

Verbs and Role-Shifting
in American Sign Language

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Verbs in ASL have attracted much attention for the reason that they are very complex structures (Fischer 1973, Friedman 1975, Supalla & Newport 1978, Coulter 1979, Klima et al 1979, Liddell 1980, McIntire 1980). Since the time of the last NSSLRT in 1980, additional descriptions of different types of verb structures have been completed (Supalla 1982, this volume, Padden 1983, to appear). I would like first to review some descriptions of ASL verbs and then turn to a problem that now faces researchers of ASL about how some verb morphemes should be described. This problem concerns how to describe the locations in space that these morphemes include. As I discuss below, certain structures in ASL sentences, broadly called "role-shifting," play an important role in this description. I do not propose a full description of "role-shifting" here but rather, I would like to offer some observations about this structure as a first step toward a better description.

Background

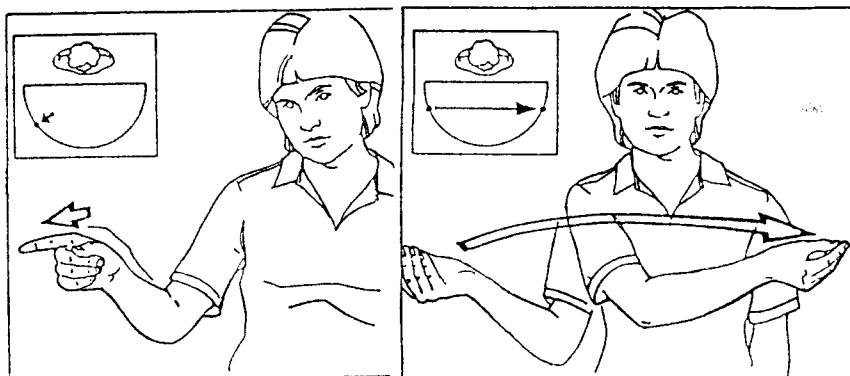
It has been well-known from the time of early descriptions of ASL that verbs vary in form. Two major classes of verbs have been distinguished: "directional" verbs and "body-anchored" verbs. "Directional" verbs are those that vary depending on person, number and location. The classic example of how directional verbs vary is the set of forms for GIVE. Forms translated as 'I give you,' and 'you give me' are different in direction. Likewise, verbs like MOVE vary in direction and position depending on how the location is to be specified. "Body-anchored" verbs (e.g., LOVE and CELEBRATE), on the other hand, do not vary in the same contexts. "Body-anchored" verbs remain the same in form regardless of person, number of the subject and object, and location.

But the terms "directional" and "body-anchored" are misleading because they suggest physical or visual explanations for their forms. As I explain in my dissertation (1983), verbs in ASL vary with respect to which morphology can be used with them. Let me give one example to illustrate this. Within the class of verbs that have typically been grouped together as "directional" verbs, there are at least two classes of verbs that behave differently even though they are visually very similar. Verbs like GIVE, SHOW, TELL, INFORM, SEND, HATE vary depending on person (I, you, he/she/it) and number (singular, dual or plural). But verbs like MOVE, DRIVE-TO and the classifier verbs vary depending on location (here, there, etc.).

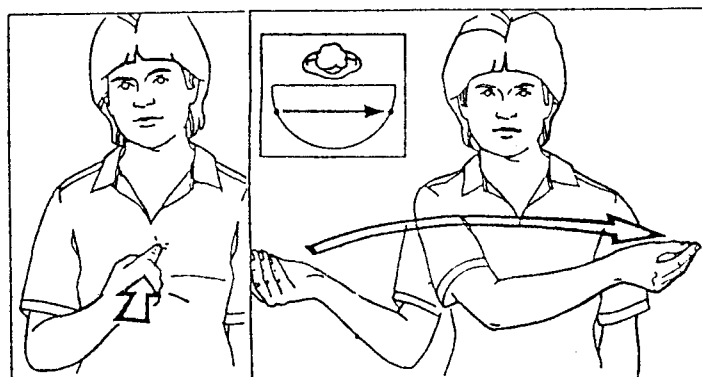
The difference between the two classes can be seen by looking at two verbs that look very similar but have different morphology: GIVE and CARRY-BY-HAND. GIVE varies depending on person and number of the subject and object, but CARRY-BY-HAND varies depending on location. This difference can be seen in sentences like (1-3) below. In (1), GIVE has the morphemes specifying person and number of the subject and object, called "agreement morphemes." The subject agreement morpheme appears at

the beginning point of the directional movement of the verb, and the object agreement, at the end point. In (1), the subject is third person, or 'he/she/it', and the object, likewise third person.'

A signer can use sentence (1) but (2) is ungrammatical (as shown by the asterisk preceding the sentence). In (2), the agreement morpheme is third person, or he/she/it, but the subject of the sentence is first person, 'I'. (2), thus, is ungrammatical. But notice that CARRY-BY-HAND does not have the same restriction, as shown in (3-4). The beginning point of the verb can vary in location regardless of person and number of the subject. In (3), the subject is first person; in (4), it is second person, but the verb form may remain the same. For this reason, CARRY-BY-HAND is described as not having subject or object agreement morphemes, instead, has location morphemes. I call verbs like GIVE, SHOW, TELL, etc. "Inflecting verbs," and verbs like MOVE, CARRY-BY-HAND, and PUT, "Spatial" verbs.



(1) IX_a aGIVE_b¹
'he gave it to her'

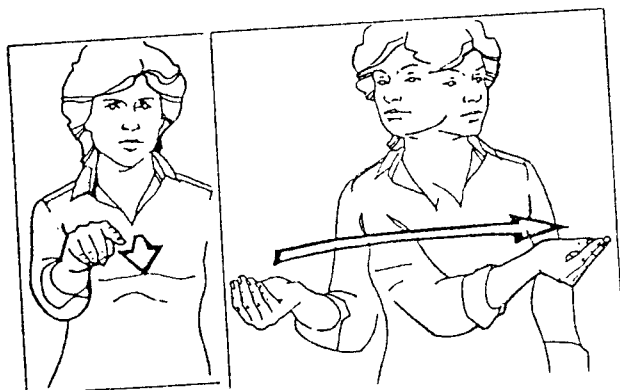


(2) * I aGIVE_b

¹ Illustrations for (1-4) by Frank Paul.



(3) I _aCARRY-BY-HAND_b
'I carried it from here to there.'



(4) YOU _aCARRY-BY-HAND_b
'You carried it from here to there.'

I give this example to illustrate that rules for the forms of location and agreement morphemes necessarily includes syntactic information. In a clause with an Inflecting verb, the subject pronoun and the subject agreement morpheme must have the same position. But there still remains much that is not yet explained about the form of pronouns and agreement morphemes.

The Problem: The Form of Pronouns and Agreement Morphemes

We understand that Inflecting and Spatial verbs take different morphemes. We can describe the form of some of these morphemes. First person agreement morphemes are located near the signer's body and second person morphemes are located near the addressee, but the problem is how to describe the form, or position of third person agreement morphemes and location morphemes. At first analysis, it seems third person morphemes can have any position elsewhere around the signer's body; similarly, location morphemes can be located anywhere in the same space.

In some early descriptions, it was proposed that third person pronouns (or indexes) and agreement morphemes and location morphemes had little restriction on their positions (Lacy 1974). If a signer referred to twenty different persons, objects, or locations, the signer could use twenty different positions in space for each. If there were restrictions, these were of two kinds. First, it appeared that if a signer wanted to refer to persons or objects, their real-world locations should be used. For example, if a house is located to the right of a signer, then any pronoun, agreement marker or location should likewise include a location to the right of the signer. But otherwise, any location could be used. Second, it also seemed that a signer must use "the same location for the same person or object." A signer could use as many locations as needed, but would need to remember the locations in order to refer to the same person or object again. Thus the only restriction against having one hundred or one thousand different locations is that they are not likely to be remembered easily.

The limitations on pronoun and agreement marker positions seemed not to be specified by rules of the language, instead, by limitations on the real world and memory.

There are at least two counter-examples to the above restrictions which show that this description is incomplete. First, it is not true that the signer must use "the same location for the same person or object." (5) below is an example of a pair of sentences where the subjects of both sentences are the same (indicated by the same subscript *i*), and the pronouns have the same position (indicated by the same subscript *a*). (6), on the other hand, is an example of another pair of sentences where the subjects of both sentences are the same, but the positions of the pronouns are different. In (6), the pronoun IX (an abbreviation for INDEX) is in position *a* but in the subsequent sentence, it is in position *α*. Identity is indicated by the subscript *i*; same identity is shown by same subscripts.)

- (5) IX_a WANT BUY DRESS. BUT IX_a NONE MONEY.
'She_i wanted to buy the dress. But she_i had no money.'
- (6) IX_a bCL:LEGS-WALK-TO_c, STOP THINK-ABOUT. IX_c DECIDE
WAIT.
'She_i walked over there, stopped, thought a bit, then she_i
decided to wait there.'

(6) is an example of what I call "locus-shifting" (Padden 1983, to appear). In clauses with Inflecting or Spatial verbs, the position, or locus of subjects of intransitive verbs or direct objects shift to the end position of the verb. Since WALK-TO in (6) is an intransitive Spatial verb, and moves from locus *b* to locus *α*, the locus of the subject pronoun in the first sentence shifts from *b* to *α* in the second sentence. (6) shows that positions of pronouns and agreement markers are specified by syntactic conditions such as subjects of intransitive clauses and direct objects. This shows that at least some positions used for pronouns and agreement markers must follow rules of syntax.

(6) shows that different positions are used for the same person or object. In another argument that "same position for same person or object" is not entirely correct, (7a-b) below shows that the same position can be used for different persons or objects. (7a-b) contains

two sentences taken from a conversation about a dormitory supervisor. In the first sentence, the object of the sentence, GIRL is in position *a*, but a few sentences later in the conversation, the same position *a* is used for a non-identical subject, SUPERVISOR. There is a crucial juncture between the two sentences in (7a-b): the two sentences are separated by shifts in "discourse frames," or shifts in topic time or setting. (7a) appeared in a frame about the parents' warning their daughter about her new dormitory supervisor, and (7b), in a time frame briefly after when the girl first encountered her new supervisor. Presumably because (7b) is framed by a different time and setting, rules of anaphora, or identity ("same person or object") which apply for the set of sentences including (7a) do not apply to (7b). These sentences demonstrate that as in oral languages, anaphora in ASL must have a discourse component, or rules which apply not across the entire conversation, but across the appropriate set of sentences. I will not propose here a definition of "discourse frame," instead leaving it for a more thorough treatment.

(7a) MOTHER-FATHER SIGNAL_b <YOU WILL HAVE NEW SUPERVISOR>.
'The parents told her (the girl), "You'll have a new supervisor."'

(7b) IX ARRIVE SCHOOL LOOK-AT_b.
'She arrived at school and saw her (the supervisor).'

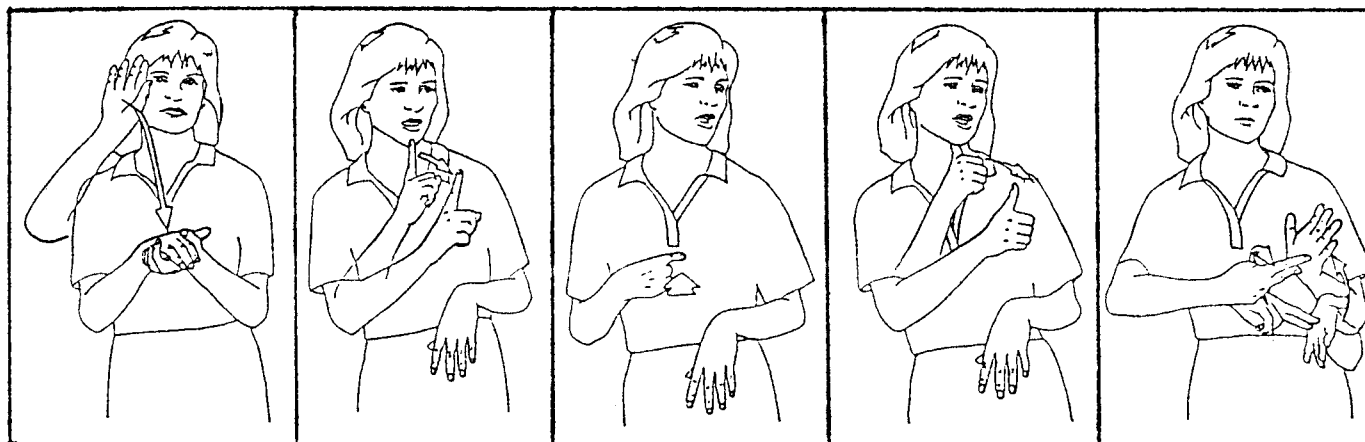
But we might ask: within a "discourse frame," how many different positions in space can be used for pronouns and agreement morphemes? Can there be one hundred or one thousand possible positions? For example, if the signer is recounting a story about twenty different people at a party, will there be twenty different positions for third person pronouns or agreement morphemes? And what will determine what positions are used?

One little-researched but major structure referred to informally as "role-shifting" plays a crucial role in the form of pronouns and agreement markers. In a role-shifting structure, third person pronouns are shifted into first person. Role-shifting is marked by a perceptible shift in body position from neutral position (straight facing) to one side and a change in direction of eye gaze for the duration of "the role." Thus, in (7b) above, instead of a third person reference to the supervisor, the signer changes the referent, "supervisor," to first person Subject, or in informal terms, the signer "assumes" the "role" of the supervisor. This one structure reduces the number of possible locations. In order to answer the questions asked in the preceding paragraph, much more needs to be known about the structure of ASL sentences and discourse. In this paper, I will briefly outline some characteristics of role-shifting structures.

Role-Shifting

"Role-shifting" is perhaps an unfortunate term. It suggests structures which resemble play-acting; indeed, this is how these structures have been described. Like early descriptions of classifier structures as "mime," role-shifting structures are thought not to be linguistic structures, but devices for playing roles within a conversation: the signer "assumes" the "role" of a "character" while signing. These kinds of descriptions incorrectly suggest that whatever common sense knowledge we have about play-acting ought to apply to understanding how role-shifting works in ASL. As it turns out, there are interesting constraints on role-shifting which indicate that its place in the syntactic and discourse system of ASL should be explored further.

(8) below is an example of role-shifting: HUSBAND has relatively neutral facial configuration, followed by a rapid shift in body position (to the right), facial configuration, and eye gaze (toward the left) for the duration of the sequence that follows: REALLY I NOT MEAN. The form of this structure has been popularly described as "shifting" into the "role" of the husband, and depicting the statement as it is being uttered by the husband.



rs: husband

- (8) HUSBAND <REALLY I NOT MEAN>.²
 'The husband goes, "Really, I didn't mean it."'

Although role-shifting is sometimes described as "direct quotation" as in (8), it does not always involve replicating discourse as (9) demonstrates. Again, as in (8), HUSBAND in (9) has a neutral form followed by a shift in facial configuration for WORK. Conventionally, (9) could be translated as : 'The husband was working,' but literally, the translation is more accurately: 'The husband was like -"here I am, working."'

² Illustrations for (8,9,10,11,12) by Robert W. Hills, Daniel W. Renner, and Peggy Swartzel-Lott.



rs:husband

(9) HUSBAND <WORK>.

'The husband was like - "here I am, working.'"

As (8-9) demonstrate, the basic structure is:

rs: Subj

Subject <[]>

(or in prose: Subject followed by a role shift to Subject, then the following discourse sequence is in role of Subject.)

The Subject of a role-shift structure can be deleted in subsequent returns to the role, but the conditions for deletion are not fully understood. An example of structures in which Subject is deleted appear below in (10).

There is a significant difference between (8) and (9). (8) involves a perceptible body shift to one side and is an example of a structure I will call "contrastive role-shifting" (Lentz 1986 in this volume calls this "two character role shift."). (9) involves changes in facial configuration, eye gaze but not body position. In contrastive role-shifting, there is one of two types of changes in body position. Each type has a different set of constraints.

Two Types of Contrastive Role-Shifting

The first type involves a simple forward-back contrast, e.g. (10) below. The manual sequence in the first sentence is accompanied by a body shift forward, and in the second sentence, a shift back. This type of role-shifting can have at most two positions - forward or back, and each indicate a role in contrast to the other. It is not possible to have a three-way distinction: forward, middle and back. The positions forward or back are not in themselves significant (i.e., one does not have to begin forward, then back for the second segment).

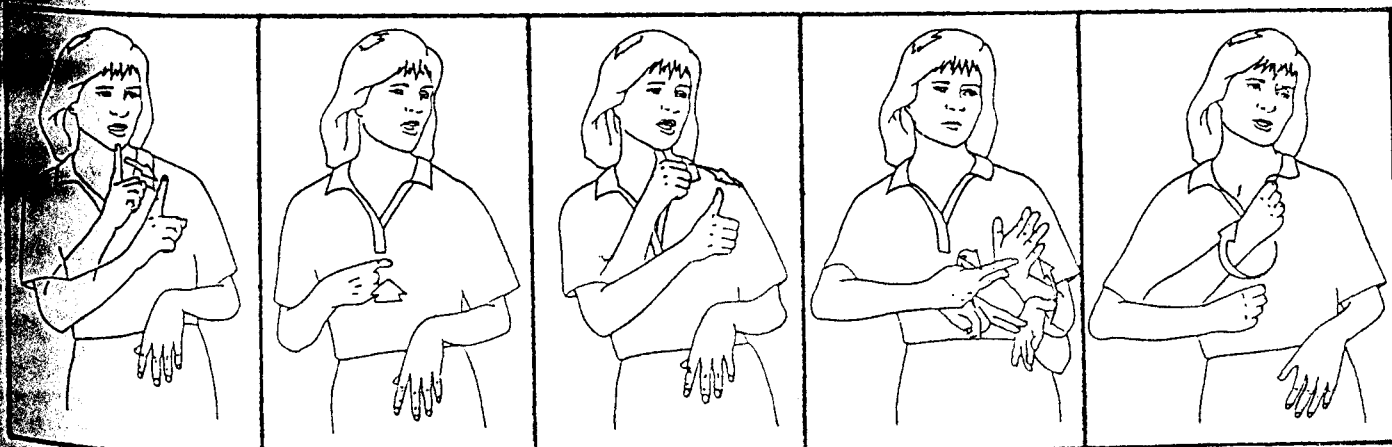


rs: welfare worker q
 (10a) <HUSBAND WORK>.
 "'Is your husband working?'"



rs: wife neg
 (10b) <HUSBAND NONE JOB>.
 'No, he hasn't any job.'

The second type of role-shifting is similarly constrained: at most only two roles can be contrasted, except that the positions are now to one side then to the other. In (11a) below, the signer shifts into the role of the husband, marked by a body shift to the signer's right. Immediately following in (11b), the signer shifts to the opposite side, and is now in the role of the wife.



- rs: husband
 (11a) <REALLY I NOT MEAN. SORRY.>
 "Really, I didn't mean it. I'm sorry."



- rs: wife
 (11b) <RECENT I TALK-WITH YOUR MOTHER.>
 "Just (today), I was talking with your mother..."

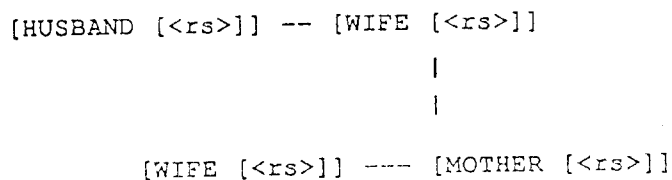
The two types are exclusive, i.e., they cannot be combined. For example, we could conceive of a form where instead of (11b) where the signer shifts to the side opposite of (11a), the signer instead shifts forward in reference to the role of the wife. This form is unacceptable. Or conceivably, for four different roles, the signer uses a forward-back shift then within each shift, shifts side to side. This is likewise ruled out.

What determines which type is used? It is unclear at this point whether the two types differ in distribution, function or meaning. But crucially, the two types of contrastive role-shifting involve at most a contrast between two roles. The logical next question is: what if there are more than two referents within a frame? What if, for example, in addition to the husband and the wife in (11a-b) above, there is a third referent? The answer to these questions is a surprising one, and reveals much about the intricate syntactic and discourse structure of ASL.

Two examples of a discourse frame involving more than two individuals were taken from a videotaped recounting of a network film, "The Burning Bed," a story of wife abuse. The first example, appearing below in sentences (12a-c), bears some close examination. (12a-c) follow (11a-b) in narrative sequence. Briefly, the narrative sequence is as follows: the husband has severely beaten his wife for wearing a negligee in front of his parents. He is then repentant and apologizes to her. The wife explains that it was his mother who initially suggested that she buy a negligee for her husband's pleasure.

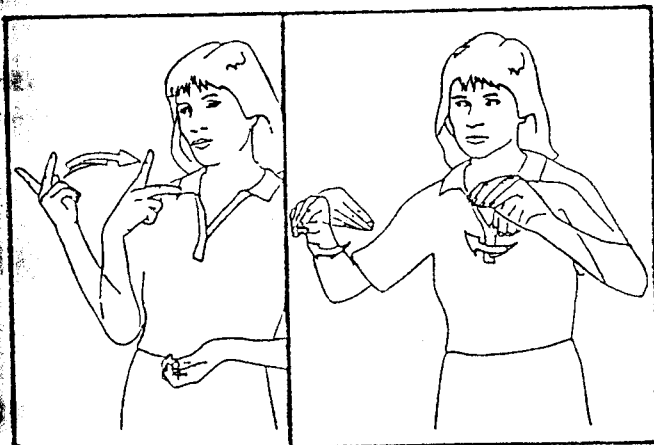
The third referent is introduced in a different contrastive role-shifting structure, one which contrasts the role of wife and husband's

mother. The wife-mother structure is subordinated to the husband-wife structure. A schematic representation of (11a-b; 12a-c) appears below:



The form of (11a-b, 12a-c) is as follows: in (11a), we see a body shift to the right (role-shift to husband), followed by a body shift to left (role-shift to wife) in (11b). (12a) continues in the left-shifted position. In (12b), the first sign: MOTHER has left-shifted position, and eye gaze toward the right (as in 11b and 12a). But for the duration of (12b), the body shifts to the right. This signals role-shift to the husband's mother. In (12c), the signer returns to the left-shifted position and resumes the role of the wife.

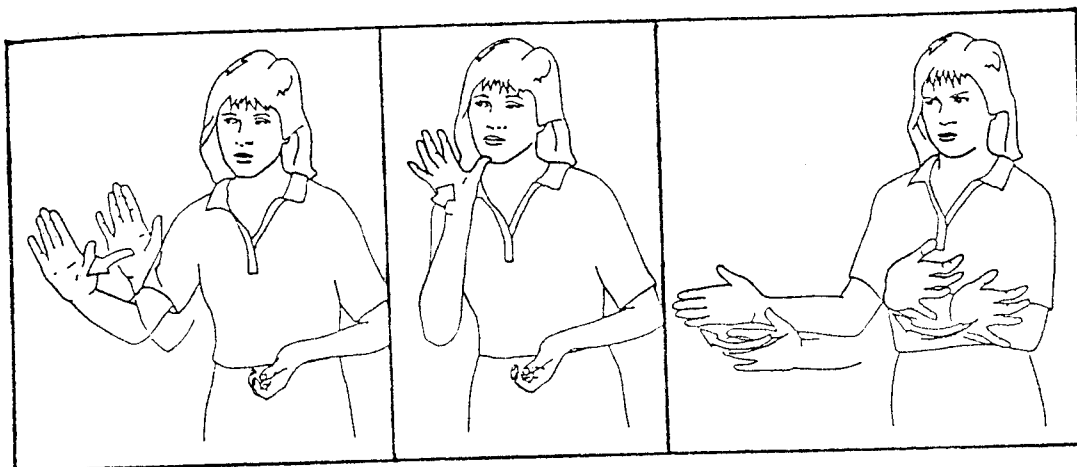
The crucial element of the subordinated structure, (12b) is MOTHER. Contrast the forms of the Subjects in (12b) and (7). In (7), HUSBAND has straight direct eye gaze, no shift in body position, but MOTHER in (12b) has eye gaze to right and a left-shifted body position.



rs: wife
 (12a) <TWO-US STORE.>
 "The two of us were at the store."



rs: mother _____ whq _____
 (12b) MOTHER <WHY-NOT BUY NEGLIGEE FOR HUSBAND>.
 "'Your mother said, 'Why don't you get a negligee for your
 husband?'"'



rs: wife
 (12c) <YOUR MOTHER ENCOURAGE>.
 "Your mother encouraged me."

(12a-c) involve two role-shifting structures, one subordinated to the other. In another example, shown below in (13a-d), there are four different referents: the lawyer, the two children, and the husband's mother. Instead of a possible three-way contrast between the lawyer, the two children and the husband's mother, the signer in (13a-b) first contrasts the lawyer and the two children together, then the lawyer and the husband's wife in (13c-d). As shown below, there are two different role-shifting structures, separated by a change in discourse frame, marked by the discourse marker: AND-NEXT.

rs: lawyer _____ whq _____
 (13a) <YOU SEE MOTHER-FATHER FIGHT HOW -MANY TIME>.
 'You saw your parents fight how many times?'

rs: children
 (13b) SAY <I CAN'T COUNT>.
 'They said, "I can't count."'

rs: lawyer
 (13c) AND-NEXT MAN POSS_a MOTHER INTERROGATE <YOU SEE
 _____ q _____
 TWO-THEM FIGHT>
 'And then they questioned the man's mother, "Did you see them fight?"'

rs: mother _____ neg _____
 (13d) <NEVER SEE TWO-THEM FIGHT>.
 "I never saw them fight."

These examples illustrate that the two-way constraint imposes restrictions on possible sentences. We see in (12a-c) how a third referent is subordinated to the other two. In (13b), two children are treated as a single mass and instead of a three-way contrast, two role-shifting structures are separated by a discourse frame marker.

It has been shown here and elsewhere (Lillo-Martin & Klima to appear, Meier to appear) that any description of pronouns and agreement markers in ASL must include information about the structure of sentences and discourse in ASL. Role-shifting clearly plays an important role in this description.

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