Rethinking Classifiers

This volume is the culmination of work discussed and presented at the Workshop on Classifier Constructions held in La Jolla, California in April 2000. Kudos go to Karen Emmorey for organizing the workshop on this timely topic and for collecting 15 of the papers into the present volume. Readers will find these chapters of interest not just because they contain an interesting array of approaches to the analysis of classifier constructions, but also because they present data from a variety of signed languages. Adam Schembri’s excellent overview of the literature on classifier morphemes in signed languages opens the volume. Reviewing the signed language literature and comparing it with data from spoken languages, Schembri concludes with what proves to be a recurring theme throughout this volume: “Although the selection of a particular handshape unit is partly motivated by the salient inherent or perceived characteristic of the referent, this does not appear to be the only factor involved in their use. Therefore, these forms cannot be said, strictly speaking, to have a primary classifier function” (p. 28).

Of special interest to these reviewers was the chapter by Susan Duncan on gesture in language. Some readers may be alarmed to find gesture and signed languages discussed together. As Duncan points out, however, research has shown that gesture is an integral part of human language. The ubiquity of gesture across cultures and spoken languages predicts a similar gestural dimension of patterning in signed languages. Duncan presents an agenda for the study of this gestural patterning that deserves further attention from signed language linguists.

Studying the acquisition of classifier constructions in ASL and Sign Language of the Netherlands, Slobin and his colleagues take issue with previous claims that classifier use requires the cognitive ability to classify. Rather, they argue, “All that is required is that the child indicate some property of the referent when choosing a handshape that takes the role of the referent” (p. 276). This position leads them to re-examine the functional role of iconicity in classifier constructions, especially as it relates to construal or perspective. They suggest rethinking classifiers more in terms of their discourse function. The “classifier” in this case is one component of a construction that refers to an entire event; the various components together function “to triangulate on an event, from a particular perspective” (p. 293). In addition to tracking referents, they note, classifiers portray referents from different perspectives. One task of the learner is to attend to properties that are appropriate in the expression of particular event construals.

One significant feature of this volume is that in addition to the chapters on signed language classifier constructions, it includes commentaries by spoken and signed language scholars. We have already mentioned one of these, the chapter by Duncan. In addition, chapters by Alexandra Aikenvald, Colette Grinevald, Leonary Talmy, and Ted Supalla complement the findings and challenge signed language researchers, as Grinevald says, “to consider the type of data that would allow for a closer comparison of the classificatory processes of human languages in all modalities” (p. 108).

Emmorey states that the major goals of the volume are to bring to light critical issues related to the study of classifier constructions and to present state-of-the-art linguistic and psycholinguistic analyses of these constructions. She and her authors have succeeded admirably, giving us a breakthrough volume that provides insightful new perspectives on classifiers, their role in discourse, their acquisition by children, and the status of their mental representation. Along the way, the reader is led to rethink the ever-recurring themes that often bedevil signed language linguists, sometimes puzzle them, and always inspire them—questions about the nature of language, the interface between language and gesture, and the role of iconicity in grammar.

Sherman Wilcox and Sarah Hafer, Department of Linguistics, University of New Mexico