

Depicting new referents in Norwegian Sign Language

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Focusing interlocutors' attention on a person or thing within a discourse involves the coordination of shared attention through the varied referential resources available in a language (e.g., Clark & Bangerter, 2004). Cognitive and functional approaches have investigated a variety of behaviors such as topic and focus constructions, preferred argument structure, pronominal anaphora, animacy, perceptual salience, and accessibility as a determining factor in the selection of referential forms (e.g., Ariel, 1990; Givón, 2017). Researchers generally agree that the choice of referential expression is linked to information management. Interlocutors use more informative referential expressions to introduce new referents, but less informative expressions are used for already salient referents. However, investigations of reference tracking have generally focused on the encoded "linguistic" and/or inferential aspects of referential coherence. To broaden this focus, here we describe how signers engage their diverse semiotic repertoire to identify and talk about referents of varying agency during a storytelling task, and we report preliminary findings from the first investigation of its kind on such patterns of reference in narratives in Norwegian Sign Language (NTS).

We collected an initial sample of 699 tokens of referring expressions from four video recordings where native signers of NTS viewed a picture book and recalled the events in their own retelling. We noted semiotic strategies employed (primarily lexical signs and noun phrases, mouthing, pointing signs, depicting signs, enactments), information status (new, reintroduced, maintained), and animacy (human, animal, inanimate) of the referents. Exploratory analysis using principal components and hierarchical clustering confirmed choice of strategy was most strongly motivated by accessibility: new referents were expressed with more conventionalized forms (especially Norwegian mouthing and lexicalized signs), whereas reintroduced/maintained referents typically involved fewer and less conventionalized semiotics. Previous results (Hodge, Ferrara, & Anible, 2019) from a parallel corpus analysis of Auslan (a signed language of Australia) revealed similar patterns except for depicting signs. In the Auslan retellings, depicting signs were a more common strategy for reintroduced or maintained referents. For the signers in this study, depicting signs were more likely to occur as a strategy for new referents ($\beta = .28$, $t = 4.78$, $p < 0.005$). This unexpected finding does not align with investigations of ASL (Frederiksen & Mayberry, 2016), BSL (Morgan, 2006), or Auslan (Hodge et al., 2019) in which depicting signs are more common as strategies during maintenance and reintroduction rather than new mentions. We discuss the implications of this from a construction grammar approach that characterizes the difference between lexical and depicting signs as a matter of degree rather than type (Lepic & Occhino, 2018), acknowledging that grammaticalization of depicting signs into fully lexicalized forms results in fluid boundaries between these categories that are subjectively and contextually dependent. While additional data collection may further clarify these findings, we allow for the possibility that differences between depiction and lexicalization may be less affected by patterns of narrative reference tracking in the ecology of NTS signers than research on other signed languages would suggest.

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