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A word order pattern from silent gesture studies observed in a new natural language

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Abstract

Studying the silent gesture of hearing non-signers is a crucial tool for shedding light on natural language phenomena. Previous studies have found that properties of the meanings conveyed in silent gesture can influence word order. For instance, participants prefer SOV ordering for extensional events (man carries ball), while for intensional events (in which the object is possibly non-existent or dependent on the action; e.g., man thinks of guitar, woman builds house) there is a cross-linguistic preference for SVO (Schouwstra & de Swart, 2014). Eliciting descriptions of the two event types in Nicaraguan Sign Language, we found evidence for these lab-documented word order preferences in an emergent natural language: objects precede verbs for extensional events, but follow verbs for intensional events. However, this word order pattern is manifested differently in Nicaraguan Sign (the result only surfaced in a sub-string analysis), because the preference interacts with NSLs language-internal constraint for verb-finalness.