

Semantics Group
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Title. The Inferential Typology of Language: Insights from Sign Language (ASL)

Abstract. Contemporary formal pragmatics has uncovered a rich inferential typology in spoken languages, one that includes at-issue contents, presuppositions, implicatures, homogeneity inferences, supplements and expressives. The division of informational contents among this typology is sometimes taken to be specified in the lexicon, but gestural research has argued against this view: with one possible exception (expressives), participants productively divide the content of iconic representations among the slots of the inferential typology, and this can be shown with pro-speech (= word-replacing) gestures as well as with novel visual animations. Despite important recent developments, sign language semantics has not systematically investigated this inferential typology. Based on published and on new data from ASL, we do so from a dual perspective: we exhibit the characteristic behavior of different inferential types in lexical signs, but also (when applicable) in iconically modulated constructions, notably classifier predicates. These have a lexically specified form but an entirely free position and movement in signing space, which are interpreted iconically and give rise to truth conditions that couldn't be stored lexically. Classifier predicates thus make it possible to replicate the productivity argument from pro-speech gestures and visual animations, but with greater ease and precision because, unlike pro-speech elements, they are a common and fully integrated part of sign language. They also address an objection to findings coming from pro-speech gestures and visual animations, namely that these are in essence codes for normal expressions of spoken language (words); this objection has no plausibility for ASL iconic constructions, as these are normal expressions of sign language. Finally, in the case of expressives, we discuss a non-iconic but productive way to create slurs, and contrast it with modification by way of gestures or facial expressions.