

Speech and Sign: The Whole Human Language

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Traditional historical and comparative linguistics emphasized differences across spoken languages and language families. Chomskyan generative linguistics caused a paradigm shift by emphasizing universal properties, thought to be innate, and minimizing the role of the body, dubbed “externalization” [1].

Both approaches are called into question by natural sign languages. In the absence of auditory input, humans inevitably create an alternative sign language system, a system exhibiting impressive formal universals that are indeed similar to those of spoken languages [2]. But that is not the whole story.

I will demonstrate certain fundamental, predictable, and nontrivial differences between spoken and signed languages, most notably, a direct correspondence between bodily articulations and linguistic functions [3,4]. The striking difference between self-organization of speech articulators in the vocal tract, and self-organization of visible parts of the body -- each associated cognitively with a linguistic function (Figure 1) -- will be presented. I will argue that it is precisely these differences that shed light on the nature of the whole human language in our species.

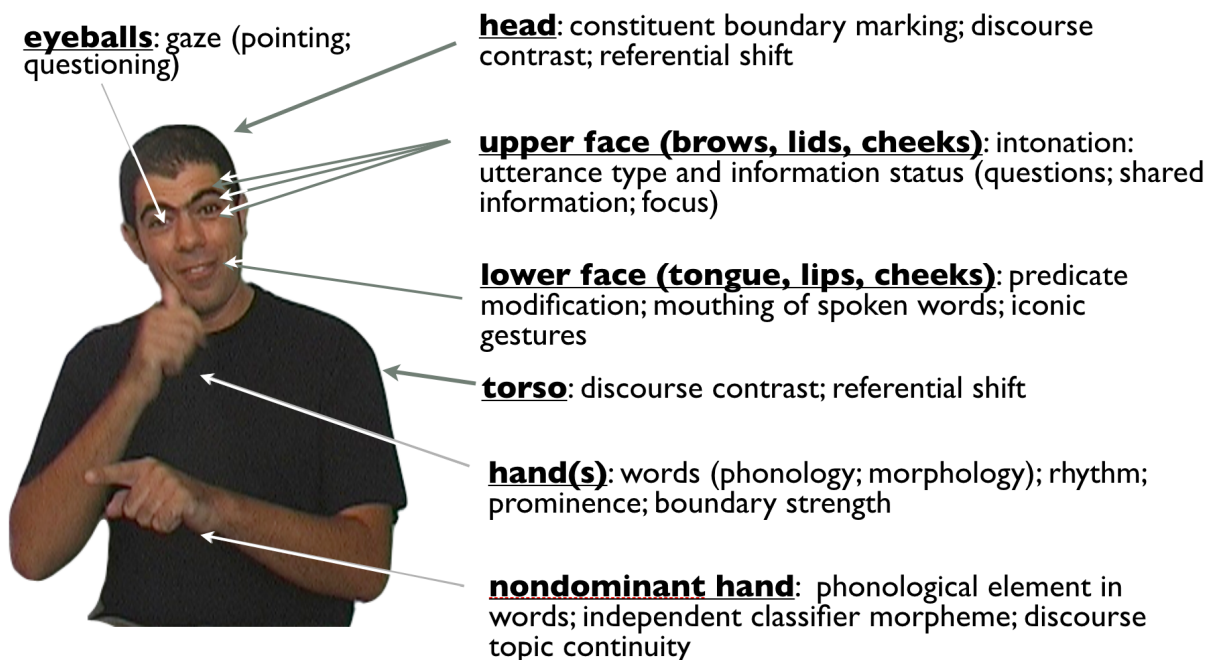


Figure 1. Correspondence between bodily articulations and linguistic functions in sign languages

References

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- [4] Sandler, W. (2018). The body as evidence for the nature of language. *Frontiers in Psychology* 9/1782. 2-21. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01782