Variation and use of constructed action in sign languages
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In contrast with traditional grammatical phenomena, constructed action (CA) – the allegedly universal pantomime-like process in which signers use their body and its parts to show the actions, thoughts, feelings, or sayings of someone they are referring to in the discourse – is still little studied in the world’s sign languages (SLs). In general, the research carried out so far has shown that CA is a relatively frequent but compositionally complex activity that interacts in subtle ways with syntactic units in SL narratives. However, we still lack crucial information on the concrete ways CA is connected to different types of signs and the effects the linguistic and non-linguistic contexts have on CA. In order to contribute to the attempts in the field of SL research to better understand CA and, for example, to complete a crucial step in the compilation of the hitherto unwritten reference grammar of Finnish Sign Language (FinSL), this study takes as its main objective the investigation of these connections and contexts. Specifically, the study asks: How do the degrees and functions of CA both interact with different types of depictive signs and vary according to the parameters of discourse type and the age of the signer in SLs in general and FinSL in particular? In line with the gradual emergence of SL corpus linguistics, the questions will be addressed with the help of large video corpora comprising a total of thirty hours of signing in FinSL and in two other SLs: Swedish SL and the SL of the Netherlands. As a pioneering contribution to the analysis of CA, the study will also investigate, for the first time, the differences between adult signers and young people, with corpus data from FinSL. Methodologically, the study relies on a variety of linguistic and computational methods and will develop these further for the benefit of future corpus-based research on SLs. Scientifically, in addition to producing completely new conclusions on CA and its variation and use, the study will contribute to the general research on gesturality as an inherent feature of SLs and also provide parallel data for future research on CA and gestures in spoken languages. Societally, the project will help to raise the status of FinSL as a minority language, both in Finland and internationally.

Keywords: sign language, Finnish Sign Language, constructed action, gesture, gesturality, depiction, variation, use, corpus, language acquisition