

The embodiment of stance in narratives in two signed languages

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The ‘embodied simulation’ hypothesis (Kok and Cienki 2017) attempts to model how a speaker (or, in our case, signer) creates a simulated version of another entity’s action or speech, claiming that “language comprehension engages partial re-enactment of perceptual, motoric, and affective memory traces” (p. 3). This seems to fit well with how signers enact character actions and interactions when they construct narrative sequences. These portrayals are necessarily embodied, grounded in experiential memory and, it appears that signers intend their visual narrative to be jointly experienced.

Such jointly-embodied simulations involve multiple markers of stance both in portraying projected subjective character stance along with frequently interjected signer-as-narrator stance marking, characterized by phenomena such as simultaneity (Vermeerbergen, Leeson and Crasborn 2007) and body partitioning (Dudis 2004). Stance is conveyed in two respects in narratives. First, characters within the narrative space are portrayed as subjectively viewpointed in that the narrator imposes a viewpoint on those characters (and a viewpoint on their relative narrative space). Second, the narrator herself has a subjective viewpoint on aspects of the narrative as it unfolds, intersubjectively between her and her present interlocutor. Shaffer (under review) suggests that signers assign an “attributed stance” to some referent and then co-opt that stance as their own. These stances are fully enacted, and therefore visually displayed for the addressee. The narratives in Janzen (2012, 2018) show evidence of similarly complex stance-taking, highlighting the fact that these stance portrayals reach across past and present spaces. But are these stance elements “stacked” in Dancygier’s (2012) sense?

The present study examines this question by looking at spontaneous narrative passages in American Sign Language (ASL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) to examine the multiplicity of expressions that indicate stance within utterances and the embodied simulation effects they create. How do signers enact the stance-laden perspectives of narrative characters to scaffold their own intentional and intersubjective stance “performances” so as to shape addressees’ embodied simulation of the narrative events, thus jointly constructing a way to apprehend the narrative scene, and ultimately leading to a way to comprehend the stance-related goals of the narrator. Our results show that multiple elements frequently combine in ASL and ISL utterances to convey speaker stance, leading us to believe that these instances provide evidence of embodied simulated comprehension.

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