

# On the role of eye gaze in depicting and enacting: A case study of Flemish Sign Language narratives

Inez Beukeleers  
KU Leuven  
[inez.beukeleers@kuleuven.be](mailto:inez.beukeleers@kuleuven.be)

Myriam Vermeerbergen  
KU Leuven  
[myriam.vermeerbergen@kuleuven.be](mailto:myriam.vermeerbergen@kuleuven.be)

**Keywords:** eye gaze, depicting, enacting, grounding, Flemish Sign Language

Studies within signed language linguistics have highlighted different linguistic functions of eye gaze. When using depicting signs, for example, signers tend to gaze at their own hands, i.e. at the projected referent. During enactment, on the other hand, signers' gaze behavior often reflects the gaze of the referent in the discourse (e.g. Cuxac 2000 for LSF). Important to note, however, is that these studies do not report on a systematic analysis of gaze behavior. Moreover, eye gaze is shown to be an important mechanism to seek for positive evidence of understanding (e.g. Baker 1977) and as such to keep track of common ground (Clark and Brennan 1991). As both depicting signs and enactment are less conventionalized and less entrenched (Johnston & Schembri 2010), this coordination of understanding might be more important and as such discourse regulating functions might overrule linguistic functions of eye gaze. The current study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the role of eye gaze in signed discourse by providing a first fine-grained analysis of eye gaze in 10 narratives of "Frog, where are you?" (Mayer 1969) taken from the Flemish Sign Language corpus (Van Herreweghe et al. 2015). Results show that signers tend to alternate their gaze between the projected referent and the interlocutor when depicting a certain action or event. Signers thus incorporate both linguistic and discourse regulating functions of eye gaze when depicting an event space. When enacting, signers tend to imitate the referent's gaze and the use of eye gaze in the process of updating their common ground seems to be less common. Further qualitative analysis will gain more insights in the achievement of common ground during/after periods of enactment.

## References

- Baker, C. 1977. Regulators and turn-taking in American Sign Language discourse. In L. Friedmann (Ed.) *On the other hand: New perspectives on American Sign Language*, 215-236. New York: Academic Press.
- Clark, H. H., Brennan, S.E. 1991. Grounding in Communication. In L.B. Resnick, J.M. Levine and S.D. Teasley (Eds.) *Perspectives on socially shared cognition*. Washington: APA Books.
- Cuxac, C. 2000. *La Langue des Signes Française: Les voies de l'iconicité*. Paris: Ophrys.
- Mayer, M. 1969. *Frog, where are you?*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.
- Van Herreweghe, M., Vermeerbergen, M., Demey, E., De Durpel, H., Nyffels, H., Verstraete, S. 2015. et al. 2015. *Het Corpus VGT. Een digitaal open access corpus van video's en annotaties van Vlaamse Gebarentaal, ontwikkeld aan de Universiteit Gent i.s.m. KU Leuven*. [www.corpusvgt.be](http://www.corpusvgt.be).
- Schembri, A., Johnston, T. 2010. Variation, lexicalization and grammaticalization in signed languages. In *Language et société* 1/131, p. 19-35. doi: 10.3917/lis.131.0019