

## What you see isn't always what you get: simultaneous classifier constructions in sign language

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In describing Figure-Ground constructions, languages deploy coordinate systems that calculate the angle between Figure and Ground from either an external viewpoint (relative Frame of Reference – FoR), e.g. “the tree is left of the church,” the features of the Ground (intrinsic FoR), e.g. “the tree is in front of the church,” or with respect to cardinal directions (absolute FoR), e.g. “the tree is north of the church” (Levinson 2003). The visual-gestural modality allows signers to place the hands in signing space in order to iconically represent such spatial relationships (Talmy 2003). This type of signed Figure-Ground construction is called a simultaneous classifier construction (SCC); and studies have revealed a striking similarity across sign languages in their use (Emmorey 2003). Furthermore, interlocutors that perceive SCCs, consistently perform a mental rotation in reconstructing a scene, taking the sign-producer’s perspective as a vantage point (Emmorey, Klima, & Hickock 1998; Perniss 2007; Arik 2009). This study presents new data, which challenges the assumption of the uniformity of SCCs. Elicited signed dialogues from a Balinese sign language called Kata Kolok (KK, see Marsaja 2008) show that KK sign-producers generally foreground spatial relations between elements of a scene being described, but generally background their own view of the scene. Moreover, in contrast to the cross-linguistic pattern, KK sign-comprehenders consistently reconstructed the array absolutely rather than performing a mental rotation of it. Performance on spatial memory tasks mirror the linguistic data in that scene-internal (facing) information, but not viewpoint-information, was systematically included. These findings are consistent with the view that the intrinsic FoR, but not the relative or absolute FoR, is dominant in Kata Kolok. Despite the affordances of the visual-gestural modality, sign languages thus appear to structure space in radically different, but typologically constrained ways.

Keywords: sign language, frames of reference, visual-gestural modality, typology, iconicity

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