
A modality-agnostic investigation of reference in French Belgian Sign Language and Belgian French

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Research on reference has shown that speakers encode referents (e.g., people, objects and concepts) through referential expressions based on factors such as cognitive accessibility, animacy, syntactic function and definiteness. In spoken languages (SpLs), gestures often accompany and are shaped by the same factor (Debreslioska & Gullberg 2020). In sign languages (SLs), referents are established through referential expressions, spatial anchoring and can also be represented by iconic strategies (Hodge, Ferrara & Anible 2019). Despite an increasing number of multimodal and comparative studies, these findings are still mostly discussed in a modality-specific way and in isolation from one another.

Recent semiotic approaches in linguistics emphasize that SLs use only visual-kinetic modality, while SpLs combine aural-oral and visual-kinetic modalities. Although they differ in the use of channels (visible articulators for SLs and SpLs, and the vocal tract for SpLs) both SLs and SpLs are *polysemiotic* (Lepeut et al. 2024). Despite these differences in modalities and channels, meaning production relies on three strategies: description (using conventional relations between form and meaning), depiction (showing meaning through resemblance) and indication (signalling meaning through spatial or temporal relations).

This study explores how a modality-agnostic framework can reveal both the similarities and differences in reference establishment and maintenance in French Belgian Sign Language (LSFB) and Belgian French (BF). Findings show that signers and speakers use a wide range of referential expressions, ranging from conventionalized forms (e.g., lexical signs and words) to highly context-dependent ones (e.g., pointing signs and constructed action structures). Signers and speakers also tend to combine referential expressions to simultaneously denote referents. Beyond the modalities and channels that may differ, both groups exhibit comparable patterns of reference construction. Coming from directly comparable corpora (LSFB and FRAPé corpora – Lepeut et al. 2024), results are based on the productions of eight signers and eight speakers, each retelling cartoons.

References: • Debreslioska, S. & M. Gullberg (2020). The semantic content of gestures varies with information status, definiteness and clause structure. *Journal of Pragmatics* 168, 36–52. • Hodge, G., Ferrara, L. N. & B. D. Anible (2019). The semiotic diversity of doing reference in a deaf signed language. *Journal of Pragmatics* 143, 33–53. • Lepeut, A., Lombart, C., Vandenitte, S. & L. Meurant (2024). Spoken and Signed Languages Hand in Hand: Parallel and Directly Comparable Corpora of French Belgian Sign Language (LSFB) and French. *Corpora* 19(2), 241–253.