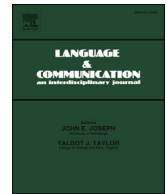


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## Feeling your own (or someone else's) face: Writing signs from the expressive viewpoint

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### ABSTRACT

SignWriting (SW), a featural writing system that iconically represents the moving body, was originally written from the receptive viewpoint but is now typically written from the embodied viewpoint of a signer. Through this shift, SW was re-envisioned from a writing system that focused on the receptive visual modality of sign languages (what others see), to one that visually highlights the phenomenological experience of signing (what a signer feels). This article analyzes ideological framings of SW literacy events in which users interpret or produce SW texts reflecting another signer's embodied perspective. In so doing, many SignWriters consider whether and how the qualia that characterize the phenomenological experience of signing can be intersubjectively shared among differently positioned interactants.

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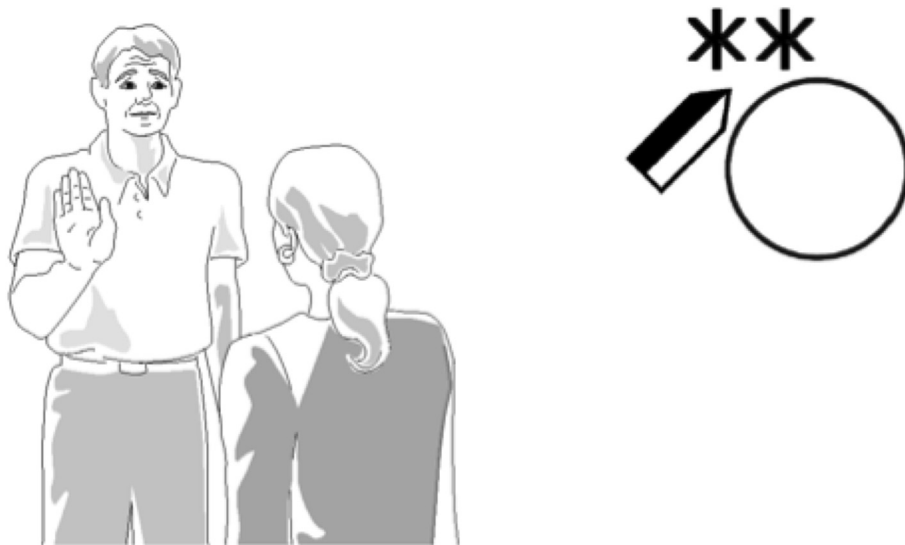
### 1. Introduction

Small groups of signers in over thirty countries use a featural writing system called SignWriting (SW) to produce and circulate texts in their respective languages.<sup>1</sup> One of the unusual affordances of this system, derived from its iconically motivated representations of bodily articulators and its diagrammatic representations of the spatial relationships between them, is that it can encode signing practice from different visual origins, or “indexical centerpoints” (Silverstein, 2013: 89; Bühler, 1934; Haviland, 1996). It is possible to write signs from what SignWriters term the “receptive” viewpoint, the embodied perspective of someone observing another person signing (see Fig. 1). It is also possible to write from what they term the “expressive” viewpoint, the embodied perspective of a signer (see Fig. 2). In principle it is also possible to represent movement from a viewpoint oriented above a signer's head, from below, or from a signer's right or left.

SW was initially written primarily from the receptive perspective, due to the context in which SW developed from what had originally been a dance notation system called DanceWriting. Its inventor, ballet dancer Valerie Sutton, had been recruited by sign language researchers in Denmark to adapt her movement writing system for the purpose of transcribing data from video-recordings of Danish Sign Language (Dansk Tegnsprog or DTS). She was asked to sit in front of video-screens and notate what she saw, as if she was transcribing a dance from the perspective of the audience.

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<sup>1</sup> SW is comparable to the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) in that it is designed to be able to represent any signed language. However, unlike the IPA it is used for daily writing purposes as well as for research.



### Receptive Viewpoint

When someone is facing you, signing to you, you view the signs as an observer.  
The signer's right side is your left side. This is called the Receptive Viewpoint.

Fig. 1. TO-KNOW in American Sign Language, written from the receptive viewpoint (Sutton, 2009).

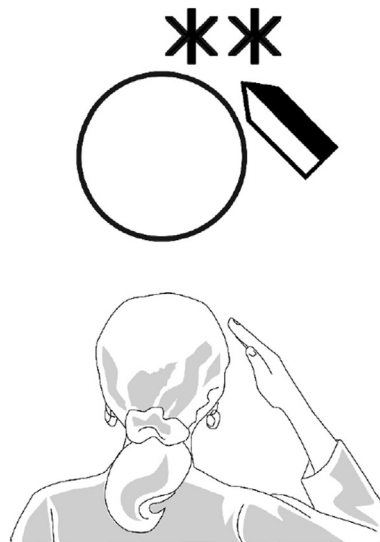


Fig. 2. TO-KNOW in American Sign Language, written from the expressive viewpoint (Sutton, 2009).

By the early 1980s, what had become SW had migrated out of research labs and was being developed into a daily writing system by Sutton and a group of d/Deaf<sup>2</sup> signers. In 1984, two of the early Deaf adopters, Lucinda O'Grady and Meriam Ina Schroeder, called for a meeting in which they announced that they would no longer write from the receptive perspective but would only write expressively. Their metapragmatic (Silverstein, 1976) framing, or reflexive construals of the reasons for and

<sup>2</sup> In this article I follow the widespread convention of writing the word deaf (lowercase) to indicate the inability to hear and Deaf (with a capital D) to indicate identification as a member of a signing community. In cases in which I refer to a group or situation in which both aspects of d/Deafness are relevant, I use mixed case (d/Deaf). My use of this convention should not be taken to imply that I view this binary as universally adopted by signers or as relevant in the same ways across social contexts.

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