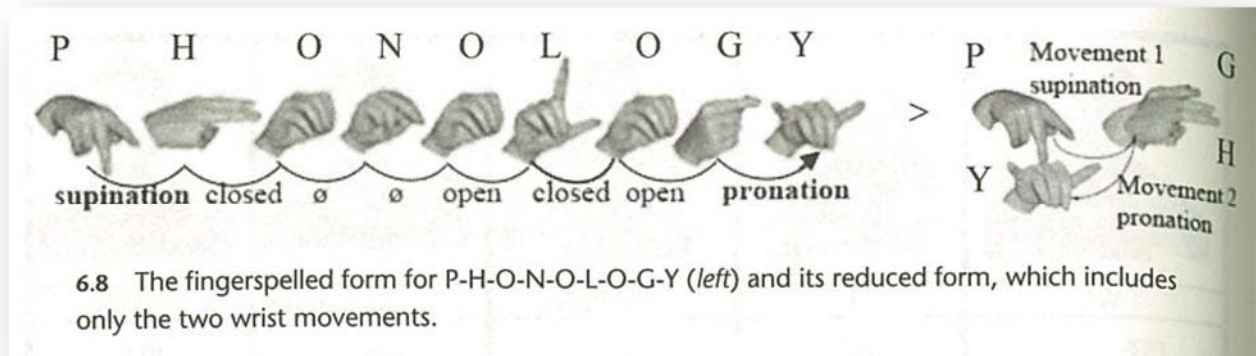**Tutorial on classifiers in sign languages**

21 Jan. 2020

0. I promised this earlier: ASL sign for PHONOLOGY

- A word we should know ☺
- But also an example of a loan that's a reduced form of a fingerspelled word

6.8 The fingerspelled form for P-H-O-N-O-L-O-G-Y (*left*) and its reduced form, which includes only the two wrist movements.

(Brentari 2018, p. 138)

- The point of this example, for Brentari, is that the wrist movement makes a good syllable nucleus
    - so P-H and G-Y both make good syllables
    - and the rest of the letters are dropped

1. OK, back to classifiers. Not all verbs have them

Here's how Morgan & Woll (2007) break down verbs found in European sign languages—they don't mention how this differs in other parts of the world

- plain verbs
    - don't get modified much if at all

    - e.g. BSL RUN [1]

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[1] https://www.british-sign.co.uk/british-sign-language/how-to-sign/run/

- agreement verbs
  - use movement and orientation to indicate subject and object
  - e.g. ASL GIVE starts in the location that has been set up as referring to the subject, and ends in the location that has been set up as referring to the object

examples from LifePrint

me-GIVE-you

you-GIVE-me

me-GIVE-him

- **spatial verbs**
  - inflect (iconically) for "path, trajectory, speed, and location"
  - **handshape** indicates **class** of the thing that is moving
  - e.g. BSL RUN-DOWNSTAIRS

> This part seems to happen in just about all sign languages

2. How do you use a classifier in a sentence?

Explanation for ASL learners from LifePrint

"Similar to pronouns, that which is being represented (or described) by a classifier must be 'introduced' prior to using the classifier. If I'm going to use a classifier to talk about Jane, first I'll identify her in some way. (If she is in the room I might point at her. If she is not in the room I might spell her name or point to where she usually sits.)

"Suppose I want to tell you that my sister 'bumped into' her old boyfriend yesterday? I might start by signing 'MY SISTER' with raised eyebrows to see if you recall my sister. Then after you nod slightly or otherwise indicate that you know who I'm talking about I might sign, YESTERDAY SHE M-A-L-L CL-1 'walking along, bumped-into' CL-1 FORMER BOYFRIEND."

CL-1: can represent many things, including a single person

"If I'm talking about throwing a baseball, I'll identify the sport before using a CL-3-claw to represent the ball"[2]

3. Example from Supalla 1982, p. 6: ASL 'A car crashing through a fence'
- First sign object FENCE, then subject CAR
- Then use classifier handshape for vehicles to show motion
  - in this case while using weak hand from object

4a. FENCE   4b. CAR   4c. VEHICLE-MOVE-THRU-FENCE

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[2] https://www.lifeprint.com/asl101/pages-signs/classifiers/classifiers-frame.htm
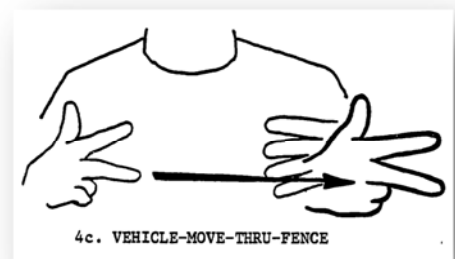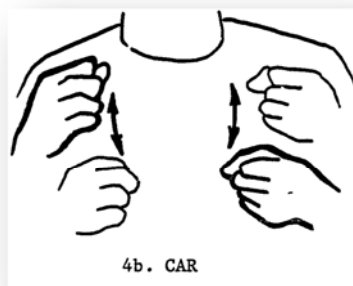
4. **Example from Emmorey 2001, p. 87:** ASL 'A bicycle is near the house'
   - Notice how each hand gets to be the classifier for a different referent
     - weak hand is making classifier for large, bulky objects
     - strong hand makes classifier for vehicles
   - I think BIKE is normally two-handed, but only strong hand is used here, since weak hand is busy

| HOUSE | whole-entity CL + *loc* | BIKE | whole-entity CL + *loc* |
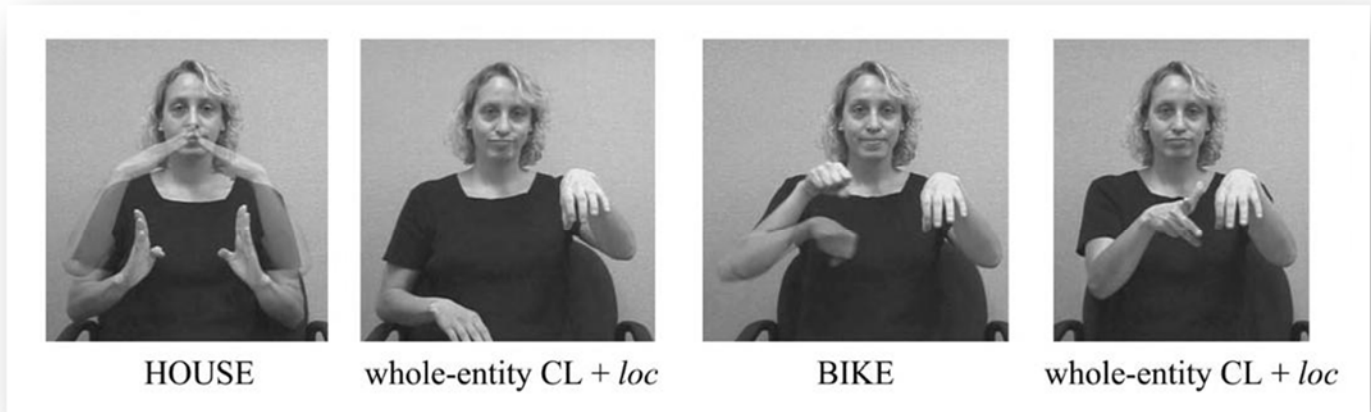
5. **Three main types of classifier**
   - size and shape specifiers (SASSes)
     - embody visual properties of the referent

THIN & STRAIGHT

NARROW & STRAIGHT

WIDE & STRAIGHT

FLAT & ROUND
(circle)

SHALLOW & ROUND
(shallow cylindrical)

DEEP & ROUND
(cylindrical)
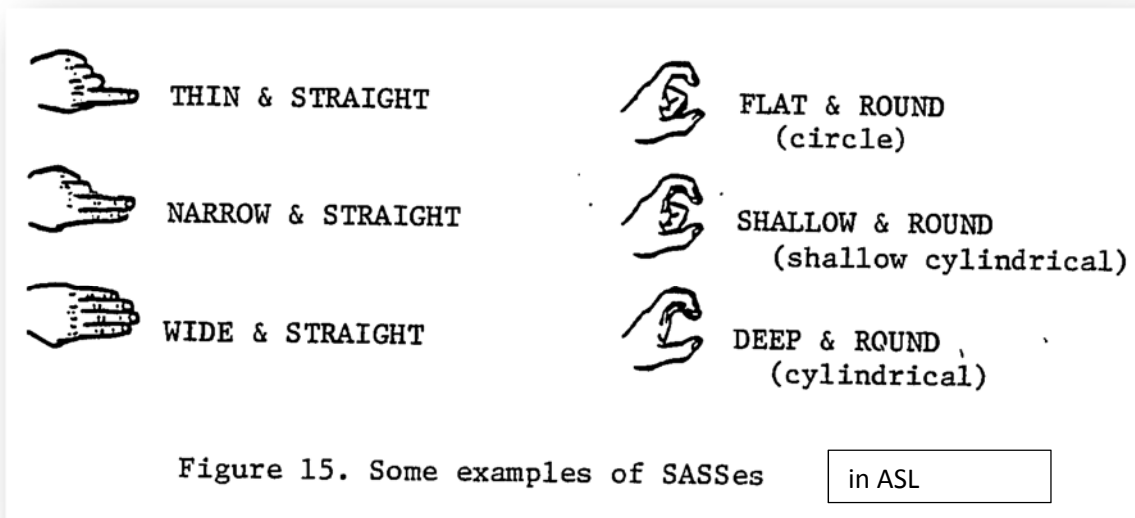
Figure 15. Some examples of SASSes in ASL

(Supalla 1982), p. 38

- semantic classifiers, aka entity classifiers

Figure 16. Some examples of semantic classifiers
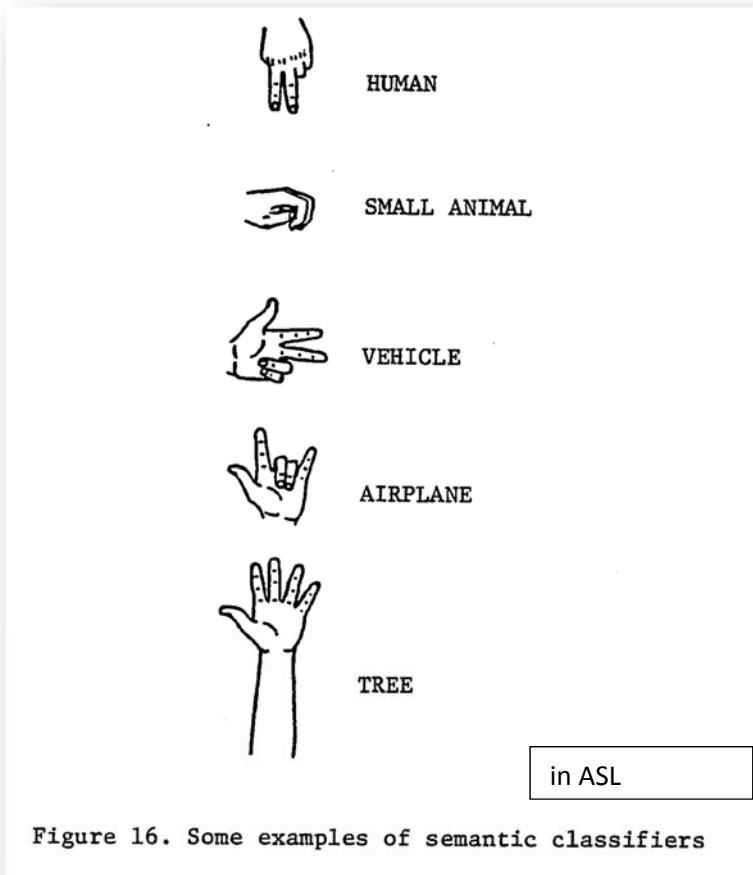
(Supalla 1982), p. 41

- handling classifiers
    - shape the hand makes when using the referent

ASL examples from LifePrint[3] (most of these handshapes can also be used as SASS or semantic classifiers)

computer mouse, baseball …   cup, book …   button, coin…

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6. Phonological differences from lexical signs
- Unlike in lexical signs, weak had can be independent
    - as seen in examples above, where it's its own classifier
- Thus, Battison's conditions can be violated

7. Interesting remark about eloquence by Sandler & Lillo-Martin (2006)
- After noting similarities of sign language classifiers to noun incorporation…
- First, they quote Mithun 1984 on noun incorporation in spoken languages

e.g. Cayuga   Skitu   ake'-**treht**-ae'   (Mithun 1986)
                   Skidoo I-**CL(vehicle)**-have
                   'I have a ski-doo'

"An interesting fact, noted by grammarians for a number of languages, is that innovative NI [Noun Incorporation]… involves special skill. Speaker of polysynthetic languages often comment on … who speaks their languages especially well. This recognition … is for stylistic skill, which appears in conversation as well as in jokes, anecdotes, legends, and formal oratory. Admired speakers generally share a specific trait: they use a variety of morphologically complex words – particularly incorporating constructions" (p. 879)

- Then they state that heavy classifier use is typical of storytelling and poetry performance in ASL, SLN, and BSL
    - and presumably other sign languages too

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