of depicting construction in which the signer may use eye gaze, head shift, facial expression, stylistic variation, and use of signing space to convey information. The signer is not merely dramatizing the narrative but is directly reenacting the narrative event. While this construction may involve a level of gesture, it is linguistic in nature. CA may also use formal lexical signs, in addition to using the body and or face in gestured, mimic manner. This study found the most common signs used in CA are ASL classifiers (depicting verbs), linguistically constrained hand shapes used as an aid in description. This project involves analyzing these instantiations of the constructed action framework as well as the examples when no overt lexical sign is used. Since CA involves the communication of action, constructed action verb analysis was conducted to find any interrelational function(s) between constructed action (CA) and the verbs that occur in its use in order to determine the conditions for its use.

By looking at videotaped narratives of 36 adult native Deaf signers, this research looked for the interrelational functions between CA and verb types. The study examines whether the verb sign itself holds a significant determination in whether the signer will use CA or not. The findings suggest that the principal verb used in CA is the depicting verb (also referred to as ASL classifiers). Congruent with this finding, this study advocates that CA also tends to initialize with a depicting verb. In other words, CA starts most often with a depicting verb (73.5% of the CA occurrences). Propensities to collocate verb types within CA emerge from the results. Depicting verbs co-occur with other depicting verbs. When the plain verb inserts itself into this series, Depicting verbs will complete the sequence (90% of the CA occurrences). The Iconic gesture verb (the isolated aspects of CA) is far less frequent than first expected as compared with the Depicting verb. The Iconic gesture verb prefers to follow a depicting verb. Thus, this research concludes that CA may possess a formal structured system with concrete linguistic restrictions that licenses verb type patterns. The ASL feature Constructed Action may contrast significantly from any feature possessed by spoken language since this feature depends upon iconic elements in signing. This research shows a highly structured pattern for Constructed Action. In at least one way, ASL is an innately distinctive type of language from spoken languages. Implications of this research extend into the ASL language community particularly ASL interpreting education since this research supports a controlled system previously not addressed in the literature for the use of CA."

**Tuesday, March 27, 2012**

**2:30pm, COBA, Room 154**