Introduction

Teeming with thoughts, the human mind by nature desires to connect with other human beings. Our thoughts are dynamic and multifaceted. They range from the mundane to the extraordinary, and from moment to moment we seek to communicate statements of the directly and presently tangible as well as flights of fancy and intricate abstractions. We recognize that other humans are experiencing such complexity of thought as well, and to live in community we need and want to share our thoughts with them and be privy to some of their thoughts as well. For everything from planning to politics to poetry, the primary means by which we attempt this feat is language.

Language use is not direct access to thought, however. In communicating even what seem to be simple concepts, we make choices about how much detail to express, which perspective to convey, what aspects to emphasize. On all of these scales, languages allow for various choices while limiting others. At the lexical level, we may choose to describe the same person using the words *that boy* or *the young man in the yellow T-shirt* or *David* or *your annoying brother*. This multiplicity of options applies not only at the lexical level; it is also available to us as we combine words into utterances, and we can describe a single event in various ways.

The English sentences in examples 1 through 3, for instance, could be uttered as descriptions of the same event, yet each one expresses a different portrayal of that singular event:

1. Scott bought the painting from my sister.
2. My sister sold the painting to Scott.
3. The painting was sold to Scott (by my sister).

The primary distinction conveyed here is what cognitive linguists refer to as *construal,* which is defined as the specific portrayal of a given situation (Van Hoek 1997; Langacker 2001; Taylor 2002). Although all three

sentences describe the same event and they can all be simultaneously accurate representations of what occurred, they do not all convey the same meaning. Each sentence asks the reader to conceptualize the situation differently. In sentence 1 the focus is on Scott and his action; in sentence 2 the sister is the most active participant; and in sentence 3 the painting itself is the primary focus. Though all three express descriptions of the same event and resultant state, different circumstances would call for each one, depending on which aspect of the scene the speaker chooses to emphasize. A native English user would not use them interchangeably. Construal is therefore a critical component of meaning.

THE MEANING OF GRAMMAR

The sentences in examples 1 through 3 express different construals through both word choice and grammatical structure. Sentences 1 and 2 both have the same grammatical structure. The difference between them is the choice of the verb, namely, *bought* in sentence 1 and *sold* in sentence 2. Sentence 3, however, uses the same verb as sentence 2 (i.e., *sold*), but its grammatical structure is different from that of sentences 1 and 2. This difference allows the same situation to be expressed by yet another construal.

Sentence 3 is in passive voice, whereas sentences 1 and 2 are in active voice. In active-voice utterances, the participant initiating the action, called the *agent,* is expressed in subject position and is understood to be the focus of the utterance. In a passive-voice utterance, the agent is not the focus of the sentence; the agent either is not expressed at all or is expressed in a *by*-phrase that occurs after the verb. This structure evokes a meaning in which the agent is not in focus.

Since various construals can be expressed by choosing different lexical items, such as the verbs in 1 and 2, or by choosing particular grammatical structures, as in 2 and 3, grammatical structures themselves convey part of the meaning of expressions. In fact, as Langacker (2006) states, "The semantic import of grammar resides in particular ways of construing the conceptual content evoked by other elements" (115). The meaning of each sentence depends not only on the meaning of the individual words but also on the meaning provided by the construal, which is based on the grammatical arrangement of those words.

For language learners, the fact that particular forms evoke particular meanings at all levels—morphemes, lexical items, grammatical constructions, discourse structures—has striking implications. In addition to understanding the vocabulary of a new language, an effective language user must also be able to recognize patterns in the use of particular grammatical constructions in order to be able to generalize over a variety of situations and determine the meaning encoded in the various forms of the sentences. This understanding of structural meaning is the foundation of one's expressive ability and allows one to form novel sentences and converse comfortably in a range of discourse settings.

Fortunately, the importance of learning vocabulary in context and of being able to use the appropriate constructions is generally understood. We know that replacing English words with "equivalent" Spanish words does not yield an effective translation, as evidenced by the hilarity (or downright weirdness) that can ensue when performing such "word-to-word translations" via web-based searches such as Google Translate. It goes without saying that students of a language who learn vocabulary but have no clear understanding of the ways in which constructions at the phrasal, sentential, and discourse levels interact with that vocabulary will be ineffective at conveying their true intent.

Unfortunately, this seemingly commonsense understanding that meaning in language stems from so much more than vocabulary alone is somehow less self-evident when the languages under consideration are a spoken language and a signed language. Formal linguistic analysis of signed languages is a relatively recent undertaking (generally considered as getting its real start with the work of William Stokoe in the early 1960s; Stokoe 1960; Stokoe, Casterline, and Croneberg 1965) and as such the extent of what we know about grammatical and discourse structures remains quite limited. Though our foundation is strong and the field is blossoming as it reaches the half-century mark, linguistic knowledge about American Sign Language (ASL) as used by those who acquire it natively from their parents has not been able to keep pace with the demand for teaching ASL to aspiring students. This, in combination with myriad sociological and biological facts about deaf lives and signed languages (Padden and Humphries 1988; Van Cleve and Crouch 1989; Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan 1996; Padden and Humphries 2005), conspires to create a situation

in which vocabulary teaching takes precedence. As a result, a true grasp of the meaning conveyed at other levels is often missed.

PASSIVE VOICE AS A CASE STUDY

Take passive voice as just one example. Many materials designed for teaching ASL and/or for teaching ASL/English interpretation and trans-literation (Kelly 2001; Mikos, Smith, and Lentz 2001) maintain that ASL does not have passive voice and that agents must therefore be in focus. Students are taught that agents should always be overtly specified in prominent positions (i.e., at the beginning of an utterance and expressed as either a topic or the subject), and interpreters are encouraged to pro-duce "active" signed translations of spoken utterances expressed in passive voice.

If beginning users of ASL are going to be interpreting, there is good reason for teaching them to restructure English passives into active ASL structures. Literal translations of passive utterances in English generally leave out the morphemes that mark verbs as passive (a form of *to be* and the past participle of the main verb), resulting in an expression that liter-ally reverses the roles of agent and patient.

Consider, for example, this short text about an experiment on REM sleep:

REM Sleep Experiment

Experiments show that REM sleep definitely can help you learn better. In one test, volunteers were taught a new skill. That night, some of them were awakened whenever they entered REM sleep. The others were awakened the same number of times, but only during non-REM sleep. The next day, the people who got their REM sleep tested better than the others at performing the new skill.

The main clause of the second sentence is "volunteers were taught." A literal translation that followed the English word order and omitted the passive markers would potentially be VOLUNTEERS TEACH, incorrectly stating that the volunteers were the ones doing the teaching rather than the ones learning the new skill.

The following sentence in the English text ("some of them were awak-ened") is also in passive voice, and a literal translation omitting the pas-sive marking would again result in a skewed meaning, though in this case

the effect on the meaning is quite different. Here an attempt at translation that ignores the content conveyed by the passive structure would result in the ASL utterance SOME PRO.pl→volunteers WAKE-UP. Because the volunteers are expressed as the subject of the active verb WAKE-UP, the meaning conveyed is that the volunteers woke up of their own accord, which is not the meaning conveyed in the original English sentence and in fact skews the entire understanding of the experiment.

Thus, teaching beginning students of ASL, who are producing word-by-word literal translations of the English sentences in their heads, to recognize agents and express them actively in ASL makes sense. However, the underlying assumption that in ASL agents must always be in focus is untrue.

If it were true that agents must always be in focus in ASL, one would expect ASL users, when asked to translate English passive sentences into ASL, to produce only utterances with an agent-focused construal. They might express all assumed agents overtly as subjects. For English prompt sentences with *by*-phrases, one would predict that ASL users would reorder the entities to produce an utterance with the agent in subject position.

However, in data collected for my dissertation, when native ASL users were asked to do precisely that—translate English passive sentences into ASL—only 11 percent of the utterances they produced had the agent in focus. Within the set of twenty sentences containing passive-voice clauses, three of the passive prompt sentences even included overt mention of the agent (i.e., in a *by*-phrase). Even from these prompts, where rearrangement to produce an ASL utterance with the agent in subject position is remarkably straightforward and would be expected, participants reordered the entities only half of the time. Even more striking, out of eighty given opportunities, signers chose to overtly express an assumed agent in only four instances.

Clearly, ASL users do have ways to express a construal in which the agent is not the primary focus. The goal of my dissertation research and this book describing those results was to determine the linguistic strategies that ASL users employed to express a meaning similar to that expressed when English speakers use passive voice. The data showed that, in ASL, just as in English and other languages, various linguistic factors influence the level of focus with which entities are construed. In addition, ASL has multiple mechanisms for achieving agent impersonalization, and each mechanism, with its unique form, results in a slightly different construal.

The motivation for undertaking research on passive voice specifically began with my experience teaching English reading and writing to deaf students. Although the students were working hard to understand the material, I found myself struggling to explain the meaning expressed through particular English grammatical structures. In our classroom, ASL was the language of instruction, so part of my role in explaining the structures included providing ASL translations of the English example sentences. For passive voice in particular, I found myself unable to come up with ASL expressions that were semantically equivalent without resorting to long, drawn-out explanations and roundabout explanations of meaning. I wondered how native ASL users express the meaning encoded in passive utterances, specifically the reduction in focus on the agent in a transitive event. What started as a query related to improving my effectiveness in the classroom naturally evolved into my research question and the design, elicitation, analysis, and results described in this dissertation.

Using my classroom experience and understanding of the meaning of the English passive as a foundation, the research question I formulated was therefore as follows: does ASL have structures that evoke a defocused agent construal? The requisite follow-up question was of course this: if so, what are the forms of these ASL agent-defocusing utterances? Once utterance types that defocus the agent had been identified, further analysis was conducted with the goal of describing how the utterances shift focus away from the agent and what level of agent focus each utterance type evokes.

Because the motivation for the research emerged from my personal teaching experience, in which I had struggled to find equivalent translations for passive sentences, similar translation tasks were used to elicit the data. Four participants, all native ASL users with advanced proficiency in written English, were asked to translate individual English passive sentences and short written English texts containing passive constructions into ASL. They were also asked to do a short ASL-to-English translation task for comparison.

Though using translation for elicitation purposes has potential drawbacks, I chose it as the starting point for this initial foray into the question of how ASL expresses defocused agent construals. The use of passive prompts in English controlled for the target defocused agent construal, so the task required the participants to either produce ASL utterances that evoked the same construal or restructure their utterances in a way that

would express analogous meaning. Because the tasks involved translation, specific participants who are skilled bilinguals with advanced metalinguistic awareness were chosen, thereby reducing the potential negative impact of working with both languages during the elicitation tasks.

The elicitation tasks were designed to investigate several different aspects of ASL expressions evoking defocused agent construals. Isolated passive sentences in English were used as prompts for one task in order to determine how ASL users express events when the agent is entirely unknown. I was curious to see what structure(s) would be employed and whether patterns would emerge. In the other task, the short texts containing English passives were each representative of a different discourse genre and were included to determine whether pragmatic similarities exist between ASL and English (i.e., whether similar construals would be evoked in the ASL texts or whether the signers would simply restructure the content as a whole and produce agent-focused utterances).

In fact, in the collected data, the most common strategy that native signers used to produce translations of English passive sentences was to simply leave the agent unexpressed. Though claims have been made that ASL is more direct than English (see discussion in Hoza 2007) and that ASL uses active voice where English uses passive voice (e.g., Kelly 2001), native ASL signers who were asked to translate English passive sentences into ASL simply added overt subjects and changed them into "active" sentences in very few cases. Participants did not struggle with the translation tasks they were given, and they expressed very little discomfort at being asked to produce agent-defocused construals. All four signers in all of the translation tasks readily produced utterances that simply did not overtly mention the agent, evoking the defocused agent construal.

In addition to the fact that agents were not always overtly specified, various levels of agent focus were also found to be expressed in ASL, just as in English and other spoken languages. These ASL utterances encode construals that parallel those encoded in the range of impersonal forms in English, in which prominence and specificity interact to produce various degrees of agent focus. Just as English uses not just the passive voice but a variety of other impersonal forms as well, each of which defocuses the agent to a different extent (Shibatani 1985; Marín-Arrese 2008), ASL also has a variety of impersonalization strategies that reflect different ways agents can be expressed and also affect the degree of focus on the agent.

Based primarily on my dissertation research, this book explores the options for expressing agents in ASL. Such information on where and

how agentive entities are expressed, as well as the varying levels of focus evoked by each form, expands our knowledge of the intricacies of meaning inherent in particular ASL constructions. Perhaps more important, though, this book also demonstrates that form can never be divorced from meaning at any level, reminding us that for true understanding we must look beyond vocabulary.