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Probing the lexical-gestural boundary: Evidence from LSU Deaf signers

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Abstract

Gestures share properties with signs and can be highly conventionalized. Some approaches consider them to lack linguistic status (potential cognitive conflict), whereas others view them as inherently linguistic. We investigated lexical recognition in Uruguayan Sign Language (LSU) with 31 deaf signers using a lexical decision task. No a priori power analysis was performed, but sample size was similar to those in previous studies. Latencies were equivalent for iconic and non-iconic signs. Gestures yielded slower reaction times and higher error rates than non-signs, suggesting a tendency to perceive them as signs. There is an inherent asymmetry in stimulus construction: non-signs lack meaning, whereas gestures carry semantic content. The greater processing cost for gestures may arise from suppressing a meaningful form, a task unnecessary for rejecting non-signs. Given this methodological caveat, we interpret the difference as evidence of gradience. We cannot directly infer cognitive monitoring. Overall, the findings support gradation-based models.