

# THE GRAMMATICAL USE OF THE BODY

*Carlo Cecchetto*

Università degli Studi di Milano-  
Bicocca

When non-signers think about sign languages, they usually think about hands.

Hands are definitely important for sign languages. However, they are not the only articulators and concentrating only on what they do may result in a big misunderstanding, namely the belief that sign languages have a poor grammar.

In fact, if you look at hands alone, you find few *grammatical* signs.

Linguists divide words into:  
content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives etc.)  
and  
grammatical words (auxiliaries, prepositions, articles, conjunctions, etc.).

The same division can be applied to signs.

However, there are not that many manual signs with a grammatical function.

Furthermore, signs for nouns or adjectives can be articulated in the same way in singular or plural forms and signs for verbs can be articulated in the same way in the present, past and future.

The scarcity of grammatical signs and the fact that signs do not need to be modified to express grammatical features has misled people to think that sign languages have an impoverished grammar.

This is wrong, though.

The reason why it is wrong is that the body has been excluded from the picture.

Roughly speaking, one can say that while the two hands express content words (nouns, adjectives, verbs), the upper part of the body expresses most grammatical information.

The body conveys grammar in two ways.

*(i)* There are articulators in the upper part of the body, which move independently from the hands to convey grammar.

*(ii)* The body moves to specific areas of the signing space to convey grammar.

Would you like to see how this works?

In the video we see in a minute, Delphine Caron will sign a story in LSF in which a fox has to get back her tail, which has been cut away. The fox is asked by different characters (a woman, a cow, the grass, the river, another woman, a peddler, a farmer) an object. Only if the fox can provide these objects she will eventually get back her tail.



In each dialogue, you will see Delphine shifting between the role of the fox (with Delphine's body positioned on her left, looking rightwards) and the role of other characters the fox is interacting with (with Delphine's body positioned on her right, looking leftwards).

What Delphine will do in the video is adopting a strategy that is very common in sign languages and is called “role shift”.

To understand what role shift is one has to know that signers locate themselves, their interlocutor(s), and other people they are talking about in the signing space. The signer's location is of course the position of his/her body; the position of his/her interlocutor is usually the one in front of him/her. Other characters are placed in specific positions either on the left or on the right of the signer.

Role shift takes place when the signer moves his/her body towards the position in the signing space associated to the character the signer is talking about. By doing so, the signer assumes the perspective of (“becomes”) that character.

Role shift is reminiscent of something familiar in spoken languages, namely direct discourse.

In direct discourse we do not say “John said that *he* is tired” but we say “John said “/ am tired”. Similarly in role shift the signer will point to his/her body to refer to the character he/she is talking about.

Let us watch the video!

Remember that Delphine is role shifting between the fox (on her left) and the other character (on her right).



I hoped you like the video. What is so theatrically exciting in it, i.e., the use of the body, has no less exciting consequences for linguistics because it allows us linguists to show that sign languages are grammatically rich.



I will show you the grammatical use of the body by making another example involving role shift.

Suppose you want to say that a stone hit John and that you do not know who threw it. One natural way to express that meaning in English is saying “John was hit by a stone”, namely using a passive.

In the passive construction, the person who is affected by the action becomes the subject of the sentence while the person performing the action does not need to be expressed.

Sign languages do not have passives of the spoken language type.

Does it mean that sign languages are poorer because of this? No.

The reason is that in sign languages the communicative function of passive sentences is played by role-shift.

In this passive-like construction, the signer temporarily “becomes” another person by moving his/her body to the position in the space to which that person is associated and performs the action on his/her body.

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Today I could not talk much about the grammar of sign languages but I need to mention the European *SignGram* project, namely COST ACTION IS006 “Unravelling the grammars of European sign languages: pathways to full citizenship of deaf signers and to the protection of their linguistic heritage”.

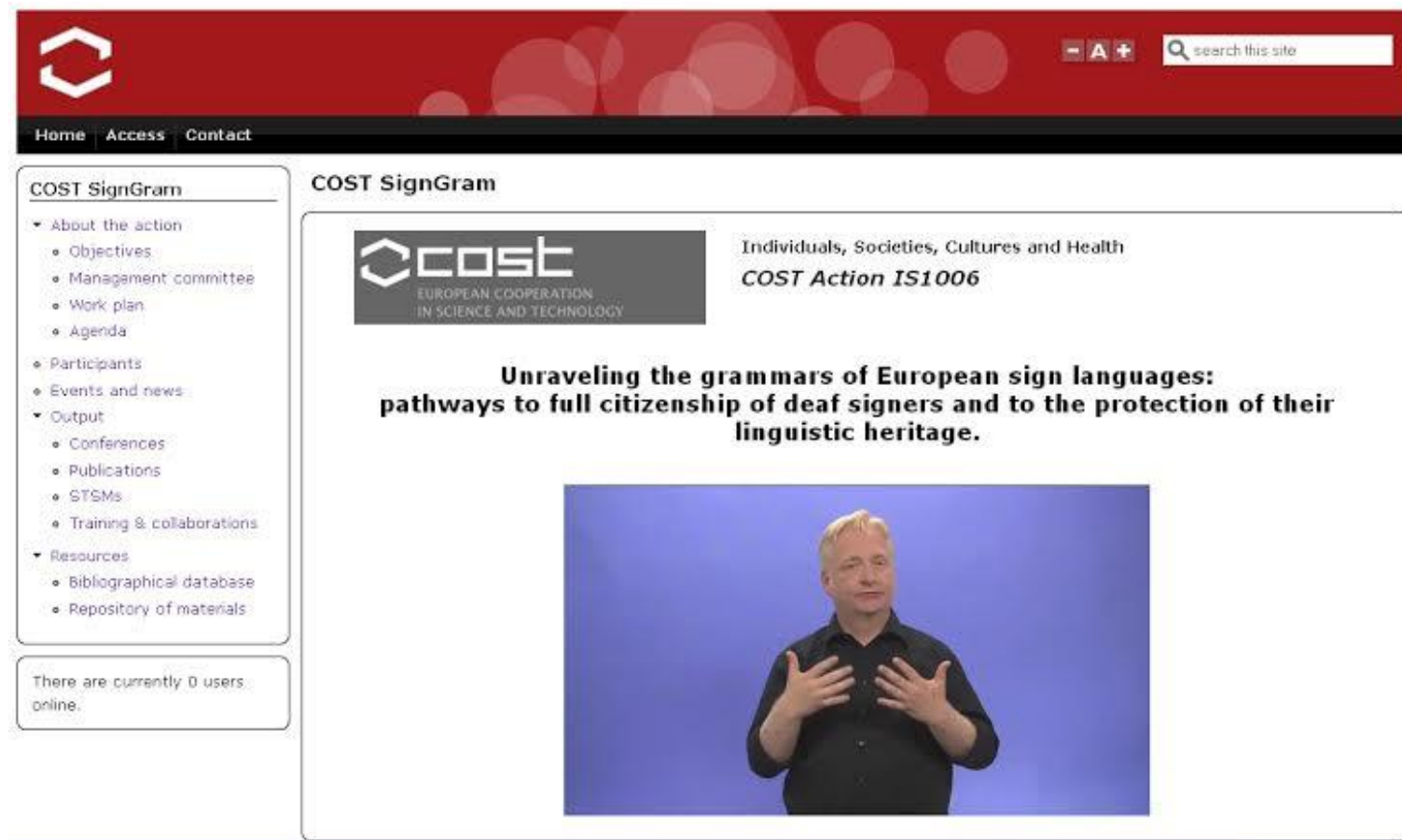


**SIGNGRAM**

The *SignGram* COST Action sponsored my presence here today and, what is more important, will make a detailed grammatical description of European sign languages possible.

If you want to know more on the grammar of sign languages:

<http://parles.upf.edu/en/content/cost-signgram>



**COST**  
EUROPEAN COOPERATION  
IN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Individuals, Societies, Cultures and Health  
*COST Action IS1006*

**Unraveling the grammars of European sign languages:  
pathways to full citizenship of deaf signers and to the protection of their  
linguistic heritage.**

There are currently 0 users online.



If you want to know more about artistic expressions in sign languages:

Here in France there is a very important festival of theatre in sign language: Clin d'Oeil, which takes place every second year in Reims.

Many other Deaf theatre and cinema festivals take place in different countries in the world.  
Not to be missed!