Identifying Subjects and Objects in American Sign Language
Interpreting II (ASL 3330)

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

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

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
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 is 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

References and Bibliography