

Translation of ROLE SHIFT AND CONSTRUCTED ACTION from the Linguistics of Auslan series, which is located at <http://www.deafconnected.com.au/linguistics-of-auslan/>

ROLES SHIFT AND CONSTRUCTED ACTION

Role Shift (usually abbreviated to R-S when signing), is also known as Constructed Action (abbreviated to C-A), and is used in Auslan when a person tells a story, usually about an experience that has happened to them. The signer imitates the actions or behaviours of the characters in the story; and this can be about themselves, other people or animals. This helps the viewer to gain a better picture what was happening at that time.

Constructed action is seen most often in narratives, to recount an event that has already taken place; however, it can also be used to describe something that is imagined to happen in the future. Constructed action is not used for things happening in the present moment, since the signer is physically there and you can see them. Indicators to look for when a person is using constructed action include expressiveness of facial expression, eye gaze and signing style.

If I describe a time when I was previously in conversation with another person who was standing to my left, I will show this through my posture and eye gaze. Alternatively, I can move my body, eye gaze and move the sign for CONVERSATION across the signing space to indicate a conversation with multiple people. That means it is easy to recognise the difference between a conversation I am having with one person or with many.

The next example, of a conversation between a mother and daughter highlights how I can adopt the personas of each character and give the dialogue from each character's perspective.

- Daughter: eye gaze and shoulders facing upwards towards the mother, facial expression is asking a question.

"Can I go outside to play?"

- Mother: body shifts with eye gaze and shoulders looking downwards to the daughter, facial expression is that of concern.

"Yes, but it's cold outside, make sure you put a jumper on first."

- Daughter: eyes gaze and shoulders upwards, expression in agreement.

"I will."

You can see in the previous narrative, I have taken on the character's personality by shifting roles between the mother and daughter. The person who is viewing the story is able to picture and understand the people and event taking place.

The following two examples will highlight the difference between not using constructed action (Example 1) and using construction action (Example 2); the story is about a man cleaning his house.

Example 1: (pt. MAN pt. HOME CLEAN-FINISH+) - eye gaze and body posture is front-on towards the viewer, and little facial expression used.

Example 2: (pt. MAN pt. HOME CLEAN FINISH) – eye gaze moves with body, while showing the action of cleaning. There is little eye contact to the viewer. There is more facial expression used to show the amount of work done.

You will see the difference in these examples, in the facial expression used, eye gaze and the stress shown.

There are five main features of constructed action: body posture, shoulder positioning, eye gaze, facial expressions and signing style.

I will give you another example to demonstrate this. A man is sitting at a bar with his drink and looking nonchalant. A person then comes up to him and punches him in the face. In this example, I am using my own fist to show the punch to the face, but the viewer is still able to identify that there are two separate characters. My facial expression also shows surprise and fear as the punch comes towards me.

Another example to demonstrate this; I am on a casual walk when a person from the opposite direction approaches. As I am depicting the person walking towards me, my facial expression changes to correspond with their walking action, this indicates that they have an aggressive expression. I am reflecting the other person's character.

Native users of Auslan incorporate a great deal of constructed action in their signing. People who learn Auslan later in life tend to use this less; they are more likely to 'tell' the story (using 'he said/she said'), rather than 'show' the story. Using constructed action is a powerful tool when telling a narrative in Auslan because it helps the viewer visualise what has taken place from individual character's perspectives. It is a fundamental feature of Auslan.