

# A THESPIAN GRAMMAR OF THE BODY

WENDY SANDLER  
UNIVERSITY OF HAIFA





# **LANGUAGE IS COMPOSITIONAL**

(KRIFKA 2013, SMITH & KIRBY 2012, SANDLER & LILLO-MARTIN 2006)

**A COMPLEX EXPRESSION IS INTERPRETED  
IN TERMS OF THE MEANINGS OF ITS  
PARTS AND THE WAY THEY COMBINE**



# LANGUAGE IS COMPOSITIONAL

(KRIFKA 2001, SMITH & KIRBY 2012, SANDLER & LILLO-MARTIN 2006)

**WHAT IS THE ORIGIN  
OF THE COMPONENTS  
AND HOW DO THEY COMBINE?**



# GESTURAL ORIGIN THEORIES

(CORBALLIS 2002, ARBIB 2012)

- In apes, gestures are more voluntary and flexible than vocalizations (Tomasello 2008; Liebal et al 2015)
- Apes can learn signs (e.g., Gardner & Gardner 1969) but not spoken words
- All humans gesture with speech when they communicate (McNeill 1992) including blind people (Iverson & Goldin-Meadow 1998)
- All deaf communities develop sign languages naturally, without a model or instruction (Senghas & Coppola 2001; Sandler et al 2005)



# GESTURAL COMPONENTS ARE THOUGHT OF MAINLY AS HAND GESTURES

Arbib's (2012) model: Earliest precursors involved gesture and vocalization together. (Facial expression also played a role.) But mostly hands:

*"I might mime a flying bird by **flapping my arms up and down**....The power of pantomime is the ability to create an open ended set of complex messages exploiting the primates' open-ended **manual dexterity**." (2012:219)*



# WHY RESTRICT ATTENTION TO THE HANDS?

In sign languages, hands convey word-like units. **Attention to words in spoken language and hands in sign/gesture has been unduly influenced by the narrow perspective of traditional linguistics: focus on written words and syntax.**



# BROADER WORKING DEFINITION:

Language is a communication  
system comprised of intentional  
**compositional** expressions.



# THE HUMAN COMPOSITIONAL REPERTOIRE IS FAR RICHER THAN HANDS/WORDS

- Intentional expressions are comprised not only of words and their arrangement – but of attitudes, emotions, perspectives, and actions – and their components
- In spoken medium: expressed by voice, gestures of hands, face, and body
- In sign medium, all intentional expressions are conveyed by the body
- **Components and their combinations most vividly revealed by creative extension**
- **Goal: to enrich the model of language that evolution has afforded to humans**





# THE BODY AS A SOURCE OF COMPOSITIONALITY IN LANGUAGE





# CREATIVE EXTENSION OF SIGN LANGUAGE COMPONENTS

- What are the sequential and simultaneous corporeal components afforded to visual language?
- How are they extended in creative expression?
- The grammar of the body in creative expression reveals the complexity of human communicative competence



# 1. LINGUISTIC USE OF THE BODY IN SIGN LANGUAGE





# The hands: lexical items



DOG



ESCAPE



# Head and body in prosody: delineating and relating parts of the sentence

(Nespor & Sandler 1999)



Topic phrase:  
*(small dog that) I found last week*

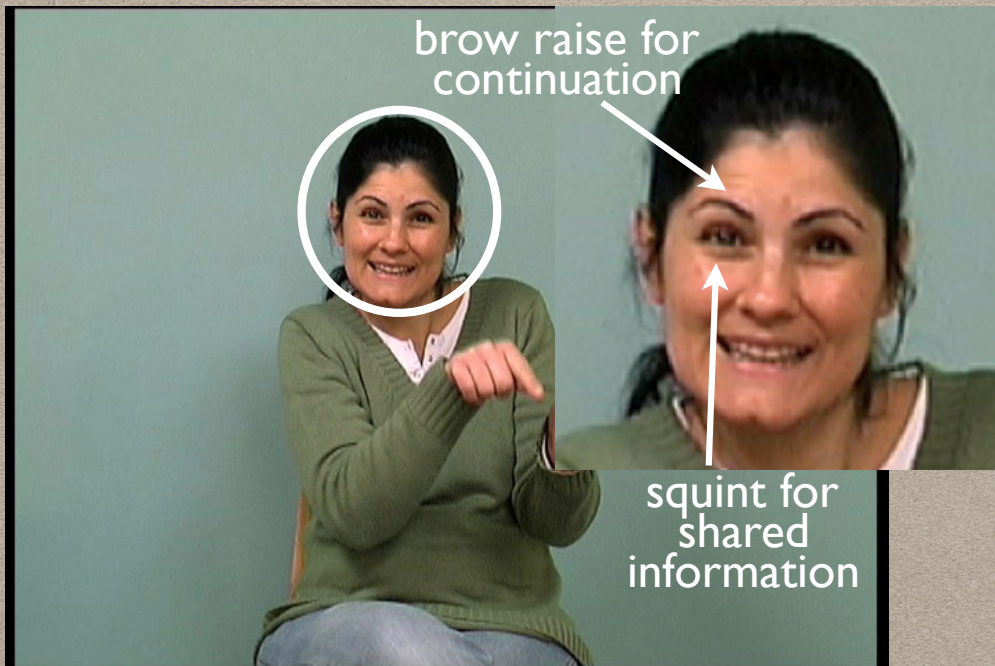


Comment phrase:  
*ran away*



# Face: intonation has grammatical function and is aligned with hand and head movement

(Nespor & Sandler 1999; Sandler 2012a; Dachkovsky & Sandler 2009)



Topic:

*small dog that I found last week*

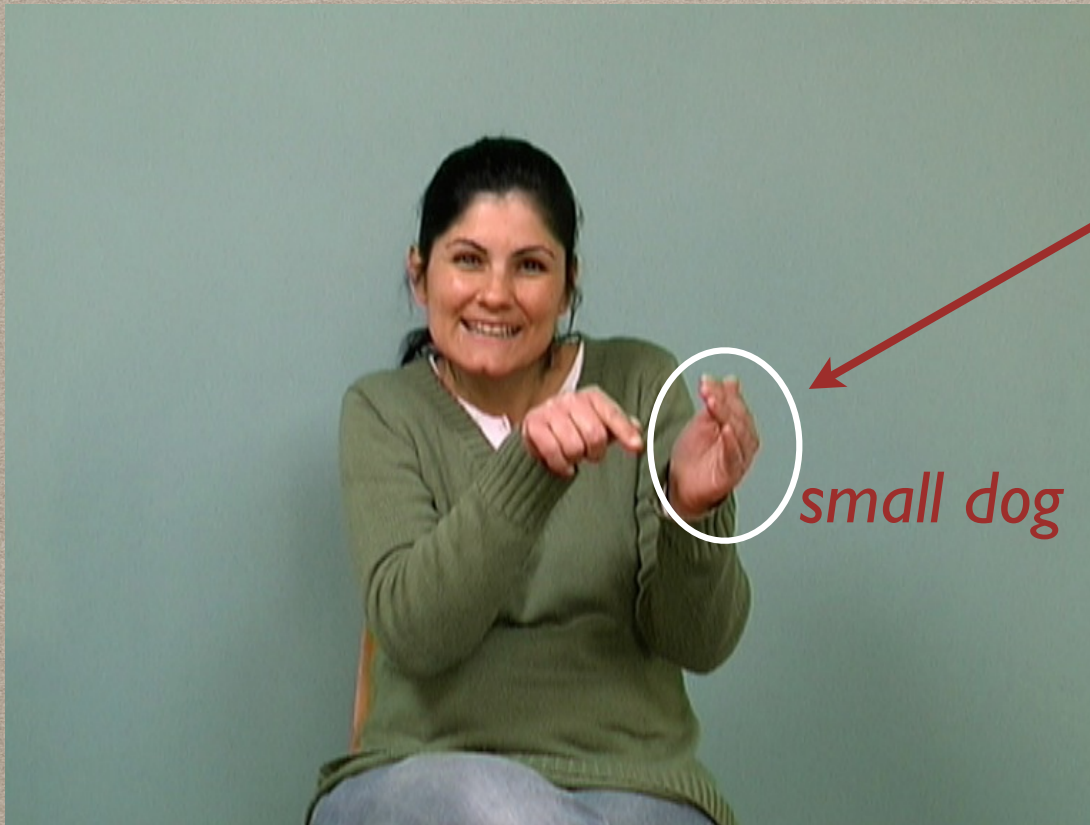


Comment:

*ran away*

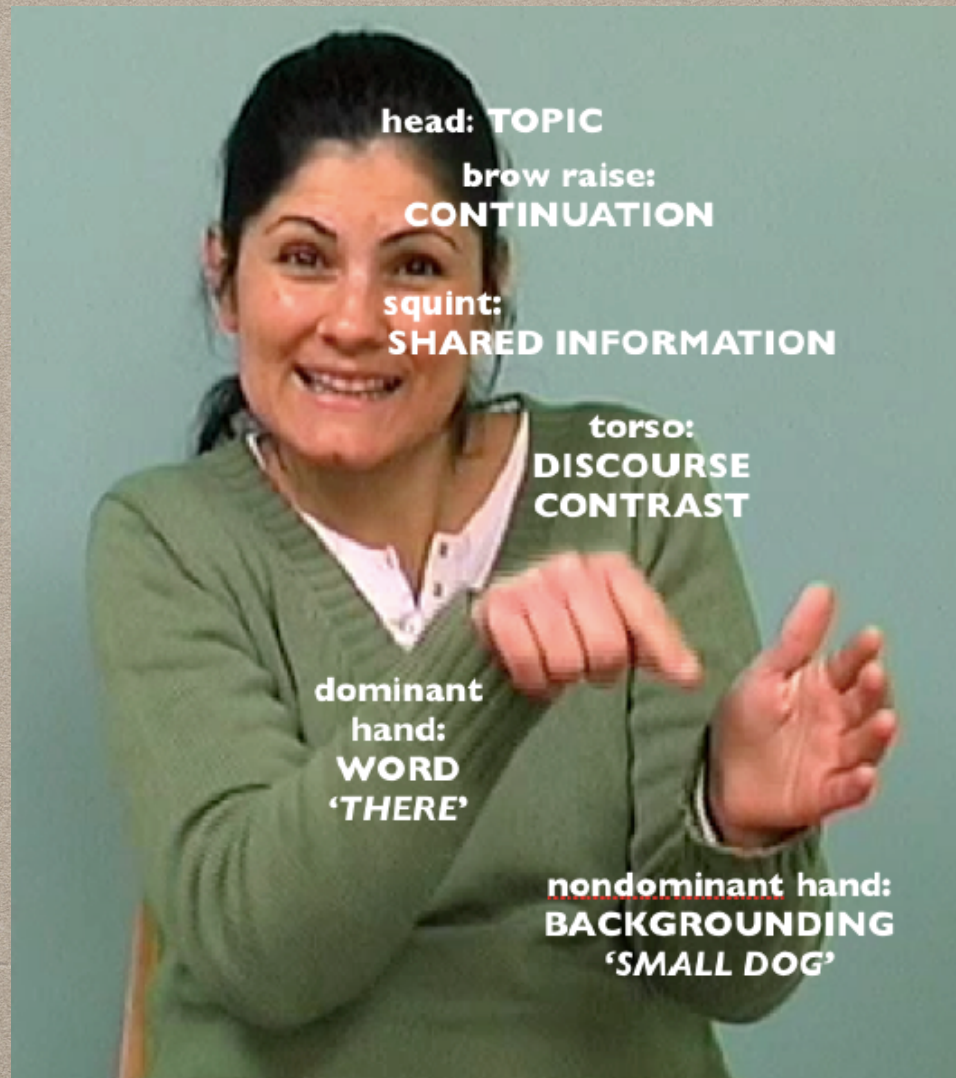


# Two independent hands



Nondominant  
hand: topic  
continuity





# SIMULTANEOUS COMPOSITIONALITY

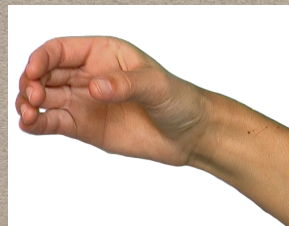


# ADDITIONAL PRODUCTIVE MORPHOLOGICAL ELEMENT: CLASSIFIERS

- set of lexical handshapes that stand for classes of entities according to size and shape or semantic category
- combine with gestural/mimetic movements and locations



small round object



cylindrical object



‘car rides under bridge’



## **2. USE OF THE BODY IN CREATIVE EXPRESSION**

**CREATIVITY UNLEASHES  
THE FULL COMMUNICATIVE  
REPERTOIRE**



# ***THE EBISU THEATRE LABORATORY***

- 7 deaf actors, 1 hearing, all ISL signers
- Performance constructed through improvisation (Atay Citron, director)
- Meant to be accessible to both deaf and hearing audiences
- Extends sign language devices to create visual theatre
- Creative extension reveals the components and their combinations





# 1. SIGN LANGUAGE WITH CREATIVE EXTENSION OF BASIC SIGN LANGUAGE ELEMENTS

*Who is Ebisu?*

**MOVIE**

What is the story of Ebisu?

CL: islands

CL: island  
among waves

'that island'



# SIGN LANGUAGE WITH CREATIVE USE OF BASIC SIGN LANGUAGE ELEMENTS

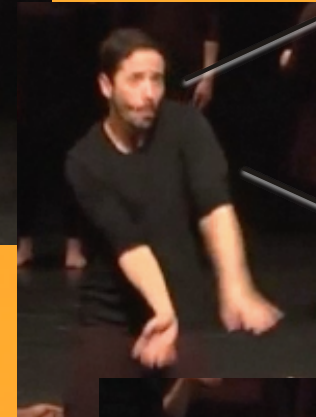
## SIMULTANEOUS & SEQUENTIAL COMPONENTS

Classifier:  
basket



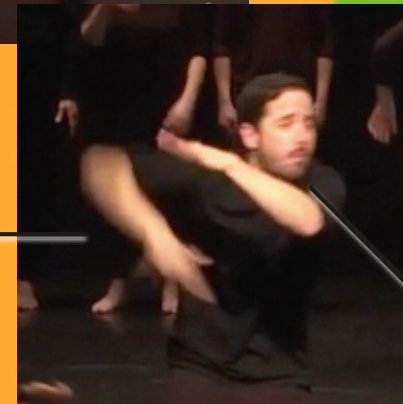
Classifier:  
waves

mime:  
boneless face



mime:  
boneless body

Classifier:  
basket



Classifier:  
waves



# COMMUNICATIVE USE OF THE WHOLE BODY: BODY PARTITIONING

(Sutton-Spence & Napoli 2010)

(Wulf & Dudis 2005)

*Eating snails*

## MOVIE



diner  
perspective



sign: SNAIL

snail  
perspective



narrator  
perspective

snail  
perspective



snail  
perspective

narrator  
perspective



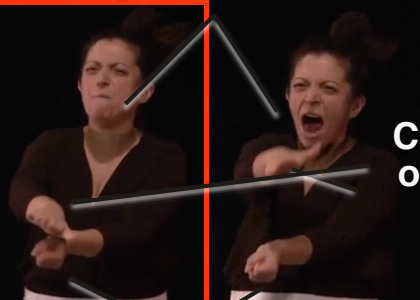
diner  
perspective





# SIGN AND GESTURAL COMPOSITIONS CREATE COMPLEX 'SYNTAX'

Iconic mouth  
gesture 'PA':



Classifier: flat  
object (steak)

Mime: pan-fry



Gesture: Enhancement  
Body Beat (EBB)

(Belsitzman, Sandler &  
Citron 2016)

*Daily Specials*

## MOVIE



Sign: COW



Mime:  
cow's face



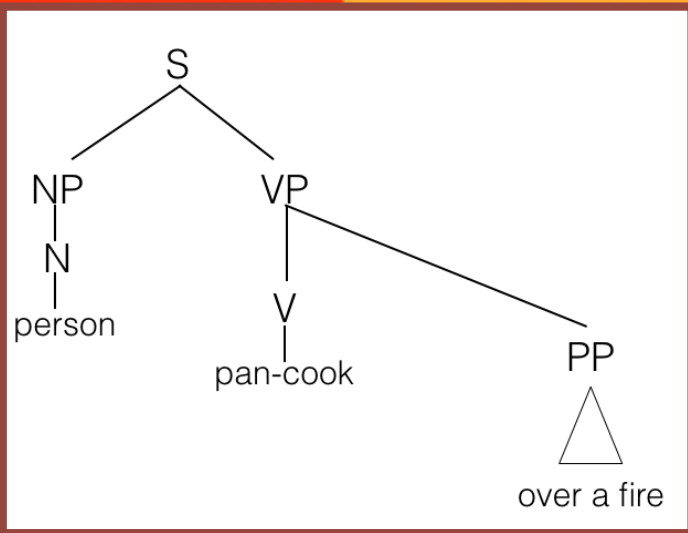
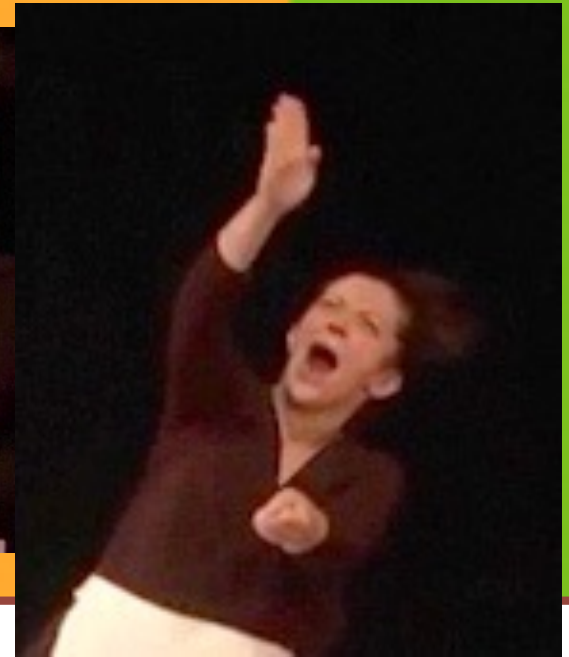
Mime: pan-fry  
Sign: FIRE



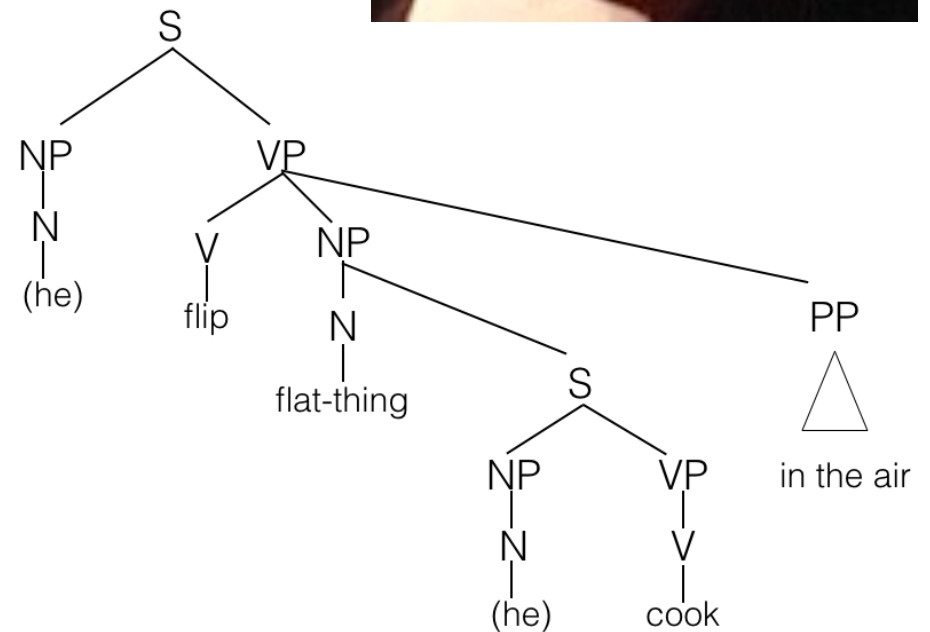
Mime: cow  
chewing

Classifiers:  
cow's jaws





*The chef cooked a steak in a pan over a fire.*



*He flipped the steak that he was cooking into the air*



*The chef cooked the steak in a pan over a fire. He flipped the steak that he was frying way up high in the air. The steak wafted and flipped its way down, landing in the pan with a thud.*





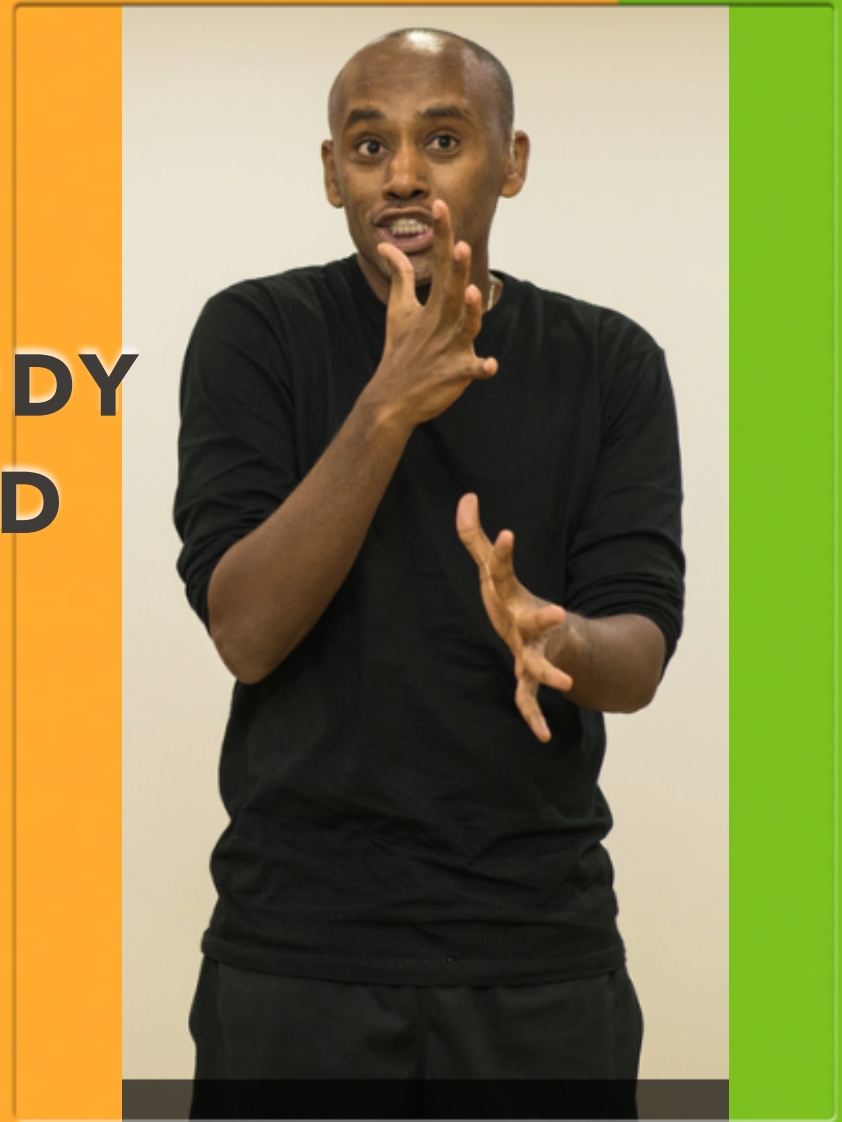
# IS THIS LANGUAGE?

**LANGUAGE IS A  
COMMUNICATION  
SYSTEM COMPRISED  
OF INTENTIONAL  
COMPOSITIONAL  
EXPRESSIONS**





**THE CREATIVE  
GRAMMAR OF THE BODY  
REVEALS AN ENRICHED  
MODEL OF THE FORM  
AND SUBSTANCE OF  
HUMAN LANGUAGE**





# THANK YOU

Actors: Golan Zino, Lee Dan,  
Ella Okhotin, Adis Tesffa Sibaht

Director: Atay Citron

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