

# Identifying Subjects and Objects in American Sign Language

American Sign Language  
Utah Valley State College

## After this workshop, you will

Better understand:

- 1) how ASL determines subjects and objects of sentences and utterances
- 2) that ASL determines subjects and objects through a) verb modulation, b) topicalization and sign order, and c) body/gaze shifting

## 1) How do both English and ASL determine the subjects and objects of sentences and utterances?

### Definitions

- Subject: a noun that represents a person or thing that does something
- Object: various types
  - a) direct object: a noun that a subject acts upon
  - b) indirect object: a noun that generally is the recipient of or is affected by the subject
  - c) oblique object: nouns generally found in prepositional phrases

### Subjects/objects in English:

- word order determines grammatical roles in English; subjects are first, verbs follow, objects appear later, etc.

### Subjects/objects in ASL

- changes or modulations in verb formation
- use of specific sign orders (when verbs cannot be modulated)
- changes in body positioning, shift, or eye gaze represent different participants in narrative situations

## 2) a. Verb modulation in ASL

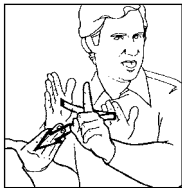


Figure 2a: Signer uses body tilt; indicates subject or object



Figure 2b: directional verb agrees with referents' spatial location



Figure 2c: verb involves two referents

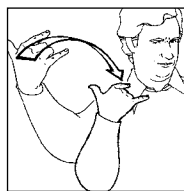


Figure 2d: verb moves from one location to another location



Figure 2e: verb signed on specific area; indicates what is acted upon

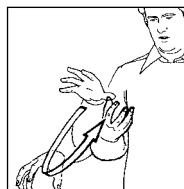


Figure 2f: handshape identifies shape/size of object

### Spatial locations are pre-designated in ASL

- signer location represents first person
- addressee (who is being signed to) location represents second person
- other present and non-present people, things, or places represent third person

### Non-manual behaviors accompanying subject/object identification

- when signer is subject, body tilts toward referent; when signer is object, body tilts away from referent (I GIVE-to-you, YOU GIVE-to-me); figure 2a, 2b

### Ways ASL verbs are modulated

- Directional verbs agree with the subject's and object's spatial location  
Examples: figure 2a, 2b

- Some directional verbs agree with two mutual referents; these *reciprocal* verbs indicate simultaneous actions; figure 2c  
Examples:

- Other directional verbs agree with spatial locations; figure 2d  
Examples:

- A verb can be made in a specific area, indicating action in that area; figure 2e  
Examples:

- The movement and/or handshape of the verb agrees with specific verb action; figure 2f  
Examples:

- Verbs which are non-directional or "body-anchored" require a noun or pronoun to indicate referents
  - a) "rule of last mentioned subject" says—if many verbs follow a subject, it is understood that all subsequent actions belong to that subject until new referent is indicated.  
Examples:

## 2) b. Topicalization and sign order

### *Topicalization*

- As ASL is a visual/spatial language, it relies on a topic-comment word order and grammar. Oversimplified, a signer identifies a 'topic' (person, thing, place, etc.) and then adds comments about the topic. Topics are set off by non-manual behaviors (raised eyebrows and short pauses)

*Examples:*

## 2) c. Body and gaze shifting

### *Body and gaze shifting*

- A technique that ASL/Deaf signers use to indicate you are performing an action or "speaking a part." It is most commonly used in narratives
- The signer, once shifted "into" a spatial location, represents a referent; he/she assumes the role of the referent in the narrative and signs as if he/she were the referent. It becomes very clear as to what is being said and who is saying it.
- Body position and gaze must agree with other referents in the narrative on both vertical and horizontal planes; i.e. a small child might look right and up to an adult while an adult would address the child down and left
  - a) vertical plane (up-down) may also be used to indicate status (teacher-student, royalty-commoner, employer-employee, authority figure-average citizen, etc.)

### *Linguistic challenges*

- looks like signer is speaking in first person ("I did this," "I bought a car") when actually he/she may be giving a narrative; English speaker generally give narratives in third person