

A study on the use of constructed action by FinSL signers: Enriching corpus analysis with linguistic ethnography

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This paper presents a study on *constructed action* – an enactment-based way to express meaning, in which a person depicts the actions, thoughts, feelings or utterances of discourse referents with different parts of their body (Figure 1; referred to also with terms such as *demonstration*, *body quotation*, (*mimetic*) (*re-*) *enactment*, *character viewpoint gesture* and *depiction*; e.g. Clark & Gerrig 1990; McNeill 1992; Enfield 2009; Streeck 2008; Lilja & Piirainen-Marsh 2019). Constructed action is a well-known phenomenon in sign language discourse, and its use has been found to vary among different people and across different discourse contexts (e.g., e.g. Ferrara & Johnston 2014; Hodge & Ferrara 2014; Cormier et al. 2015; Puupponen et al. 2022).

In order to get a better understanding of the causes of this variation, we conducted a study in which we combined the analysis of the Corpus of Finnish Sign Language (Corpus FinSL) with ethnographic data collected through interviews with the corpus participants. We annotated and analyzed the tokens of constructed action in the corpus materials of 22 signers and interviewed these same signers about their family and social networks, as well as their lifelong language, geographical, educational, and employment trajectories. In the presentation we discuss (i) how the corpus and interview data were used in the exploratory (Conditional inference trees) and confirmatory (Generalized linear models) statistical analysis of constructed action, (ii) how the statistical analysis shows that the use of constructed action interacts with the signer's age and language education background, but not, e.g., with their parents' signer profiles, (iii) how the qualitative inspection of signers' personal histories and communicative ecologies illuminate the corpus-based analysis of constructed action, and (iv) how these issues could contribute to the discourses on deaf education. We suggest that the approach taken in the current study enables linguistic analysis of corpora to "open up" more to language users' lived experiences, while still "tying down" empirical descriptions of language (see Rampton, 2007).



Figure 1. Examples of conveying the meaning 'being surprised' in FinSL with a lexical sign (left) and with constructed action (right).

Keywords: sign language; corpus; linguistic ethnography; enactment; constructed action

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