

## **Title**

Lexicalization in signed languages: when is an idiom not an idiom?

## **Abstract**

The internal and often iconic structure of the signs in a signed language—the rough equivalent of words in spoken languages—present interesting challenges for linguistic theory. Specifically, lexicalisation in SLs occurs when a signed unit acquires a clearly identifiable and replicable citation form which is regularly and strongly associated with a meaning. The meaning is unpredictable and/or more specific than that implied by the value (meaning) that each component may contribute to the overall form of the signed unit. SL linguists continue to struggle with the dual nature of sign components — they appear to be simultaneously phonemes and morphemes, depending on one's perspective. Cognitive linguistics and construction grammars offer a principled analysis of this situation. It holds that the use of linguistic symbols in patterned ways involves constructions that can be differentiated along two continua: one of size or simplicity (from atomic to complex), and one of lexical specificity (from substantive to schematic or abstract). Idioms, famously, are the most obvious manifestation of this lexico-grammatical continuum. In this presentation, we show how lexicalization in SLs can be best understood as a type of idiomaticity: fully-lexicalized signs (atomic and substantive) are 'idiomatic' in SLs in much the same way as multi-word constructions (complex and substantive) can be idiomatic in spoken languages. Lexical signs are in a sense idioms, i.e. the components in a lexical construction do not (just) mean what they 'should' mean based on these components. In SLs there thus appears to be a large role for idiomaticity at the level of lexical constructions, and very little use of idiomaticity on the level of multi-sign (multi-word) constructions, unlike spoken languages. The lexico-grammatical continuum exists in all languages, it is just that idiomaticity occurs at a different level in this continuum in signed languages.