

# A Unified Contrastive Analysis of Lateral Shift in American Sign Language

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## 1. Introduction

**Role shift** is a mechanism unique to sign languages used to report another's dialogue or action from the referent's perspective. Various non-manual markers mark role shift, including eye gaze, head position, facial expression, and **shift in body position (Fig. 1)**, often described as being directed toward the locus of the referent (Quer, 2005).

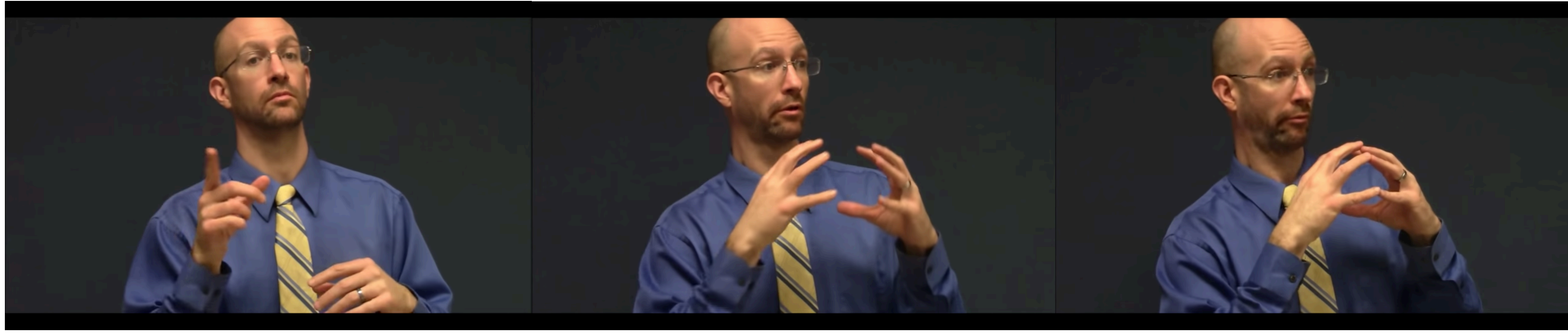


Fig. 1: Body Shift in Role Shift (Source: ASL THAT)  
CONTEXT: IX-3 ; BALL CL-CLAW-5 -(THROW)<sup>RS<sub>i</sub></sup>

### Research Objective:

Given that body shift is neither obligatory or unique to role shift, this project investigates the independent function of lateral shift in varying contexts in ASL, including role shift, coordination, and focus marking.

## 2. Body Shift as Contrastive Role Shift

ASL signers typically use alternate strategies in place of lateral body shift to signal role shift (Cormier et al, 2015).

Padden (1986) draws a distinction between:

- One Character Role Shift** (lacks body shift)
- Two Character/Contrastive Role Shift** (uses body shift)

Likewise, Janzen (2012) finds distinct functions of space in role shift (Fig. 2):

- Mentally rotated space**, in which the narrator rotates their perspective of reported space from a neutral body position, is the dominant strategy in role shift narrative.
- Static space**, in which the signer shifts their body toward a loci, is largely reserved for **comparative discourse frames** that contrast referents.

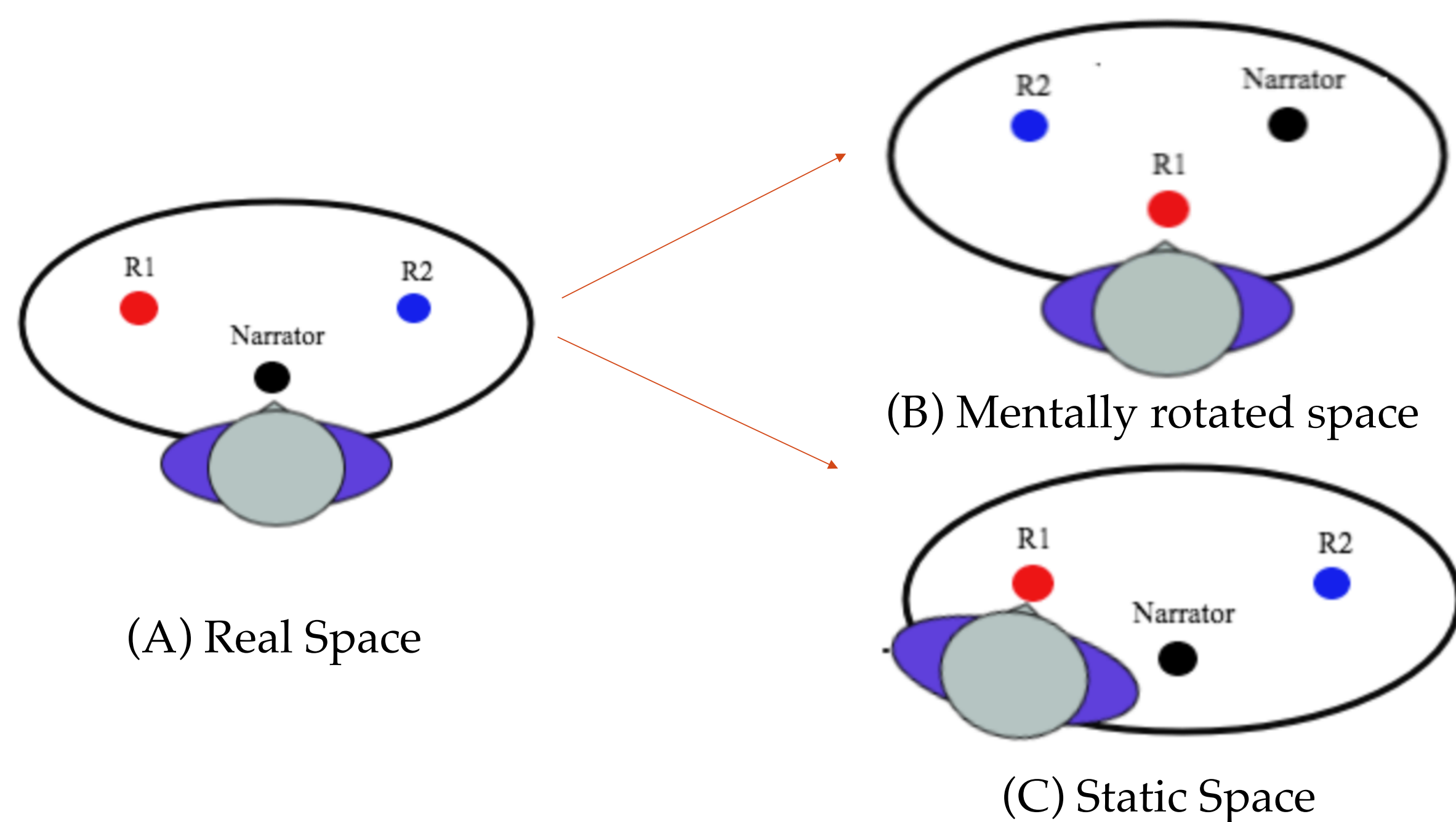


Fig. 2: Mentally Rotated vs Static Space

## 3. Body Shift as Focus Marking

ASL marks focus by both forward-backward and left-right body leans. Right-left body shifts are preferred in **parallel contrastive focus** when comparing two referents (Wilbur & Patschke, 1998)

(lean left) (lean right)  
IX-2 LIKE WHAT CHOCOLATE VANILLA  
(ASL, adapted from Wilbur & Patschke 1998)

Role shift similarly makes use of both types of body shifts in different contexts: forward-backward shifts are often used for reported action from a character's perspective while left-right body shifts are used from the narrator's perspective to **contrast and compare two referents** (Kocab, Pyers, & Senghas, 2015).

## 4. COORD-SHIFT: Lateral Shift as a Coordinative Device

COORD-SHIFT, as described by Davidson (2013), expresses conjunction or disjunction non-manually through a left-right shift in body position (Fig. 3). The form can express coordination alone or accompany lexical coordinative signs.



Fig. 3: COORD-SHIFT (Source: Lifeprint)  
CONTEXT: IX-2 PREFER PIZZA [COORD-SHIFT] HAMBURGER

## 5. Proposal: A Shared Function of Lateral Shift

Lateral shift functions in many different contexts to establish **distinction** and **contrast** between referents. This paper proposes that analyzing and notating lateral body shift as distinct from other features of role shift will accomplish the following:

- 1) Representing distinctions between role shift types (Janzen, 2012; Padden, 1986).
- 2) Creating a transparent representation in surface similarity between body shift in role shift, focus marking, and coordination.

Here, lateral body shift would refer to a bi-lateral contrast in space realized through body shift. As the purpose of lateral shift, particularly in role shift and focus marking, is to contrast two referents, a possible analysis follows Matsui and Kubota's (2012) denotation of the Japanese comparative morpheme *-hoo*, which introduces a presupposition that the marked referent is a member of a salient contrastive alternative set,  $C$ , with a cardinality of two.

$$[[ \text{LATERAL SHIFT} ]] = \lambda x : x \in C \wedge |C| = 2. x$$

## References

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