The embodiment of speaker subjectivity in modals and evidentials in ASL

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Inherent in the conceptual domain of epistemic modality is the potential for the speaker to express a level of commitment, from weak to strong, to the situation encoded by the proposition. On another axis, a modal construction may be either agent-oriented or speaker-oriented, and when speaker-oriented, the expression may range in the degree of overt or implied subjectivity. Evidential constructions, which share at least some characteristics with epistemic modal constructions, may also range along the dimension of subjectification/objectification.

Here, we are interested in the interplay of these features for both modals and evidentials in American Sign Language (ASL), and take an embodied view of the signer-as-articulator's production of both modal constructions and evidentials. Embodiment means more than just using the body in the articulation of a signed language. Taking the view of embodiment exemplified by Landau, O'Hearn and Hoffman (2010), we examine how the body's "anchoring to the world" (2010:132) in large part determines how spatial representations are developed and, in fact, form the basis for the expression of both actual and abstract spatial relations. A signed language gives us particular insight into the exploration of these aspects of thought and expression because the signer does use her body, face and hands in the articulation of language. Crucially, this takes place within the space surrounding the signer, upon which conceptual space mappings occur with regularity.

In this study we look at two aspects of modal and evidential constructions in an attempt to better understand how signers embody speaker subjectivity. We first examine structural elements in the clauses where modals and evidentials appear, that is, the modal or evidential form, the existence of an overt agent whether first person or other, eye gaze, and spatial relations expressed within the clause, particularly as informed by viewing the hands as objects (Wilcox 2007) and the notion of body partitioning (Dudis 2004). From this we see evidence that links to the second aspect of this study, which is whether or not the degree to which the subjective stance of the signer can be correlated to some overt feature, or combinations of features of the construction. The study is corpus-based, with modal and evidential constructions taken from conversations between dyads in ASL and annotated in ELAN. Shaffer (2000, 2004, in press) and Shaffer and Janzen (in preparation) have begun to categorize modal verbs and evidential structures in ASL, but to date they have not investigated linguistic correlates among elements in these constructions altogether. The present study seeks to do just this, and thus give us a clearer understanding of what an embodied view of grammar in ASL can tell us about the human capacity to conceptualize subjectively construed relationships between the language user and the propositions she expresses, along with the development of linguistic structures that represent her views.

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