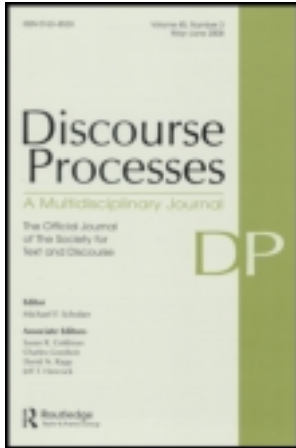


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Publisher: Routledge  
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## Discourse Processes

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hdsp20>

### Discourse structure in American sign language conversations (or, how to know a conversation when you see one)

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Available online: 11 Nov 2009

To cite this article: Ronnie B. Wilbur & Laura A. Petitto (1983): Discourse structure in American sign language conversations (or, how to know a conversation when you see one), *Discourse Processes*, 6:3, 225-228

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01638538309544565>

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# Discourse Structure in American Sign Language Conversations (or, How to know a conversation when you see one)\*

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Previous research on American Sign Language (ASL) has concentrated almost entirely on the structural characteristics of signs and their combinations into sentence-sized units (see Wilbur, 1979, for review). Even those investigators who have addressed aspects of the macrostructure of discourse (Baker, 1976, 1977; Baker & Padden, 1978; Covington, 1973) have focused on features which concern utterance boundaries and turn-taking. Recent discussions of topic (Coulter, 1979; Friedman, 1976) have focused entirely on the grammatical debate of subject vs. topic-prominent language typology, and not on the discourse realm. No characterization of the "conversational contract" between native signers has yet been provided. The information concerning the structure of ASL which has become available in the last 10 years now allows us to attempt a description of the "conversational contract" in ASL, that is, the topic flow and the grammatical devices used to initiate, maintain, and terminate topics within a conversation. The implications of such a description for understanding communication between native and non-native signers, between ASL-signing parents and their children, and finally between deaf children and educational and language specialists can now be examined.

Recent pragmatic research on units larger than sentences has provided frameworks for describing stories (Mandler, 1978, Stein & Glenn, 1979), texts (Kintsch, 1977; Rumelhart, 1977) and general comprehension of prose (Clark, 1977; Just & Carpenter, 1977; Kintsch & Kozminsky, 1977; Meyer, 1975). Such descriptions include episode-size units, with subparts such as settings, beginnings or initiating events, reactions, attempts, outcomes, and endings. These

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\*This work was supported in part by Boston University Grant GRS-575-SED, Harvard University, and by WIRCO, Watertown, MA. An earlier version of the paper was presented at the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association Convention in Detroit, November, 1980. Thanks to George Karlan for helpful comments on this manuscript. Correspondence and requests for reprints should be addressed to Ronnie B. Wilbur, Purdue University, Department of Audiology and Speech Sciences, Heavilon Hall, W. Lafayette, IN 47907.

frameworks are useful for analyzing conversations insofar as conversations contain identifiable episodes (e.g., "Let me tell you what happened to John last week. . ."). To the extent that conversations involve less narrative and more turn-taking, story, or text grammars, they must be supplemented by more fine-grained analyses. Various aspects of conversational structure have been dealt with by Haviland and Clark (1974), Gordon and Lakoff (1971), Grice (1967), Searle (1969), Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974), Keenan (1977), Keenan and Schieffelin (1976), and Ochs and Schieffelin (1979). These aspects include the Given-New contract, conversational postulates (sincerity, reasonableness, etc.), routines for establishing and changing the topic, "repairs" (hesitations, self-corrections, misunderstandings), and the incorporation of non linguistic context into conversation (eye gaze, pointing, reaching, handing, showing, etc.). Adherence to the Given-New contract in consideration of the listener's efforts to follow the sender has been described by Haviland and Clark (1974). The importance of the distinction between Given and New information has resulted in the inclusion of pragmatic and semantic information in what was formerly purely syntactic discussions of such structures as anaphoric and deictic pronominalization, determiner use, ellipsis, topicalization, and various forms of clefting.

Keenan and Schieffelin (1976) describe the procedures by which two partners establish, maintain, and change conversation, or discourse, topics. They consider a discourse to be "any sequence of two or more utterances produced by a single speaker or by two or more speakers interacting with one another" (p. 340). A discourse may contain several linked discourse topics. Linking may be accomplished by "topic collaborating," when a topic exactly matches that of the immediately preceding utterance, or "topic incorporating," when a claim or presupposition of a preceding utterance becomes the new discourse topic. If the topic is not maintained through collaboration or incorporation, a new topic may be introduced or a previous topic may be reintroduced. Various techniques are available for establishing each of these topics. For example, topic collaboration may be accomplished by exactly repeating the topic from the preceding utterance; topic reintroduction is generally preceded by stock phrases such as "getting back to. . ."; new topics may be introduced by phrases such as "not to change the topic but. . ." or "that reminds me. . ."

The mechanisms by which the turns themselves are regulated have been described in considerable detail (Condon & Ogston, 1966, 1967; Duncan, 1972, 1973; Ekman & Friesen, 1969; Goffman, 1964; Kendon, 1967, 1976; Weiner, Devoe, Rubinow, & Geller, 1972). Conversational partners provide each other with cues as to whether the turn will be continued or the floor will be yielded. Kendon (1976) reports that the speaker may give the floor to the listener by sustaining eye gaze, and that the listener may then look away as he begins his turn. Similarly, Duncan (1973) reports that the speaker's gestures can indicate to the listener that an interruption is not welcome. Duncan (1972) identified several cues which the speaker gives to signal the end of a turn. These include the end of

a gesture, rising or falling intonation, and increased duration of the last syllable. Duncan (1973) also described the appropriate form and timing of listener back channel cues which serve to indicate to the speaker that the listener is following the conversation and that the speaker may continue.

The degree to which turn-taking regulators and conversational structure may be modified by modality differences in ASL is of interest. Baker (1977) describes in detail devices which control turn-taking procedures in ASL. Using the classification system developed by Weiner and Devoe (1974) for spoken language dyadic conversations, Baker analyzes conversations between two sets of deaf signers. Weiner and Devoe identify four conversational regulator sets: initiation, continuation, shifting turns, and termination. Within these sets, the devices used by sender and addressee may be different. Baker observes that a signer initiates a turn by raising the hands into the signing space, followed by various optional methods of obtaining the receiver's attention such as pointing, touching, or waving a hand in front of the face (also described in Stokoe, Casterline, & Croneberg, 1965). The initiation of a turn might be accompanied by leaning forward or looking away from the receiver (except in the case of questions). The receiver must continue to look at the signer as a signal that the signer may continue signing. To indicate that signing will continue, even after a proposition is completed or a pause takes place, the signer may avoid eye contact, increase the rate of signing, or keep the hands in the signing space. The receiver indicates that continuation may proceed by maintaining eye gaze toward the signer, headnodding, smiling, or by other minor back channel signals, and occasionally by short repetitions of some of the signer's signs. To shift turns, signers may signal with eye gaze, a decrease in signing speed, by pointing to the receiver, holding and/or raising the last sign, using question intonation (facial expression or body posture), or returning the hands to rest position outside the signing space. The receiver may signal a desire for the floor by raising the hands into the signing space, increasing size and quantity of head nodding, averting eye gaze, leaning forward, or actually beginning to sign until the signer has stopped or has successfully resisted interruption.

Whereas the focus of the Baker study is turntaking, the present study further investigates the topic structure as it flows through the conversation. In particular, we provide a description of the flow of discourse topics, and a description of devices which are used to accomplish the initiation, maintenance, and termination of topics within an ASL conversation.

## METHOD

### *Data Collection*

Two signers, Ned and Edith, who knew each other well, were videotaped as they were engaged in casual conversation. Two cameras were used, one focused

on each signer, with a special effects generator to render a split-screen image. Food and drink were available. There was every indication that the signers were intently focused on the topics of their discussion. The data described here was part of a larger corpus (nearly 3 hours) of signed conversations between several sets of native signers. The signers knew they were being recorded, and to encourage natural signing, were told that the tapes would be used as a final exam to determine whether students in the advanced ASL class were in fact able to understand "real" ASL conversations.

### *Tape Transcription*

Extensive procedures were followed to ensure that all information in the signer's utterances were fully represented in the transcript. All grammatical information was recorded, with special attention paid to such salient linguistic devices as head and body movement, use of space, eye gaze (sight line) information, brow and facial movements, etc. Semantic-syntactic units, or utterances, were parsed from examination of the signer's own rhythmic clustering of signs, placement and duration of the signer's pauses, use of linguistic devices (e.g., head and body shifts, eye gaze, etc.), semantic and syntactic information, and placement of the receiver's nods and interruptions.

### *Coding*

The utterances were coded for their role in the discourse topic flow and for their role in turn-taking.

Using the Keenan and Schieffelin model (1976), individual utterances were determined to be either continuous or discontinuous discourse sequences. Continuous discourse sequences were either Topic Collaborating (sender and receiver communicate about the *same* topic over two or more utterances), or Topic Incorporating (information from an immediately preceding topic is integrated to introduce a *new* discourse topic). Discontinuous sequences were either a re-introduction of a previous (earlier) discourse topic, or the introduction of a totally new discourse topic. Decisions were made using the previous utterance to determine incorporating or collaborating, after which a review for consistency was done, based on longer sequences.

Turns were either naturally terminated by the sender, or terminated as a result of an interruption by the receiver. Interruptions by the receiver were determined to be either attempts to take the floor (both successfully or unsuccessfully) or utterances interjected with no apparent intent to take the floor. Specific methods used by the receiver to interrupt and any attempt by the sender to resist an interruption were also noted in the transcript. The precise onset times of interruptions were determined by using the slow motion speed-control on the viderecorder plus a stop watch.