
Preface

A major goal of this book is to function as a point of access to the field of sign language phonology for researchers who are working in closely related disciplines but who have not yet learned to sign. For instance, for those readers who have attended a conference session on sign languages and would like to learn more, this book will provide a first immersion into current questions in the phonology of sign languages. To aid in this, I have included images that will serve as an anchor for the book's arguments based on sign language forms.

In addition to introducing the field, the book has several other goals, which have shaped its structure. Chapters 1 and 8 are a framing device for what is contained in chapters 2 through 7. Chapter 1 concisely articulates the major claims of the Prosodic Model and the grounds on which I will argue for them. It also describes and gives example images of the canonical types of signs used in phonological analyses more generally, providing background for the more detailed analyses to follow. Chapter 8 shows how the Prosodic Model incorporates elements of other models of sign language phonology and how it differs from them. This chapter also uses the well-formedness constraints developed on independent grounds in the rest of the book to propose a means for delineating lexical strata in American Sign Language. Finally, it places the Prosodic Model into the context of current discussions of higher-order visual processing. This research on vision has gone virtually untouched by sign language phonologists, yet its findings could be useful in making arguments about sign language phonological structure based on perception. I also believe that sign language data, and analyses of them, provide categories of visual forms used in some of the experimental work on vision.

Chapter 2 is aimed at sign language researchers and linguists who are not phonologists who may benefit from some background in the specific

theories drawn upon for the analyses in this book. Although the discussions in this chapter do not cover these theories in their entirety, they do explain the context in which particular concepts developed and how they are being used to analyze sign language within the Prosodic Model.

Chapters 3 through 7 are the heart of the book. Sign language phonology is no longer in its infancy, and researchers have come to a consensus about some of the questions that launched the field. My intention is to highlight these areas of consensus wherever possible so that future work can build upward and outward from them. The central idea of the Prosodic Model of sign language phonology, which distinguishes it from other models, is that two kinds of phonological features can be systematically identified in core lexical items: those that are necessary for describing a sign's movement (the prosodic features) and those that describe properties of the sign that do not participate in movement (the inherent features). The latter express many of the paradigmatic contrasts of a sign; the former capture phonological contrasts as well, but they also are important for syllable construction and syllable weight. To date, no other model has isolated movement features in this way—a way that allows their uniform behavior in phonological operations to be expressed.

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