

The grammar of the body: Insights about language from sign language
Wendy Sandler
University of Haifa

The first half century of linguistic research on sign languages was dedicated to discovering in sign languages the same essential properties that characterize spoken languages. This enterprise was successful, and the similarities, including formal similarities, between languages in the two modalities, are indeed striking and often surprising. These results seemed to support the Chomskian view that it is a computational system in the brain that determines linguistic structure, independent of the ‘sensorimotor system’ – the body -- which is thought to be of secondary importance.

My goal here is to bring evidence from sign language in favor of a paradigm that works in the opposite direction, from thought units to the body, and from there to linguistic form. Specifically, we follow the notion proposed in earlier investigations by several investigators of spoken language, that the core unit in human communication is the thought unit, akin to a propositional unit, and typically comprising a prosodic phrase. I show that this core unit accrues linguistic form by the exigencies of the human body, through communication, over time. The evidence here comes from three sources: so-called modality effects such as iconicity/arbitrariness and simultaneity/linearity; the emergence of sign language from scratch; and a comparison of prosodic phrases and their content across modalities and across generations in language emergence. The conclusion is that ‘modality effects’, i.e., the role of the body, is not peripheral, but rather is critical to the structuring of language in **both** modalities.