





Classifier Constructions in Sign Languages - A Typological Overview

Isabeau Lettow

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Classifier constructions (CCs) [1], are “morphological categories that denote entities [...] by depicting some salient iconic aspect of these entities by manual articulation, in particular, handshape [...]” [2]. The term originates from spoken language linguistics where it describes morphemes that distinguish noun classes from each other. Frishberg adopted it for sign languages in 1975 [2]. There are also other terms for CCs like *depicting verbs* or *polymorphemic signs* and you could debate whether it makes sense to subsume both phenomena in one concept [1]. CCs can be subdivided into further categories such as *whole-entity classifiers*, *handling classifiers*, *size-and-shape classifiers* and *body-part classifiers*. Again, there are differences in the terminology [2].

The use of a classifier-handshape is a complex morphological process which happens simultaneously and thus, is a modality-dependent difference from classifiers in spoken languages [3]. Most of the sign languages studied so far make use of these CCs [4], but they do it in different ways. In German Sign Language (DGS), a person is shown with the -handshape because it's taller than wide and a car is realised by the -handshape because it's wider than tall [3]. The same person-classifier is realised with a -handshape in Hong-Kong Sign Language (HKSL) [5] and the car-classifier is shown with a -handshape in Québec Sign Language (LSQ) [6]. So, while the choice of a handshape is always made based on semantic information, different languages might concentrate on other iconic characteristics.

In my presentation I will share general information on CCs and discuss the similarities as well as differences between classifiers in spoken and signed languages. Following that, I will take a closer look at the classifier-inventory of sign languages. After comparing the CCs of different sign languages, I will concentrate on DGS and present its inventory in greater detail. The goal of my presentation is to share theoretical information about classifier constructions in spoken and sign languages. Moreover, I want to highlight practical characteristics of CCs in different sign languages.

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