

Topicality and the problem of “topic” in American Sign Language discourse

TERRY JANZEN

UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

Submitted: 20/04/2025 Revised version: 16/08/2025

Accepted: 18/08/2025 Published: 13/11/2025



Articles are published under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (The authors remain the copyright holders and grant third parties the right to use, reproduce, and share the article).

Abstract

American Sign Language (ASL) has been characterized as a topic-comment or as a topic-prominent language. But studies based on actual usage reveal a great deal of variation, leading to the proposal here that the very idea of a definable category of topic should be re-examined. Janzen (2007) proposes a topicality hierarchy for constructions in ASL, finding that the higher degree of topicality an expression has, the less likely it would be found as a marked topic. Only expressions at the lowest levels of the topicality scale occur as marked topics in topic-comment constructions. When the topic content is nominal, marked topic phrases are typically explicit noun phrases or full clauses. Relatedly, marked topics indicate topic shift rather than topic maintenance. In line with Langacker’s (2008, 2013) analysis of topic expressions as reference-point constructions, topics in ASL are subjectively chosen by signers as a pragmatic framing mechanism, given that the signer might have multiple viable reference points from which to choose. It is also an intersubjective choice, taking into account assumptions regarding the addressee’s knowledge store. If “topic” is a language-specific notion, characterizing topic as a cross-linguistic category may be problematic. It is within this context that “topic” is explored in this study of ASL.

Keywords: identifiability; intersubjectivity; reference point; topic marking; topic shift; topicality hierarchy.

1. Introduction¹

American Sign Language (ASL) has long been understood as having frequent “topic-comment” constructions (Liddell 1980; Valli & Lucas 1992), and has been characterized as a topic-comment language (e.g., Ingram 1978; McIntire 1982; Janzen 1998, 1999), or as a topic-prominent language typologically (Slobin 2006). Early accounts of ASL treat topic as categorical (e.g., Friedman 1976; Liddell 1980, 2003; Valli & Lucas 1992), meaning that a single, unified category of topic constructions is understood, characterized by specific obligatory markers structurally, and with a singular purpose, that is, to “front” or left-dislocate some particular sentence element (Lillo-Martin 1991; see also Neidle et al. 2000). Most early work on topic in ASL focused solely on structural properties, without much consideration of discourse or pragmatic functions. An example can be taken from Valli, Lucas, and Mulrooney (2005: 131):

(1) [HOMEWORK]-TOP, PRO.1 DETEST²

‘Homework, I detest it/As for homework, I detest it.’

The entirety of Valli et al.’s (2005: 131) description of “topicalization” is that topicalization “occurs in ASL when the object of the sentence can be moved to the front of the sentence. ... The object that is moved to the front of the sentence and is topicalized is marked by particular nonmanual signals, which include raised eyebrows and a head tilt, and possibly a short pause.” They include no discussion of functionality, discourse motivations, or discourse effects. Janzen’s (1998) study on topic in ASL texts finds that, in actuality, objects “fronted” as topics constitute only a small percentage of topic-comment constructions (9.7%), suggesting that functions other than object fronting may be more characteristic of topic marking in naturalistic ASL discourse.

¹ My appreciation goes to the two anonymous reviewers whose detailed and helpful comments have made this a better paper. Thanks too to Pavel Ozerov and Doriana Cimmino for their many insightful suggestions.

² ASL signs are represented by English word glosses, which should be considered approximations of meanings – sometimes it is a reasonable match but often it is less so, and it should not be assumed that any categorization or grammatical properties of the English words apply to ASL. It is but one way to represent ASL on the page. See the notation key for details. Most translations of ASL discourse examples are not transliterations, but conventional and grammatical English phrasing.

The construction in (1) is without question grammatical, but in functional terms, consistent with pragmatic accounts of given versus new information (e.g., Halliday 1967; Li & Thompson 1976, 1981; Haiman 1978; Givón 1984; Prince 1981), it is framed only as a possible construction, and says nothing regarding under what discourse circumstances it may be chosen by the signer, nor the construal (Langacker 1991) conceptualized by the signer at the moment of expression. In a small corpus based study, Janzen's (1998) finding that topic-marked objects were rare is possibly because verb-object combinations more frequently constitute new, or focused, information, thus are more commonly found in comment phrases rather than marked topic phrases.

More recent discourse-based studies reveal that there is a great deal of variation within the presumed category of "topic" in ASL, leading to the proposal here that the very idea of a definable category of topic is in need of re-examination. Ideally, this merits a typological study cross-linguistically, but in this article I examine topic and topicality within just one language, ASL, leaving cross-linguistic comparisons for later study. I do, however, bring several relevant examples from other languages into the discussion below.

In what follows, in section 2 I discuss topic from functional and cognitive linguistics frameworks, and in section 3, look at some structural attributes of topic within ASL utterances. Section 4 next gives a number of examples of the most basic types of topic constructions found in ASL. Section 5 examines the discourse functions of topic in ASL. In section 6 I suggest a number of problems with the ideas of topic and topicality from a usage perspective that are specific to ASL, including discussion of a topicality hierarchy of various syntactic, morphological, and grammatical items, degrees of givenness, and differences between sentence-level and discourse-level topics. Throughout sections 2 – 6 I retain the term "topic" for the examples under discussion, and in particular their notation, as this is the term used widely in the literature for these constructions. Section 7 offers some conclusions, and suggests that an appropriate alternate analysis can be found in Langacker's (1991, 2008, 2013) notion of reference point.

2. Functional/cognitive approaches to topic

Givón (1984) proposes that propositions in successful discourse must have a balance between "old" information (that is, information identifiable to interlocutors), and "new"

information. This is the case because readily identifiable information is crucial for the addressee to ground what is new. Too much old information, however, results in discourse that is redundant. Too much new information, on the other hand, leads to discourse that is incoherent. In topic-comment constructions, this balance might seem neatly divided: first the addressee encounters a phrase (or clause) that is identifiable information, followed by a phrase (or clause) that contains new information that is somehow linked to the content of the topic phrase. But this may be too simplistic – in some of the ASL examples below, what constitutes topic versus comment, and identifiable versus new information, doesn't always neatly coincide.

One factor has to do with what constitutes identifiable information. Chafe (1976, 1994) introduces the idea that identifiability is based on what is within the interlocutor's conscious awareness at a given moment. Information within an intonation unit, the unit Chafe considers to be the primary type of constituent in discourse, may be active, semiactive, or inactive. More specifically, according to Chafe, active information is what a speaker assumes to be in the consciousness of the addressee at the moment the utterance is articulated, while new information the speaker assumes is being introduced into the addressee's consciousness. Information that is semiactive is not quite fully active (i.e., is not immediately accessible without effort), but which can be recalled or brought forward when cued by some particular related phrasing. Chafe suggests that the conscious mind is dynamic, and while he discusses the three categories of active, semiactive, and inactive, we might consider these on a continuum, especially because the category of semiactive seems to imply a wide range of possibilities both in terms of the degree of semiactiveness and the amount of cuing it might take to move an item from semiactive to active. Prince's (1981) taxonomy of "assumed familiarity" in some ways aligns with Chafe's model, where items—in Prince's case, noun phrases (NPs)—may be newly introduced into the discourse, evoked from the text or situation, or inferable in some way.

An "aboutness" view of topic is given in Hornby (1971: 1976; italics in original) as such: "The part of the sentence which constitutes what the speaker is talking about is being called the *topic* of the sentence in the present work. The rest of the sentence, the *comment*, provides new information about the topic." Similarly, Lambrecht (1994: 118; small caps in original) defines topic as "the thing which the proposition expressed by the sentence is ABOUT". The topic is "the already established 'matter of current concern' about

which new information is ADDED in an utterance” (Lambrecht 1994: 150, small caps in original; see also Li & Thompson 1981; Reinhart 1982; Dahlstrom 1995). Lambrecht notes that how this is manifest in different languages can be quite variable, from being formally marked to no specific grammatical marking, but important to note is how he defines topic.

Within the theory of Cognitive Grammar, Langacker (1991, 2008, 2013) introduces the notion of reference point constructions, which he diagrams as Figure 1.

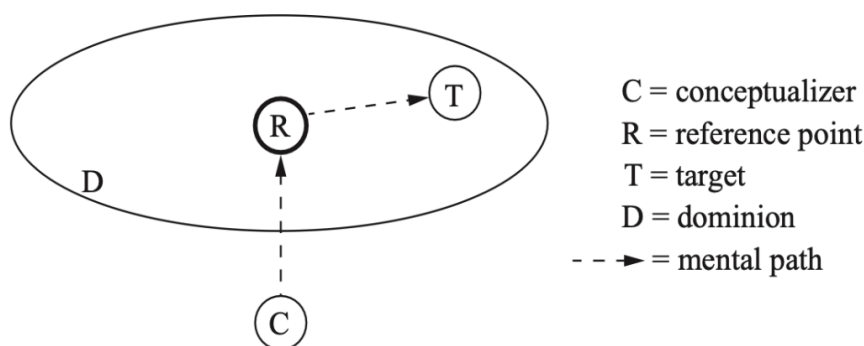


Figure 1: Reference points. From Langacker 2013: 418 (his Figure 2).

Reference point constructions include categories such as possessives and topic constructions. Langacker’s premise is that a speaker invokes “the conception of one entity for purposes of establishing mental contact with another, i.e., to single it out for individual conscious awareness” (Langacker 2013: 417). In Figure 1 the conceptualizer (C) gains mental access to a target (T) through a reference point (R). In a possessive phrase such as *his father*, C understands *father* only with reference to R. For the category of topic, it is “a salient entity evoked for purposes of mentally accessing another” (Langacker 2013: 436). Here the domain (D) is important as it is the class of potential targets within which T resides. We will look at this in more detail in section 7, once a number of ASL examples have been examined.

Here we contrast earlier conceptualizations of topic in ASL (e.g., Liddell 1980; McIntire 1982; Janzen 1995a) which suggest category-like status, with more recent discourse data-driven analyses where such a categorial status is less certain. These various views of topic are evaluated against particular discourse-based examples of topic constructions in ASL in the sections that follow.

3. Where is “topic” positioned within the clause?

In languages with marked topic constructions, which are typically thought of as “topic-comment” languages (see, for example, Li & Thompson 1976; Chafe 1976), an iconic constituent order is topic-first, comment-second, following the adage that old information iconically precedes new information (Haiman 1978; Givón 1985).³ Li and Thompson note that the relationship between topic and comment does not equate to that of subject and predicate, with the implication that topic in these languages does not equate to subject. This will be evident in the discussion of topic in ASL below.

ASL clause structure has been examined from various linguistic theoretical frameworks, including structuralism (Friedman 1976; Liddell 1980), formalist/government-binding theory (Aarons et al. 1992, 1994, 1995; Neidle et al. 2000; Sandler & Lillo-Martin 2006), functionalism/pragmatics (McIntire 1982; Janzen 1998, 1999), and cognitive linguistics (Liddell 2003; Janzen 2017, 2018; Shaffer 2004).⁴ In past research on topic in ASL, topic phrases are prototypically marked by raised eyebrows concomitant with the entire phrase, and a backward head tilt, often followed by a pause, with the eyebrows and head returning to a more neutral position once the signer begins the comment phrase. From a grammaticalization perspective, Janzen (1998, 1999) analyses marked topics in ASL as having grammaticalized from yes/no questions, following Haiman (1978), suggesting a change from interactional to grammatical in the sense that a yes/no question (eyebrows raised, forward head tilt) invites a response whereas a similarly marked topic phrase (eyebrows raised, backward head tilt) marks shared information.

Janzen notes that yes/no questions necessarily include significant assumed shared information, which means they have much in common with topic phrases (Li & Thompson 1976; Haiman 1978; Geluykens 1993) and so are commonly noted as grammatical precursors to topics diachronically. Interestingly, the difference in head tilt in ASL yes/no questions and topics is gesturally iconic in that the forward head tilt of a yes/no question may be a gestural invitation to respond, whereas the backward head tilt of a marked topic may signal a (grammaticalized) topic function that does not invite or

³ Although, other orders are attested, for example sentence-final topics in Tagalog. See, for example, Naylor (1975).

⁴ These citations are of course representational; numerous additional works on ASL and a host of other signed languages fall within these theoretical frameworks.

require a response from the addressee.⁵ The marked topic constructions analyzed in the monologic discourse data in Janzen (1998) suggest that in a non-interactive discourse context, the marked topic phrases (broadly resembling yes/no questions except in the direction of the head tilt) are emancipated from any interactive communicative intent. Marked topic constructions occurred in the monologic data in Janzen's (1998, 1999) study, as they did in a later corpus of dialogic ASL discourse video recorded in 2000.⁶

A frequency comparison between topics in the two datasets has not been done, however. There are some differences between the two, in that in the monologic data, many of the topic constructions appeared to follow what had been described previously, at least structurally, along with the canonical facial and head markers of raised eyebrows and head tilt. In the dialogic data there was more variation structurally, which may be accounted for because the signers were engaged in face-to-face discourse. One example is that in face-to-face, spontaneous discourse, signers at times negotiated a topic in a sequence beginning with an actual yes/no question asking whether the addressee knew some referent or idea, which is a common discourse strategy across languages (see, for example, Ozerov 2021). If the addressee's response was positive (e.g., often signalled by a quick head nod), the signer continued. But if the addressee signalled that they did not know or were unsure, the signer began an explanatory or contextualizing sequence to bring the addressee up to speed. The signer might then repeat the original phrase, this time not as a question to be answered, but as a topic construction, followed by a comment phrase. Further examples of variation taken from this dataset are discussed in sections that follow.

While topic marking has been extensively studied for ASL, the significance of the traditionally acknowledged markers may be suspect, as there is some variability in the degree to which these facial and head markers are produced in natural discourse, suggesting that they are gradient, for example the eyebrows fully raised or only slightly if at all, or the head markedly tilted back or almost imperceptibly (or not at all, or even tilted slightly forward). Also, it appears that almost any discourse content can be topic-marked, such as pronouns, classifier constructions, noun phrases, and even whole clauses, along with time adverbials and some discourse or grammatical markers (for example the discourse marker HAPPEN: see Anible & Occhino-Kehoe 2015).

⁵ Although see example (2) and the ensuing discussion in section 4 below.

⁶ This dataset comprises approximately 9 hours of video-recorded ASL dialogic conversations between deaf participants and a deaf research assistant.

When viewed through an interactional-pragmatic lens, a marked topic phrase must qualify as content that is assumed by the signer to be identifiable (or shared) as known information for both the signer and addressee, thus is a marker of intersubjectivity (Janzen & Shaffer 2008, 2013).

4. Some basic examples of topic in ASL

We begin with a number of examples of marked topics in ASL utterances taken from the dataset in Janzen (1998) and the conversational ASL corpus recorded at the University of Manitoba in 2000, some of which are reported in Janzen (2017). In example (2), facial and head topic markers, and the more neutral head position for the comment, are shown in Figure 2.⁷

- (2) [TOMORROW NIGHT]-TOP WORK +
'Tomorrow evening I am working.'
(Janzen 2017: 522, his example 1)

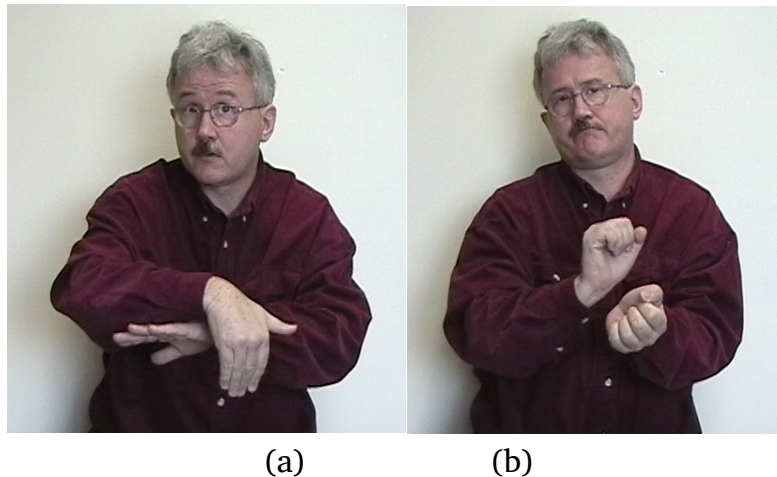


Figure 2: (a) topic-marked phrase; (b) return to a neutral position for an assertion as the comment. From Janzen (2017: 523).

⁷ I am beginning with this example because of its simplicity and clarity, although it is a constructed sentence not part of a natural discourse segment. It also gives us a first look at structural variation, as the signer's head tilts forward slightly, and not back, shown in Figure 2a. Nonetheless, the facial and head markings clearly distinguish the topic and comment phrases, and the signer is not looking for a response from the addressee, as would be the case for a yes/no question.

- (3) [L-A-K-E TOWN_b AREA(*in front of*) L-A-K-E]-TOP [*pause*]-NOD
 WOW I-C-E CL:B(*thick*) CAN SNOWMOBILE S-N-O-W-M-O-B-I-L-E *pause*
 ‘at the lake near the town, the ice was thick enough to go snowmobiling’
 (Janzen 1998: 152, his example 12a)

In examples (2) and (3), an element that is not the subject is marked as topic. In the case of (2) it is a temporal phrase, an element common to discourse participants as something readily identifiable, and in (3) it is a locational NP, which at this point in the narrative discourse has been made identifiable to the addressee.

Many marked topics in ASL are NPs, some of which can be construed as the subject of the verb as in (4), but this is not always the case. In (5), the topic NP and subject third-person pronoun (PRO.3) that follows in the comment refer to the same agent; grammatically they are both present in this utterance as separate syntactic elements.

- (4) [FATHER]-TOP JOIN_a THEATRE
 ‘His father joined the theatre.’
 (Janzen 1998: 185, his example 35)
- (5) [OTHER BOY]-TOP PRO.3 RESPONSIBLE, DRIVE GOOD, NOT DRINK + +
 ‘Another guy, who was responsible and a good driver, and who hadn’t been drinking...’
 (Janzen 1998: 103, his example 26a)
- (6) [WORLD_a CL:C(2h)(*sphere*)]-TOP MANY DIFFERENT + LANGUAGES PRO.3_a + + +
 ‘The world, many different languages (are) there.’
 ‘There are many different languages in all parts of the world.’
 (Janzen 1998: 133, his example 1)

In (6) the topic NP is not the syntactic subject of the sentence and as well, this is a sentence without an overt verb at all. The first translation is closer to a transliteration that reflects this, with ‘many different languages’ being the nominal subject.

Still other topic phrases are full clauses as in (7) and (8). The marked topic phrase in (7) includes a first-person subject pronoun, followed by a different subject NP in the

comment, PRO.1 MOTHER⁸ ('my mother'). Similar to the examples above, it is the case that the signer has chosen to mark as topic some element or referent assumed to be identifiable by the addressee.

- (7) [PRO.1 ARRIVE HOME]-TOP, PRO.1 MOTHER WORRY, [WHY WHERE]-WH-Q
'I got home, and found my mother worried about where I had been.'
(Janzen 1998: 103, his example 26c)

- (8) [GO R-E-U-N-I-O-N SOCIALIZE FINISH]-TOP #BK HOME WINNIPEG
'(after) going to the reunion, (we went) back home to Winnipeg.'
(Janzen 2025: 12, his example 6)

We can thus see that the marked topic phrase is not always a simple NP, which does not necessarily coincide with the subject of a verb in the comment phrase (Janzen 1995a; see also Li & Thompson 1976). Topic in ASL, as can be seen, does not equate to subject. In (2), note that the subject of the verb WORK is not the topic constituent, and is not overt in the utterance at all, but must be inferred.

5. Discourse functions of topic

The examples in section 4 above illustrate both structural and pragmatic features of topic-comment constructions, some of which are discussed further in sections below. It has sometimes been assumed that the topic element in ASL functions as an emphatic structure (Janzen 1995a). In an early attempt at formulating a grammar of ASL, Isenhardt (1990) suggests that the marked topic phrase represents the strongest emphatic information appearing in the sentence-initial position. This may be a consequence of wrongly assuming that what might be the case for English occurs as a similar construction in ASL. Instead, Janzen (1998), following Li and Thompson (1976, 1981)

⁸ Traditionally, ASL pronoun paradigms show a phonological distinction between personal and possessive pronouns. Thus a personal 1s pronoun would be a point with the index finger to the signer's chest and a possessive 1s pronoun would be contact with the chest by a flat hand with all fingers extended. In some of these corpus texts, however, personal and possessive pronouns are not distinguished, both taking the form of an extended index finger point, which could be a marker of casual signing by these signers.

for Mandarin, and Ingram (1978) and McIntire (1982) for ASL, proposes that ASL is a topic-prominent language, finding an average of 21.6 (72%) topics per 30 utterances in opening discourse sequences in a range of monologic texts. The high frequency itself suggests that it is unlikely that topic marking signals emphasis, and further, Wilbur (2012) has shown that the focus position in ASL tends to be clause-final, which would more likely correspond to comment portions of utterances than to utterance-initial topic phrases in terms of emphatic material.

Beyond this, we can also learn something about topics by examining how they function in longer stretches of discourse. What is not apparent if we look only at single utterances as the unit of analysis is that topic in ASL marks topic shift, and not topic maintenance. One example is from Janzen (1998: 236–237, his example 11: a narrative):

(9)

- a. [PRO.1]-TOP YOUNG OLD APPROXIMATE [SIXTEEN SEVENTEEN]-E-N
APPROXIMATE

‘I was about sixteen or seventeen years old,’

- b. [CAN’T REMEMBER]-NEG-NOD PRO.1

‘I can’t remember.’

- c. [THAT ERA]-TOP PRO.1 + GO.TO_a FRIEND POSS.3_a + DAY PARTY]-E-N *pause*⁹

‘One time, I went to a friend’s birthday party.’

- d. [PRO.3_a]-TOP *pause* [PARTY CL:5(*full of people*) F-U-N]-E-N

‘There, at the party, there were lots of people. It was fun.’

- e. [PRO.1]-TOP ARRIVE WITH GOOD.FRIEND_b OTHER FRIEND_b

lh: PRO.3_b

TWO BOY

lh: 2_b

‘I arrived with my best friend, another (girl)friend, and two boys.’

⁹ The third-person possessive pronoun + DAY is a phrase meaning ‘birthday’ in the Winnipeg, Canada dialect of ASL.

Details aside, four out of the five utterances in (9) begin with a marked topic phrase, and in no case are two consecutive topics the same content. Janzen (1998: 237) represents the topic shifts as:

(10)

- a. [1s]-TOP + time reference
- b. [that era]-TOP + event + location
- c. [demonstrative ‘there’]-TOP + state
- d. [1s]-TOP + event

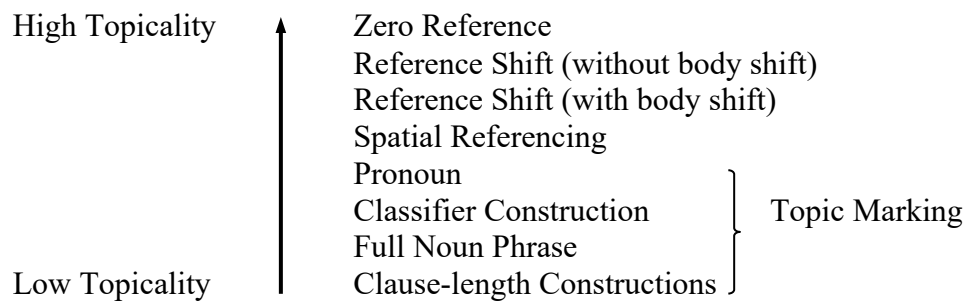
In the four utterances represented in (10), the topic shifts from a 1s pronoun to a temporal phrase, to an identifiable demonstrative, and finally to a 1s pronoun once again. This example thus illustrates that topic-marking does not appear to be a mechanism that indicates topic maintenance, which is taken up in section 6.1 below.

6. Some problems in defining ‘topic’ as a category in ASL

The examples above show some of the variability in what can be considered by the signer as identifiable, or topical, material suitable for topic marking. In the sections that follow, we examine some additional problems in defining not only what topic is, but also in determining whether there are sufficient parameters to identify topic as a category, at least for ASL.

6.1. Problem 1: A topic hierarchy in ASL and its implications

Every language has means of signalling the relative topicality of a referent, either lexically or grammatically. For example, lexical full NPs are typically understood as introducing or indicating items low in topicality, whereas pronominals and, especially, zeros or null forms occur when a higher degree of topicality is apparent. The question for ASL is what the relationship is between topic, as a particular construction, and topicality as a whole. Janzen (2007) gives some insight into this, suggesting that marked topic constructions are in fact at the lowest end of the set of constructions that reflect some degree of topicality. A topicality hierarchy adapted from Janzen (2007: 184) is in (11):

(11) *Increasing Topicality of Nominal Structures:*

The elements marking the highest level of topicality in ASL are zero references, where the referent has no overt form whatsoever, considering that zero references fully assume recoverability on the part of the addressee. Example (2) above illustrates this, as the topical subject of WORK is a zero reference. An important point to consider here is that topics within ASL topic-comment constructions are marked prototypically with eyebrows raised throughout the full articulation of the topic phrase in topic-first, comment-second sequences, as a combination of signed (i.e., lexical) and gestural (i.e., primarily facial) elements simultaneously. But with zero references there is no signed element that could be overlaid with topic marking: zero referencing plus topic marking does not occur in ASL discourse.

This is also the case for reference shifts with or without body shifts, and spatial referencing. Janzen (2004, 2012b) describes two types of reference shifting that commonly occur in ASL discourse, which are differentiated when the genre is a comparative frame (Winston 1995) or a narrative sequence. Shifts in reference along with body shifting refers to the positioning of entities within the signer's space immediately in front of and around the signer's body. That is, when a signer wishes to establish the discourse salience of a referent that is not actually present in their physical environment, the signer designates a spatial locus, perhaps to a rightward or leftward locus, and points to it or articulates an NP (e.g., 'the teacher') at that spatial location (see Engberg-Pedersen 1993 for details; Engberg-Pedersen describes Danish Sign Language but her analysis appears applicable to many signed languages including ASL). Subsequently, shifting the body may occur so as to orient an action or a comment (constructed action or constructed discourse, Liddell & Metzger 1998) as originating from

that referent. Figure 3 from Janzen (2012b: 157, his Fig. 7.1a and b) illustrates this, where the signer indicates a leftward space, and subsequently leans toward that space when enacting that referent's viewpoint.

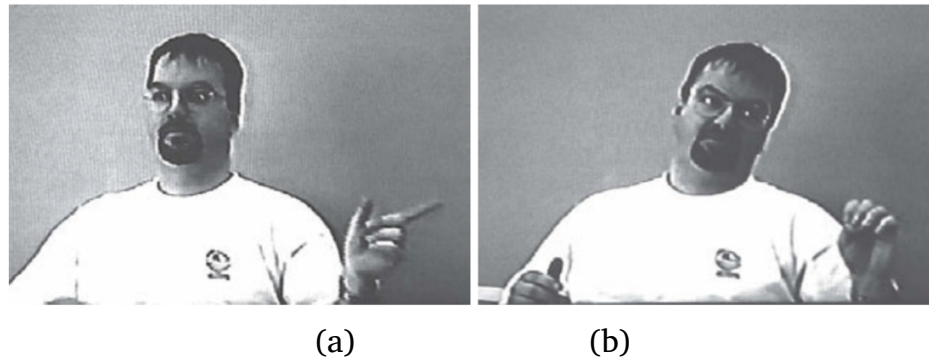


Figure 3: Indicating a leftward spatial locus in (a); the signer leaning toward the leftward locus to enact a referent's perspective.

The movement of the body shift and positioning at or near that designated spatial locus is an overt and visible action that does not need to be accompanied by a lexical or pronominal reference to the entity, thus it is highly topical because such repositioning is sufficient to evoke the referent for the addressee. However, a body shift to a designated spatial locus alone is insufficient to attract topic marking; topic-marked body shifts are not attested in ASL discourse studies (Janzen 1998, 1999).

Janzen (2004, 2012b) discusses body shift referencing associated with comparative frames as representing loci in a “static space” layout. In this discourse frame, referents are positioned in loci in the signer’s space when the referents are compared, for some purpose, but do not interact. Signers shift from one spatial locus to another when comparing attributes. The referential loci remain static in the space even when the signer (bodily) shifts from one perspective to another. A static layout has in past studies (e.g., Lillo-Martin 1995 and others) been thought to characterize the narrative genre as well. But when an interactive event is being described within a narrative context, spatial positioning is different, that is, in narratives ASL signers rotate the spatial scene mentally such that the perspectives of interactants in a narrative move (or “rotate”) to coincide with the signer’s view of the space. Figure 4 from Janzen (2012b: 157, his Fig. 7.1c) shows that there is no overt body lean to any particular space, instead the signer assumes the stance of a narrative referent.



Figure 4: The signer assuming the stance of a narrative discourse referent without a body shift.

Janzen (2004, 2012b) describes this as spatial rotation where the spatial scene is conceptually rotated so that each interactant's perspective in turn aligns with the signer's central stance. In Figure 4, the character enacted is a police officer interacting with the occupants of a vehicle, with the signer assuming the perspective of the officer without shifting to an alternate space. This then constitutes a reference shift without an overt physical body shift in the signer's space, meaning that the viewer must understand who the referent is with less overt marking. In these constructions, the lack of overt referential marking requires a high level of topicality to be identifiable, intermediate between an overt body shift and zero marking, and again, such a construction does not attract topic-marking morphology.

A somewhat related construction, spatial referencing, is positioned below reference shifting with a body shift on the topicality hierarchy. These referencing instances are constructions where a referent has been positioned spatially with subsequent referencing "agreeing" with that space (Padden 1988). For example, once a referent has been positioned, if that referent is the agent of an act of giving, the verb 'to give' begins with an articulation of the verb at that spatial location, which then moves along a path toward another location associated with the recipient (Wilcox 2011). In this case the referent is identifiable from a previous mention such that merely positioning the beginning point of the verb's path movement at that locus evokes that referent, but even though doing so identifies it as highly topical, the verbal path movement and what it signifies seems not to attract topic marking in ASL discourse.¹⁰

¹⁰ Further research on what might distinguish reference shifting with/without body shifting and spatial referencing as described here is needed. Saunders (2025) discusses a constructed scenario in a *langue des*

The lowest four categories on the topicality hierarchy that do appear as marked topics are pronouns and other constructions containing lexical material: classifier constructions, full NPs, and clause-length constructions. As we move toward the bottom of the hierarchy, each category represents items that increase in explicitness, and therefore decrease in relative topicality in discourse overall.

The pronoun system in ASL (and many other signed languages) consists of points, most typically pointing with an extended index finger (excluding possessive and reflexive pronouns) to the self (first person singular), the addressee (second person singular), or to other entities in the signer's environment or to non-present referents positioned in the signer's space (third person singular). (The paradigm of plural pronouns is somewhat more complex and will not be dealt with here.) While there are a number of ways in ASL to indicate referents, as the higher categories on the hierarchy demonstrate, pronominal points represent an overt class of items that may be topic-marked. Their occurrence in an utterance corresponds to at least some expectation of identifiability as the addressee must understand who or what is being referred to, but they are lower on the topicality hierarchy than are zero forms, reference shifts, and spatial referencing. Still, they are not a particularly common item that is topic-marked. As mentioned above, Janzen (1998) found that in a small corpus of monologic ASL discourse texts, just 9.7% of all marked topics were pronouns. One example of a topic-marked pronoun is (12) adapted from Janzen (1998: 149; his example 9):

(12) PRO.1 THINK.APPEAR FIRST THINK.APPEAR _bF-O-R-E-S-T N-I-C-K-E-R-S-O-N
'I immediately thought of Forest Nickerson'

[PRO.3_b]-TOP FIRST _aGO.TO_b AMERICA _bN-A-D _aNATIONAL ASSOCIATION
_aGO.TO_b _bLEARN

signes Québécoise (LSQ, or Quebec Sign Language) study where a signer designates a leftward spatial locus for the recipient of someone giving something to them, in a sequence where the action is described but not enacted. But in the enacted version (i.e., a narrative sequence), the signer enacts the giver giving the thing, with the sign 'to give' moving to a location directly across from them in a central location, in effect rotating the original spatial setup. The question remains, then, of whether static spatial layouts ever do appear in narrative discourse sequences, or are characteristic of constructed texts in research settings. The resolution of this issue is beyond the scope of the present discussion.

‘He first went to the National Association of the Deaf – NAD – in the United States, to learn (about their activities).’

This example clearly illustrates that pronominals are not necessarily topic-marked (e.g., PRO.1 in the first utterance). But once a referent has been identified and thus becomes accessible, in this case the fingerspelled NP in the first utterance that has also been given a spatial position (designated as location subscript ‘b’), a pronominal point to that location, as in the second utterance (in bold), can be topic-marked, indicating topical information in the discourse.

A step lower on the hierarchy are classifier constructions. Whether these items are rightly categorized as “classifiers” has been open to question (Schembri 2003). Schembri prefers the term “proforms”, in ASL a set of handshapes that participate in what Supalla (1986) describes as a class of verbs of motion and location, something akin to Mithun’s (1986) description of noun incorporation in verb forms. Mithun finds that a classifier form can act anaphorically in place of a pronoun, although it is not referential. As one example in ASL, an upright extended index finger that iconically represents an upright entity or figure, prototypically a human being, is the handshape in the lexicalized sign meaning ‘to meet’, but these handshapes can, depending on the movement of the hands, indicate other human actions such as one person turning away from the other, moving past the other, etc. (Janzen 2012a; see also Engberg-Pedersen 2010 and Zwitserlood 2012 for overviews of classifier forms in signed languages).

Importantly, a classifier handshape such as this does not identify a particular referent—that identifiability must come from elsewhere, such as a previous full NP mention or somehow pragmatically—but it gives the addressee a higher degree of information than does a pronominal point. More so, since an articulated classifier handshape cannot itself stand alone as a well-formed sign, it forms a construction along with a verbal movement (again, e.g., a handshape representing a person moving past someone; another handshape represents a vehicle that might be shown to move past a person, etc.) and it is this construction that can be topic-marked, as long as the entity plus the action are retrievable as identifiable information for the addressee, or that it is fully active in a discourse participant’s consciousness.

In (13), along with Figure 5 showing a topic-marked classifier construction, the signer is telling a story about a rock-climbing incident where she was stuck on a rock face, and

to help her out, her friend had to climb over her and up to safety above them. In this discourse segment there are three utterances. The first, (13a), is an explanatory utterance describing the situation of her being stuck, and the friend climbing over her and up. To do this, she signs a combination of two classifier-handshape + movement verb constructions, one (with her left hand) describing her state of being stuck, and the other (with her right hand simultaneously)¹¹ describing the movement of her friend. The second utterance (13b) emphasizes that her friend actually climbed over her to accomplish the rescue.

The third utterance (13c) contains the topic-marked construction. The signer repeats the classifier construction consisting of the classifier handshape (legs) and the movement verb (over her and up), but it is a truncated version characteristic of topical information: if it is topical, then less needs to be said to evoke the reference. The construction is topic-marked – note the raised eyebrows in Figure 5b¹², and the utterance as a whole is a topic phrase (identifiable because it has just been stated in a close prior utterance) followed by the new information, ‘she makes it!’.

(13)

a. POSS.1 FRIEND NOW *rh*-CL:V(*legs*)

lh-CL:V(*legs* + *movement:centre/behind rh wrist* → *upper left*)

‘My friend now climbs over me and up the rock face.’

b. OVER PRO.1

‘Over me!’

¹¹ Such simultaneous articulation of two different items being signed on each hand is common in signed languages (Vermeerbergen et al. 2007), reflecting affordances of bodily articulation, where iconically two things occurring at the same time can be represented in the articulation the items by the signer’s two hands. Unsurprisingly, this is much less available to spoken language speakers, where two co-occurring events must be described by sequential phrases or clauses.

¹² It might be argued here that the raised eyebrows accompanying this phrase instead indicate an assessment of effort. Raised eyebrows are multifunctional (see Wilbur & Patschke 1999) so it may not be possible here to know which function they perform, or it could be both. In any case, the ‘known information, new information’ structure of the clause is another clear marker of topic-comment structure.

c. [*rh-CL:V(legs + movement:centre→upper left)*]-TOP, MAKE I-T

‘As for her climbing over me and up the rock face, she makes it!’

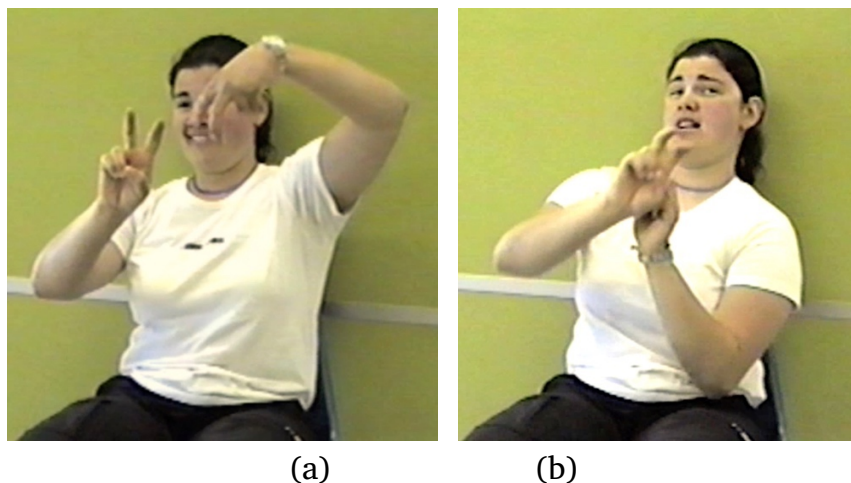


Figure 5: In (a) the signer articulates a classifier form for human legs on both hands. The left hand classifier handshape represents herself stuck on a rock face; the right hand represents her friend climbing over her and up. In (b), she uses a topic-marked classifier construction, the same classifier handshape plus a verb of motion moving upwards.

Below classifier constructions on the topicality hierarchy are full NPs. This is striking in that while full NPs would indicate very low topicality because they are fully specified referentially, they are commonly in topic position in ASL and marked as topics. Janzen (1998) found that 35.6% of all topics in his corpus were full NP phrases. An example is (14), adapted from Janzen (1998: 152, his example 12b).

(14) [POSS.1 BROTHER]-TOP FINE.*emph(intense)*

‘My brother (goes) “that’s great!”’

While the relative topicality of the possessive NP is low in (14), there appears to be a discourse reason for topic marking, having to do with topic shift, rather than topic maintenance. In the narrative that (14) is taken from, the brother is a key story character, but he has not been positioned at any specific spatial locus, and the narrator moves from character to character perspective, such that some clearly identifiable referential labeling is necessary to keep each story character and their actions clear.

The final, lowest category of marked topics on the topicality hierarchy is full clauses. Similar to full NPs, topic-marked clauses make up 35.6% of all topics in Janzen's (1998) study, resulting in 71.2% of all marked topics falling in the full NP and clause categories combined. Thus, the vast majority of topic-marked phrases in Janzen's (1998) ASL study are at the lowest end of the topicality hierarchy. That is, of all the items in ASL discourse that correspond to some degree of topicality, topic marking by far indicates items that are the most content explicit. An example of a clause-level topic is in (15) (adapted from Janzen 1998: 163, his example 18d):

- (15) [PRO.1 GROW.UP PRO.1 DEAF.SCHOOL PRO.3_b + +]-TOP CHAT.ASL + +
'When I was growing up at the school for the Deaf, we signed ASL.'

The topic-marked clause in (15) represents an already topical situation that the signer wishes to comment on. Here, the signer identifies the situation of growing up at a school for the Deaf, presumably fully identifiable to the addressee, in order to make the comment that signing ASL was the norm.

Note that the topic phrase in the utterance in (13c) above, about climbing up a rock face, also qualifies as a full clause. Even though it is a single complex item—a verb of motion with noun incorporation in the form of two classifier handshapes—such a signed construction, albeit without topic marking, could stand alone as a fully clausal response to the question “what did the climber do next?” However, classifier constructions are positioned on the hierarchy between pronouns and full NPs because they are intermediate in terms of explicitness, and a classifier handshape itself never appears alone as a meaning unit: it is either positioned somewhere in the signer's space to additionally identify the (relative) location of an entity or incorporated in a verb of motion.

Altogether then, the topicality hierarchy shows that grammatical topic does not correspond to highly topical elements in ASL discourse. Rather, highly topical discourse referents tend toward zero forms, and topic marking does not have the function of designating highly topical elements.

6.2. Problem 2: How “given” are topics in ASL?

Ellen Prince’s (1981) idea of givenness is a frequently cited pragmatic characteristic of topics, yet she finds prior accounts that focused on givenness as “shared information” inadequate, and proposes instead a taxonomy of information in terms of degrees of assumed familiarity. That is, information could be 1) new – an entity is newly introduced into the discourse; 2) evoked – either from earlier in the text (textually) or from the situation surrounding the current discourse (situationally); or 3) inferable – the entity can be inferred through logical or plausible reasoning, or an inference can be based on some aspect of the NP itself (Prince deals only with NPs as topical elements). Prince’s points 2 and 3 are most relevant here.

The idea of assumed familiarity is appealing, and it is important to emphasize that it is the speaker or signer who is making the assumption about the content of their chosen topic phrase and the knowledge store of the addressee. But what familiarity entails puts it on a very wide continuum.

Many researchers investigating topic note that any definition of topic is going to be somewhat imprecise. For example, Dahlstrom (1995) notes that the definition of topic is controversial, suggesting that while topic corresponds to given or “old” information, this isn’t a “necessary condition” (Dahlstrom 1995: 6). Dahlstrom’s discussion of topic in Fox (Algonquian) is grounded in sentence properties within a generative model where a topic phrase T is a leftward node below the sentence node S’, and she notes that an item can occur in this position that does not adhere to the general understanding of givenness. For example, she includes instances of *oči-* meaning ‘from’, but which can take the form of *we-či*. This Dahlstrom glosses as ‘why’, in topic position, as in (16) (Dahlstrom 1995: 21, her example 44):

- (16) [_{TOP} *we-či-*] [_{FOC} *ni-na*] [_{OBL} *i-ni*] [_V – *-inenakowe*]
 why I that (why).I.say.[thus].to.you.PL
 ‘why I said that to you’

Whether a structurally-based analysis of topic (that apparently involves a leftward transformation from a slot, now empty, in the sentence-final verb) would hold within a functional/pragmatic framework will not be taken up here. Rather, it is interesting that

Dahlstrom entertains the possibility of the topic containing a semantic item that does not conform well to the traditional notion of a definite NP considered as given information. ‘Why’ is not a content word, so it might seem quite unusual to consider it as a candidate in a topic slot, or taking topic-marking, so in this sense it doesn’t feel very topic-like. But ASL appears to do something quite similar, which is taken up in section 6.3 (When is a ‘topic’ not a topic?) below.

Also within a structural framework, Wilbur and Patschke (1999) examine the brow raise (their notation: br) has been understood to participate in topic marking in ASL, citing Liddell (1977) as one of the first to identify its consistent use in marking topics along with a slight backward head tilt. They also note Baker-Shank’s (1983) description of so-called rhetorical questions in ASL as marked with ‘br’ plus the head tilted back (or toward the side). They examined ‘br’ in a number of syntactic contexts and state that the “presence of ‘br’ is associated with all and only such syntactic positions, and is not obviously correlated with commonly identified communicative functions, information status, intonational phrases, or other non-syntactic domains” (Wilbur & Patschke 1999: 3; see also Wilbur 1999). Among the evidence they cite is that ‘br’ is not just found on topic phrases, but accompanies new information in some cases, as in (17) where the item, according to Wilbur and Patschke, is a contrastive topicalization containing new and focused information (Wilbur & Patschke 1999: 13, their example 13; from Aarons 1994):

- (17) JOHN_i NOT.LIKE JANE. [MARY_j]-BR, HE_i LOVES *t_j*
‘John doesn’t like Jane. It’s *Mary* he loves.’

What Wilbur and Patschke are perhaps missing in this example is that MARY in the sentence MARY HE LOVES fits the syntactic profile of a topic-comment construction with one of the most salient topic markers, raised brows. Even if it is contrastive, the referent ‘Mary’ would still need to be identifiable to the addressee if this utterance occurred in natural discourse (“evoked”, in Prince’s 1981 terms; at least “semiactive” in Chafe’s 1976, 1994 paradigm). If the referent ‘Mary’ were to be newly introduced into the discourse, in other words a first mention in the present discourse event, it would still need to be recoverable or retrievable by the addressee via some previous shared experience. For example, there’s only one Mary that both the signer and addressee know,

or pragmatically there is only one Mary that could possibly be intended in this specific context. On the other hand, the signer may be making an assumption that who Mary is will be retrievable when this is not the case. If so, the contrastive structure is grammatical and “works”, but pragmatically it does not. This suggests that the idea of givenness in such an utterance is both complicated and somewhat questionable. Once again, all this emphasizes the role of intersubjectivity in the success of discourse interactions.

A final type of topic construction in ASL that challenges the attribute of givenness is discussed in Janzen (2018), who looked at marked topic phrases introduced by either the signs KNOW or UNDERSTAND. KNOW-topics are discussed in section 6.3 below, because they are characteristically not the topic in the sense of being what the sentence is about. Here we focus on UNDERSTAND-topics. In the 2000 ASL corpus study, Janzen found that the item UNDERSTAND could occur in discourse as either a lexical verb or a topic element, which is described as a grammaticalized form of the verb that does not have functional lexical status but instead forms part of a particular type of topic phrase. This use occurred more frequently in the corpus (41 tokens, or 62.7% of all tokens of UNDERSTAND) than UNDERSTAND did as a lexical form (20 tokens, 32.8%). Two examples are in (18) and (19), from Janzen (2018: 79, his examples 17 and 18):

(18) [UNDERSTAND PRO.1 SIGN]-TOP NEG TALK

‘It’s given that I would be signing, not speaking.’

(19) [UNDERSTAND 20 DOLLAR]-TOP PRO.1 DON’T.MIND PAY PRO.3 20 DOLLAR

‘Given the idea of paying twenty dollars, I don’t mind paying him the twenty dollars.’

In these two examples, the content of the topic phrase is not something that has been introduced in the discourse previously, and perhaps not something that could be inferred by other parts of the discourse, either the prior utterance or the comment of this utterance. In (18) the signer is describing a hypothetical situation, suggesting that in a certain context she would be signing and not talking. In (19), the signer suggests that in a particular context, having to pay someone twenty dollars for doing something is acceptable. In neither case is the topic phrase content readily retrievable, and therefore

could not be considered as given. Instead, in UNDERSTAND-topics, it is information that “the signer wishes the addressee to accept as a given state of affairs, or as an agreed upon reference point from which to view the comment” (Janzen 2018: 79). It is only given in the sense that it could be an understandable, or perhaps logical state of affairs.

6.3. Problem 3: When is a ‘topic’ not a topic?

Above we have seen examples of topic-marked constructions in ASL that well reflect the pragmatic, intersubjective notion of assumed identifiability, and others that do not quite fit this schema. In this section I present examples that, while marked as topics in the same way, do not seem to be topics in the above senses at all. First, it is helpful to understand that the topic-first/comment-second form does not tell the whole story. While such utterances have long been described in this way (see, for example, Li & Thompson 1976; Givón 1984; Hornby 1971; Ingram 1978; Prince 1981; and others), Janzen (1998, 1999) suggests that topic phrases in fact fall between two elements, whether these be syntactic (i.e., expressed overtly in the discourse) or in part, pragmatic (cf. Prince 1981). That is, in representing some identifiable information, that information has to come before, either as part of a prior utterance, or in some sort of already shared knowledge between discourse participants. Such discourse prior mention is evident in example (9) in section 5 above about going to a friend’s birthday party, where an element introduced as new information then becomes available in a subsequent utterance as identifiable. Thus a topic can be described as a kind of pivot, marking a turning point from identifiable information to new information, which reflects the idea that marked topics, at least in ASL, indicate topic shift rather than topic maintenance.

Janzen (1998, 1999) identifies a number of cases of topic-marked ASL discourse markers, connectors, and so-called “rhetorical questions” (Baker & Cokeley 1980; Valli & Lucas 1992; Valli et al. 2005; cf. Wilbur & Patschke 1999). These recall Dahlstrom’s (1995) example above (example 16) where *we-čì*- ‘why’ in Fox is in topic position in the clause.

- (20) ... HELP IN TWO WAY + *pause* [FIRST] -TOP *pause* LEAD POSS.3 WALK + +
‘... helped in two ways, **first**, by leading him (on his) walk’
(Janzen 1998: 111, his example 31)

(21) WHAT'S.UP, GO.TO RESTAURANT *pause* EAT + + [BE.FINISHED] -TOP
TAKE.ADVANTAGE SEE TRAIN ARRIVE

‘So then, we went to a restaurant, ate, **and then** got to see the train arrive.’

(Janzen 1999: 295, his example 31)

In (20) we see a listing numeral as a kind of discourse marker, from a filmed lecture by John Hotchkiss around 1913 in the US, and in (21), two clauses are separated by the sign BE.FINISHED (most frequently glossed as just FINISH, but the gloss BE.FINISHED gives the essence of its true meaning in ASL somewhat better). First, in both of these cases, the topic-marked element is positioned between two elements, acting as a kind of linker or pivot. Second, even with the topic marking, it is not very topic-like: it cannot be said to be what the sentence is about (the “aboutness” claim, Hornby 1971; Lambrecht 1994), and it would be difficult to position on the topicality hierarchy described in section 6.1 above. Janzen (1998, 1999) proposes that discourse elements such as these concern the signer’s assumed identifiability on the addressee’s part of discourse structuring, acting as a kind of “signpost” guiding the direction the discourse is taking. In (20) the addressee has already been told that the signer wishes to make two points, such that what follows is likely to be those two points. [FIRST]-top then specifies for the addressee the identifiable (and undoubtedly obvious) position the signer has arrived at in the textual plan (see Traugott 1989).

In (21), Janzen (1998, 1999) identifies [BE.FINISHED]-top as having grammaticalized from the ASL verb FINISH ‘to finish’, functioning as a grammatical item that links the clauses immediate prior to and following it in an interesting way. If BE.FINISHED had a more literal meaning, it would be more clearly connected to, or a part of, the first clause, i.e., ‘we were finished eating’ (Janzen 1995b identifies FINISH in a clause final position as a completive marker). But because it occurs with topic-marking, it is more reasonably associated with the clause that follows as a topic + comment construction, such that in grammaticalizing, it has partially pulled away from the first clause and formed a closer relationship with the following clause, linking the two together more closely syntactically (see Heine & Reh 1984 on reanalysis). Again, it is not topical in terms of informational content, and it is not what the sentence is about, but to the discourse-fluent addressee, it acts as an identifiable pivot in the text. Suggested here is that both cases, then, are better analyzed as a positioning or reference-point construction

(Langacker 2008, 2013) that puts in view the next element, the so-called “comment”. Thus in neither of these two cases does the topic-marked element qualify as a topic in the traditional sense. Example (22) is a further example, with an additional function:

- (22) POSS.1 GOOD.FRIEND PRO.3 SAY THERE ALCOHOL IN,
 [WHY]-TOP PRO.3 MOTHER PREVIOUS WORK ALCOHOL STORE (...)
 ‘(I...) my best friend said she knew there was alcohol in it **because** her mother
 had worked in a liquor store before, (and...)’
 (Janzen 1999: 294, his example 27)

The element notated as [WHY]-top in (22) has for a long time been considered as a rhetorical question (e.g., Valli & Lucas 1992; Valli et al. 2005), although Wilbur (1999) and Wilbur and Patschke (1999) suggest that elements such as this do not have rhetorical question function. Janzen (1998, 1999) considers them as having grammaticalized to function similarly to the textual “topics” in (20) and (21) (see also Herring 1991), but additionally, occurring when the order of clauses does not have the canonical iconic order of events taking place in a straightforward temporal sequence. Further evidence that it is not a true rhetorical question is that in ASL discourse, rhetorical questions do exist that are clausal, marked with wh-question marking (essentially, furrowed eyebrows) and not topic-marking, with the signer not signalling to the addressee that they seek a response. Therefore [WHY]-TOP in (22) functions as a pivotal discourse marker, and is best translated as ‘because’. Both clauses, just prior and following, consist of new information, with the second clause providing the contextual situation that informs the first clause, again, not in the order of a temporal sequence. The topic-marked item is not topic-like at all pragmatically, but functions structurally as a pivotal textual element in organizing the discourse segments, in this case when the two clauses are not temporally ordered. The first clause (the friend knows the punch contains alcohol) is the point of the utterance, with the second clause giving background information.

In (23), the final example in this section, we see a topic-marked phrase of a somewhat different sort.

- (23) [KNOW R-O-A-D HIGHWAY]-TOP *off.to.side*_{rt} [NEG *on.side.road*]-NEG.NOD
 CL:3(*vehicle*).*move.over*_{rt} FINISH *pause*

‘Given the highway, (we) moved off to the side, not onto a side road but just to the side of the road.’

(Janzen 2017: 523, his example 2)

In (23) the topic-marked phrase is clausal, beginning with KNOW ‘to know’, which Janzen (2018) describes as a grammaticalized verb which has lost its lexical semantic character, here functioning to mark a certain type of topic. Janzen finds that KNOW-topics introduce a kind of domain, which at the moment of signing may or may not be within the conscious awareness of the addressee, but which seems not to matter. In this case, the topic phrase translates (roughly) to ‘do you know what highways are like?’, where it functions as a topic constituent and not an actual question (or at most a negotiated topic)¹³ because the signer is not interested in a response. Asking if the addressee knows about highways, if it were an actual question, does not make communicative sense – most people would have some experience with them. Also, it is not a question about a specific highway with specific characteristics relevant to the situation. Rather, the signer is prompting the addressee to visualize what a highway looks like. Further, and more important, is that the comment in this utterance is about being off the highway onto the shoulder. This being the case, the so-called “topic” phrase (marked as such) acts simply as a reference point (Langacker 2008, 2013). The utterance is not about the highway itself at all, but with the highway as a locational starting point, attention can be directed to a second location that is in focus.

6.4. Problem 4: Local, sentence-level topics vs. discourse-level topics

A further complication to the idea of a topic category in language is the distinction between sentence-level (grammatical) topic and discourse topic. Grammatical topics have been discussed above. Discourse topics on the other hand are broader, and which may or may not be overtly stated at or near the beginning of discourse segments, such as ‘guess what happened to me at work today!’ although there is no discourse

¹³ Negotiated topics occur frequently when the signer is not certain that their choice of topic is in fact identifiable information for the addressee, but detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. See, however, section 3 above.

requirement that a discourse topic needs to be introduced so specifically. Discourse participants are often in the position of ascertaining the discourse topic based on clues from what is said as the speaker continues. Such a topic may sometimes become clearer once the speaker is well into the story. A more global discourse topic is inevitably new information – speakers do not (typically) tell stories that their interlocutors already know. Discourse topic expressions in ASL differ in function from sentence-level topics, and do not appear with topic marking – they are not markers of assumed accessible or retrievable information. Once stated, however, they can be understood as what a discourse segment is about.

A point to make here, however, is that there is no requirement of a one to one correspondence of (sentence-level) topic and comment phrases. The topic-comment construction (i.e., one topic + one comment) is perhaps the default, although this has not been studied in any detail for ASL. McIntire (1982) discusses the possibility of up to three topic-marked phrases in sequence (see also Janzen 1998), which might, for example, have a narrowing locational effect, beginning with a broad reference point, and narrowing it so as to locate something at a specific place (e.g., something like, in the kitchen, on the counter, beside the cooktop). On the other hand, a marked topic may have scope over a series of comments, thus could be said to operate at a discourse level above the sentence. These facts make the distinction between sentence-level and discourse-level less clear, adding to the question of what should be considered if attempting to define topic as a category.

7. Concluding comments

Given the discussion above, it is clear that the category label “topic” is problematic in ASL in a number of ways. First, the label may be a theoretical holdover generally, but as well, analyses of ASL structure have often historically been based on comparison with English. English has been analysed as a language where “aboutness” plays a major grammatical role, and where there are dedicated syntactic processes and positions for a constituent to acquire this role. One mechanism has been referred to as “topicalization”, meaning that something appears, or is moved to, a left-edge sentence position, thus frequently being a sentence position for an element in focus. But in ASL the utterance-initial topic does not function in this way, and does not neatly map on the aboutness

notion as it does in English, or in general, but rather may be best viewed as a reference point construction from which to understand and inform the comment constituent information that follows it.

This relates directly to the theoretical “aboutness” proposal that the utterance is “about” the topic (Hornby 1971; Lambrecht 1994). For Langacker, this appears insufficient. He suggests that “[a]s with many fundamental notions [about language], it is hard to find a verbal definition that does not seem hopelessly vague” (Langacker 2008: 513), and proposes that whatever “aboutness” is, it must be something related to conceptual structure. For topic constructions, Langacker suggests they are a kind of reference point organization. Langacker’s schematic view of reference point constructions was given early in this article, in Figure 1, but his proposal for topics specifically is illustrated in Figure 6 showing that mental scanning entails that the conceptualizer (C) encounters the reference point (R) that leads to a proposition (P) as the target (T), within a domain (D). For Langacker, D is the range of associated knowledge such that numerous potential propositions may exist, but in a given instance, one particular P manifests as the target. The small circle between P and T is a representation of the reference point within the proposition, which Langacker refers to as a pivot. The pivot may be overt, as in example (5) with OTHER BOY as topic, and PRO₃ (‘he’) as the coreferential pronoun in the comment that follows. However, the reference point construction may not have any overt representation in the comment, as has been shown for a number of ASL examples given above.

All in all, Langacker’s reference point analysis seems an apt schematic description for what we see in ASL, but the question remains whether we can rightly call the reference point material a topic. Yet at this point, it is difficult to discuss these examples without using the terminology that has been widely used all along. Wilbur (1999) and Wilbur and Patschke (1999) similarly move away from a “topic” analysis, but only in terms of brow raise (‘br’), in that they find that ‘br’ is sometimes but not always a marker for topical information. In more complete analyses of (so-called) topic constructions, brow raise is only one possible marker, another being a head tilt, but perhaps more importantly, the utterance structure consists of topic information followed by comment information, or in Langacker’s terms, a reference point construction followed by propositional material. How these two pieces fit together forms the conceptual structure of the whole.

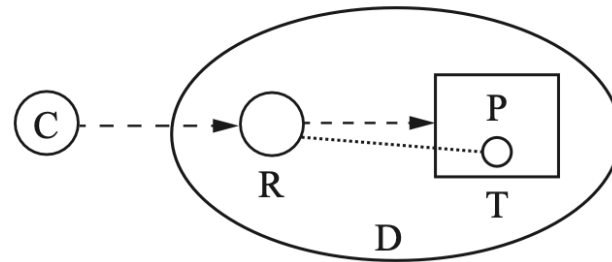


Figure 6: Topic as reference point. From Langacker 2008: 513, his figure 14.3.

Looking once again at the aboutness proposal discussed above, we see that it does not hold for ASL. Some of the most obvious examples are the topic-marked temporal phrase in (2) that contextualizes the focused information that the signer has to work, the rock face scenario in (13) where the topic-marked phrase acts as a reference point to get to the action that follows, and in (23), where a more complex locative construction (what highways are like) serves to situate the actual action being described at a second focused location (off the highway onto the shoulder).

Next, while it is not disputed that the notion of topicality discerns between discourse items that are mutually identifiable among interlocutors in an immediate context and those that are not, this does not categorically equate to the structural elements of topic and comment in ASL. The most topical elements in ASL discourse are positioned at the highest levels in the topicality hierarchy given in (11) above, whereas marked topic phrases, with their high degree of explicitness, are at the bottom of the hierarchy. Thus “topic” in ASL does not fully equate to high topicality.

A third point to make is that givenness as a characteristic of topic phrases must be considered as on a continuum, which is not unexpected since it is not a property of language but rather is determined by speakers’ and signers’ conceptualizations of states and events, and more locally, their intersubjective assessments of what their interlocutors may or may not have in their knowledge store or conscious access in their present discourse. Such intersubjective assessment is dynamic. A reference-point analysis reveals too that at times signers wish to choose something as a reference-point that may well not be within the addressee’s knowledge store, as the UNDERSTAND-topics in (18) and (19) demonstrate. In these, the signer puts forward some new information that they wish the addressee to accept as a reference point orientation that allows them access to

understanding the content of the comment, again intersubjectively, in a way intended by the signer.

Fourth, there are a good number of instances of formally marked topic phrases that could not be said to function as a contentful topic nor could be easily positioned on a topicality hierarchy. These are discourse markers and connectives, which exemplify the pivotal nature of topics, and relate to signers' and addressees' knowledge of, or understanding of, textual elements that guide the addressee through the discourse text, as fluent signers. In addition to the examples given in section 6.3 above are the frequent marking of connectives such as AND (instructing the addressee that the text will continue in a particular direction) and BUT (instructing the addressee that the text will take a turn). Thus while parallels with more contentful topics are clear, these pivots, in Langacker's terms, could not be considered topics of sentences or of discourse at all, but are textual reference points with pragmatic and intersubjective implications.

An additional example of a marked topic that cannot be considered as what the sentence is about is the KNOW-topic in (23), in which the structure of a highway (what highways are typically like) makes a good locative reference point for the event that took place to the side of the highway. Once again, there is no way to construe this "topic" as being the topic of the sentence.

Fifth, there is at least some discrepancy between sentence-level topics and discourse-level topics, for the simple reason that we would consider a sentence-level topic phrase to be assumed accessible, whereas a stated discourse topic is most appropriately, perhaps in a Gricean way, new information. A discourse-level topic, as described in section 6.4 above, such as 'can I tell you a story about a mouse?' (one example from the 2000 conversational ASL corpus), is necessarily new information, and is not topic-marked, although we might say that it is then what the discourse to follow is about. Yet there seems to be no clear dividing line between sentence-level and discourse-level topics, in that a sentence-level topic may hold as a reference point over a number of ensuing comments/utterances, and so could be said to operate at a discourse level as well, if not quite the same way as the discourse-level topics as discussed above.

The ASL data presented here suggest that a top-down categorical definition of topic is not viable given the variability regarding what types of items can occur as marked topics, their level of givenness, or their relation to other parts of the utterance, most expressly, the comment. Perhaps most importantly in this regard, in a top-down definitional

approach, is that it is difficult to account for the topic as reference point as largely determined by the signer’s intersubjective assessment of the addressee’s knowledge store, the addressee’s ability to identify the piece of information, or their willingness to accept something as an acceptable orientation to another referent or the overall informational unity. It is unsurprising that a number of researchers express dissatisfaction with broad definitions of topic.

On the other hand, a bottom-up approach, that is, looking first at occurrences in contextualized discourse in a specific language to see how particular items function, can tell us something about what *that* item is like in *that* language, but generalizations may not apply to other languages, and therefore the item needs to be considered and characterized only in a language-specific way. For ASL, the data suggest some re-evaluation is needed of what exactly “topic” means and which constructions might fit this notion, and which do not. It may be the case that “topic” as a categorical label does not capture what a wide spectrum of data reveal. The possibility suggested here is to begin with Langacker’s reference-point construction analysis, which seems to account for more topic-like constructions along with others that are difficult to construe as topics as defined by more traditional approaches.

Notation key

HAPPEN	word in all caps = an English gloss for an ASL word
GOOD.FRIEND	gloss words separated by a period = more than one English word is required to gloss a single ASL sign
L-A-K-E	a fingerspelled word
PRO.1	1s pronoun
PRO.2	2s pronoun
PRO.3	3s pronoun
POSS.1	possessive 1s pronoun
POSS.3	possessive 3s pronouns
DRINK + + +	Extended or repeated movement in the articulation of the verb
#BK	a fingerspelled “loan” sign, where the fingerspelling is truncated

	(here it would be B-A-C-K), considered as a lexical form (Battison 1978)
[...]-TOP	topic marking concomitant with the entire phrase inside the square brackets
[...]-NOD	nodding
[...]-NEG-NOD	negative (side to side) nodding
[...]-WH-Q	a wh-question
[...]-E-N	eyes narrowed
[...]-BR	brow raise (Wilbur & Patschke's 1999 term)
_a GO.TO, GO.TO _b	subscript letters (a, b, c) indicate a spatial location where the onset or offset (depending if the subscript precedes or follows the gloss) of the verb form is positioned (or an entire signed element is positioned) in space
(rh)	right hand; may also appear as a subscript
(lh)	left hand; may also appear as a subscript
(bh)	both hands
NEG	particle indicating negation
NEG.NOD	negative, side to side head movement
emph	emphatically
CL:X(descriptor(s))	a "classifier" construction; X = handshape label; descriptors further clarify the action

References

- Aarons, Debra & Bahan, Benjamin & Kegl, Judy & Neidle, Carol. 1992. Clausal structure and a tier for grammatical marking in American Sign Language. *Nordic Journal of Linguistics* 15. 103–142.
- Aarons, Debra & Bahan, Benjamin & Kegl, Judy & Neidle, Carol. 1994. Subjects and agreement in American Sign Language. In Algren, Inger & Brita Bergman & Mary Brennan (eds.), *Perspectives on Sign Language Structure: Papers from the Fifth*

- International Symposium on Sign Language Research, Vol. 1*, 13–28. Durham: International Sign Linguistics Association.
- Aarons, Debra & Bahan, Benjamin & Kegl, Judy & Neidle, Carol. 1995. Lexical tense markers in American Sign Language. In Emmorey, Karen & Reilly, Judy S. (eds.), *Language, Gesture, and Space*, 225–253. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Anible, Benjamin & Occhino-Kehoe, Corrine. 2015. What’s happening with HAPPEN? The Grammaticalization of HAPPEN in American Sign Language. In Anible, Benjamin & Beers, Keiko & Hirrel, Laura & Deborah Wager (eds.), *Proceedings of the High Desert Linguistics Society Conference 10*, 27–41. University of New Mexico.
- Baker, Charlotte & Cokely, Denis. 1980. *American Sign Language: A Teacher’s Resource Text on Grammar and Culture*. Silver Spring, MD: T. J. Publishers.
- Baker-Shenk, Charlotte. 1983. A microanalysis of the nonmanual components of questions in American Sign Language. Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.
- Battison, Robbin. 1978. *Lexical Borrowing in American Sign Language*. Silver Spring, MD: Linstok Press.
- Chafe, Wallace L. 1976. Givenness, contrastiveness, definiteness, subjects, topics, and point of view. In Li, Charles N. (ed.), *Subject and Topic*, 26–55. New York: Academic Press.
- Chafe, Wallace L. 1994. *Discourse, Consciousness, and Time: The Flow and Displacement of Conscious Experience in Speaking and Writing*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Dahlstrom, Amy. 1995. Topic, focus and other word order problems in Algonquian. The Belcourt Lecture, 25 February 1994. Winnipeg, Canada: Voices of Rupert’s Land.
- Engberg-Pedersen, Elisabeth. 1993. *Space in Danish Sign Language: The Semantics and Morpho-syntax of the Use of Space in a Visual Language*. Hamburg: Signum Verlag.
- Engberg-Pedersen, Elisabeth. 2010. Factors that form classifier signs. In Diane Brentari (ed.), *Sign Languages*, 252–283. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Friedman, Lynn A. 1976. The manifestation of subject, object, and topic in the American Sign Language. In Li, Charles N. (ed.), *Subject and Topic*, 125–148. New York: Academic Press.
- Geluykens, Ronald. 1993. Topic introduction in English conversation. *Transactions of the Philological Society* 91(2). 181–214.

- Givón, Talmy. 1984. *Syntax: A Functional-Typological Introduction*, Vol. 1. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Givón, Talmy. 1985. Iconicity, isomorphism, and non-arbitrary coding in syntax. In Haiman, John (ed.), *Iconicity in Syntax: Proceedings of a Symposium on Iconicity in Syntax, Stanford, June 24-6, 1983*, 187–219. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Haiman, John. 1978. Conditionals are topics. *Language* 54. 564–589.
- Halliday, Michael A. K. 1967. Notes on transitivity and theme in English: Part 2. *Journal of Linguistics* 3. 199–244.
- Heine, Bernd & Reh, Mechthild. 1984. *Grammaticalization and Reanalysis in African Languages*. Hamburg: Buske.
- Herring, Susan C. 1991. The grammaticalization of rhetorical questions in Tamil. In Traugott, Elizabeth C. & Bernd Heine (eds.), *Approaches to Grammaticalization*, Vol. 1, 253–284. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Hornby, Peter A. 1971. Surface structure and the topic-comment distinction: A developmental study. *Child Development* 42(6). 1975–1988.
- Ingram, Robert M. 1978. Theme, rheme, topic, and comment in the syntax of American Sign Language. *Sign Language Studies* 20. 193–218.
- Isenhardt, John O. 1990. *The Linguistics of American Sign Language*. Jefferson, NC: MacFarland & Company.
- Janzen, Terry. 1995a. Differentiating topic from subject in ASL. In Aubin, Marie-Christine (ed.), *Perspectives d'avenir en traduction*, 57–74. Winnipeg: Presses universitaires de Saint-Boniface.
- Janzen, Terry. 1995b. The Polygrammaticalization of FINISH in ASL. Master's Dissertation, University of Manitoba.
- Janzen, Terry. 1998. *Topicality in ASL: Information Ordering, Constituent Structure, and the Function of Topic Marking*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of New Mexico.
- Janzen, Terry. 1999. The grammaticization of topics in American Sign Language. *Studies in Language* 23(2). 271–306.
- Janzen, Terry. 2004. Space Rotation, Perspective Shift, and Verb Morphology in ASL. *Cognitive Linguistics* 15(2). 149–174.
- Janzen, Terry. 2007. The expression of grammatical categories in signed languages. In Pizzuto, Elena & Paola Pietrandrea & Raffaele Simone (eds.), *Verbal and Signed*

- Languages: Comparing Structures, Constructs and Methodologies*, 171–197. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Janzen, Terry. 2012a. Lexicalization and grammaticalization. In Pfau, Roland & Steinbach, Markus & Bencie Woll (eds.), *Sign Language: An International Handbook*, 816–840. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Janzen, Terry. 2012b. Two ways of conceptualizing space: Motivating the use of static and rotated vantage point space in ASL discourse. In Barbara Dancygier & Eve Sweetser (eds.), *Viewpoint in Language: A Multimodal Perspective*, 156–174. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Janzen, Terry. 2017. Composite Utterances in a Signed Language: Topic Constructions and Perspective-taking in ASL. *Cognitive Linguistics* 28(3). 511–538.
- Janzen, Terry. 2018. KNOW and UNDERSTAND in ASL: A Usage-based study of grammaticalized topic constructions. In Smith, K. Aaron & Dawn Nordquist (eds.), *Functionalist and Usage-based Approaches to the Study of Language: In Honor of Joan L. Bybee*, 59–87. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Janzen, Terry. 2025. Looking at perspective-taking through a cognitive linguistics lens. *WIREs Cognitive Science* 16(2): e70001. 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcs.70001>
- Janzen, Terry & Barbara Shaffer. 2008. Intersubjectivity in interpreted interactions. In Zlatev, Jordan & Racine, Timothy & Chris Sinha & Esa Iktonen (eds.), *The Shared Mind: Perspectives on Intersubjectivity*, 333–355. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Janzen, Terry & Shaffer, Barbara. 2013. The interpreter's stance in intersubjective discourse. In Meurant, Laurence & Aurélie Sinte & Myriam Vermeerbergen & Mieke Van Herreweghe (eds.), *Sign Language Research, Uses and Practices*, 63–84. Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter Mouton/Nijmegen: Ishara Press.
- Lambrecht, Knud. 1994. *Information Structure and Sentence Form: Topic, Focus, and the Mental Representation of Discourse Referents*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Langacker, Ronald W. 1991. *Concept, Image, and Symbol: The Cognitive Basis of Grammar*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Langacker, Ronald W. 2008. *Cognitive Grammar: A Basic Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Langacker, Ronald W. 2013. Reference-point constructions. *Mouton Classics: From Syntax to Cognition, From Phonology to Text*, 413–450. Berlin/Boston: Mouton de Gruyter.

- Li, Charles N. & Thompson, Sandra A. 1976. Subject and topic: A new typology of language. In Li, Charles N. (Ed.), *Subject and Topic*, 457–490. New York: Academic Press.
- Li, Charles N. & Thompson, Sandra A. 1981. *Mandarin Chinese: A Functional Reference Grammar*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Liddell, Scott K. 1977. An investigation into the syntax of American Sign Language. Doctoral dissertation, University of California, San Diego.
- Liddell, Scott K. 1980. *American Sign Language Syntax*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Liddell, Scott K. 2003. *Grammar, Gesture, and Meaning in American Sign Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Liddell, Scott K. & Metzger, Melanie. 1998. Gesture in sign language discourse. *Journal of Pragmatics* 30. 657–697.
- Lillo-Martin, Diane. 1991. *Universal Grammar and American Sign Language*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Lillo-Martin, Diane. 1995. The point of view predicate in American Sign Language. In Emmorey, Karen & Judy S. Reilly (eds.), *Language, Gesture, and Space*, 155–170. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- McIntire, Marina L. 1982. Constituent order & location. *Sign Language Studies* 37. 345–386.
- Mithun, Marianne. 1986. The convergence of noun classification systems. In Colette Craig (ed.), *Noun Classes and Categorization*, 379–397. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Naylor, Paz Buenaventura. 1975. Topic, focus, and emphasis in the Tagalog verbal clause. *Oceanic Linguistics* 14(1). 12–79.
- Neidle, Carol & Kegl, Judy & MacLaughlin, Dawn & Bahan, Benjamin & Lee, Robert G. 2000. *The Syntax of American Sign Language: Functional Categories and Hierarchical Structure*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Ozerov, Pavel. 2021. Multifactorial Information Management (MIN): Summing up the emerging alternative to Information Structure. *Linguistics Vanguard* 7(1): 20200039. <https://doi.org/10.1515/lingvan-2020-0039>
- Padden, Carol. 1988. *Interaction of Morphology and Syntax in American Sign Language*. New York: Garland Publishing.

- Prince, Ellen. 1981. Toward a taxonomy of given-new information. In Cole, Peter (ed.), *Radical Pragmatics*, 223–255. New York: Academic Press.
- Reinhart, Tanya. 1982. Pragmatics and linguistics: An analysis of sentence topics. *Philosophica* 27. 53–93.
- Sandler, Wendy, & Lillo-Martin, Diane. 2006. *Sign Language and Linguistic Universals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Saunders, Daz. 2025. Mouth actions in Quebec Sign Language: Compositional units or context-dependant gestures. Presentation at International Cognitive Linguistics Conference (ICLC) 17, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 14–18 July 2025.
- Schembri, Adam. 2003. Rethinking ‘classifiers’ in signed languages. In Emmorey, Karen (ed.), *Perspectives on Classifier Constructions in Sign Languages*, 3–34. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Shaffer, Barbara. 2004. Information ordering and speaker subjectivity: Modality in ASL. *Cognitive Linguistics* 15(2). 175–195.
- Slobin, Dan I. 2006. Issues of linguistic typology in the study of sign language development of Deaf children. In Schick, Brenda & Marc Marschark & Patricia E. Spencer, (eds.), *Advances in the Sign Language Development of Deaf Children*, 20–45. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Supalla, Ted. 1986. The classifier system in American Sign Language. In Craig, Colette (ed.), *Noun Classes and Categorization*, 181–214. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Traugott, Elizabeth C. 1989. On the rise of epistemic meanings in English: An example of subjectification in semantic change. *Language* 65. 31–55.
- Valli, Clayton & Lucas, Ceil. 1992. *Linguistics of American Sign Language*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Valli, Clayton & Lucas, Ceil & Mulrooney, Kristin J.. 2005. *Linguistics of American Sign Language* (4th edition). Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Vermeerbergen, Myriam & Leeson, Lorraine & Onno Crasborn (eds.). 2007. *Simultaneity in Signed Languages: Form and Function*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Wilbur, Ronnie B. 1999. A functional journey with a formal ending: What do brow raises do in American Sign Language? In Darnell, Michael & Moravcsik, Edith A. & Noonan, Michael & Frederick Newmeyer & Kathleen Wheatly (eds.), *Functionalism and*

- Formalism, Volume II: Case studies*, 295–313. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Wilbur, Ronnie B. 2012. Information structure. In Pfau, Roland & Markus Steinbach & Bencie Woll (eds.) *Sign Language: An International Handbook*, 462–489. Berlin/Boston: Mouton De Gruyter.
- Wilbur, Ronnie B. & Patschke, Cynthia. 1999. Syntactic correlates of brow raise in ASL. *Sign Language and Linguistics* 2(1). 3–41.
- Winston, Elizabeth A. 1995. Spatial mapping in comparative discourse frames. In Emmorey, Karen & Judy S. Reilly (eds.), *Language, Gesture, and Space*, 87–114. Hillsdale NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Wilcox, Phyllis Perrin. 2011. GIVE: Acts of giving in American Sign Language. In Newman, John (ed.), *The Linguistics of Giving*, 175–206. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Zwitserlood, Inge. 2012. Classifiers. In Pfau, Roland & Steinbach, Markus & Bencie Woll (eds.), *Sign Language: An International Handbook*, 158–186. Berlin/Boston: Mouton De Gruyter.

CONTACT

terry.janzen@umanitoba.ca