

# Joint attention and shifting spatial reference points in ASL

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## Introduction

- ASL signers take full advantage of their surrounding space to localize conceptual entities they wish to refer to.
- Joint attention is directed to these spaces.
- Joint attention is dynamic.
- Primary and secondary attention
- Some references appear to be subordinate

## Reference points (Langacker 1998:7):

"One aspect of dynamic conceptualization is our very general cognitive ability to direct attention to some entity".

"By serving as an initial focus of attention the reference point tends to activate an array of associated entities which collectively constitute its dominion. This enables attention to shift to a secondary focus within it".

## Our view on space

- It isn't sufficient to talk just about "spaces"
- The hands are articulators
- The hands are objects in space (Wilcox 2004, 2010)
- The articulation and the space must be viewed together.
- The articulation as object in space is symbolic, as are gestures.
- The articulation in space is linguistic material.

## Embodiment

"Despite arguments in favor of abstract internal cognitive representations of space, our physical anchoring to the world has significant consequences for the way that we carry out spatial computations, for the efficiency and accuracy with which we do so, and perhaps even for how we come to develop spatial representations of the world." (Landau, O'Hearn and Hoffman 2010: 132)

- Embodiment may seem to be an odd thing to talk about in a signed language
- It might seem obvious, because the signer uses parts of the body for articulation
- But in terms of spatial relationships, the signer's own body is at a subjective center of a space
- The signer has a subjective perspective on that space
- Signers appear to capitalize on that subjective, deictic center
- If this is true, then it would seem most appropriate to direct primary joint attention to the body, and not to what might be articulated out in some space away from the body
- However, signers also use and direct attention to spaces away from the body
- This is particularly true in cases of body partitioning, in which the signer's hand(s) represents something unconnected to the signer enacting some action

## Dudis (2004) on body partitioning: How is attention focused?



- Primary attention is to the signer's body.
- Secondary attention is to the partitioned librarian.
- There are two main spatial elements.
- Attention is distributed in space.

## Passives



'I was given a trophy.'

## Reported speech evidentials (Shaffer, to appear)



'It was told to me, and I was surprised...'

## Subordination (Janzen 2008)



'We saw the van up ahead.'

About certain gestures Kendon (2004:180) says that "the speaker is able to present that concept in another way, in a way that is not fleeting, but can be held before the audience. Perhaps, because of this, the gesture can serve in assisting to fix this concept in the mind of the audience."

Police: leftward space

Vehicles: rightward space



'The police officer motioned for us to pull off the road, so we did.'

## The hands as objects of attention

Attention is directed to the hand (and a space) that is representational of some mental construct (and which is therefore likely similar to a gesture)

It has properties of both an object that has attention directed toward it and a linguistic sign

Thus the observer is asked to attend to several spaces at once, but also to evaluate the relative weight to associate with each space/articulation

This is distributed attention

Further, the observer may be asked to link several spaces without assigning additional attentional weight

In the example where the police officer motions for everyone to pull off the road (and they comply), two distinct spaces are used (one to a distal leftward space and one to a distal rightward space) to locate the same entity - the car

## Conclusions

- Attention isn't directed to spaces but rather to articulations in spaces.
- Attention is distributed among several spaces that vary in 'weight'
- What the observer understands to be of primary importance depends on the salience of the elements assigned by the signer.
- For example, by the length of time the hands are held in place in a space.

## Does it work?

- We need to code a stretch of narrative discourse paying attention to how intended attention is distributed, then
- track how viewers actually do attend, perhaps through an eye tracking study.