

F. General Discussion: Classifiers

There is a fairly large set of signs in ASL which are called *classifiers*. These classifiers can be divided into two groups: (a) classifiers that are made with a particular handshape and that represent a noun and indicate the location and possible actions of that noun, and (b) classifiers that indicate something about the size, shape, texture, etc., of a noun as well as its location in space. These classifiers (b) are often made with two hands and are sometimes called *size and shape specifiers* (SASSes).

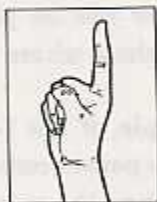
Some classifiers are like pronouns because they represent a particular group of nouns. Like pronouns, classifiers generally cannot be used until it is clear what they are representing. For example, the classifier 3→CL can represent things like a car, truck, bus, van, boat, or submarine. However, the Signer needs to indicate which one of these things s/he is talking about before using the classifier. Generally this is done by first signing the noun (e.g. BOAT or #CAR), and then using the classifier.

Below is a list of some of the classifiers in ASL and some of the nouns that they can represent.



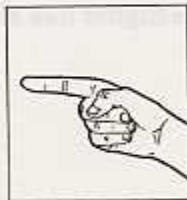
3→CL

car, bus, truck, van, boat,
submarine



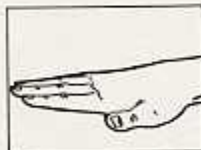
1-CL

person (e.g. boy, girl, man,
woman)



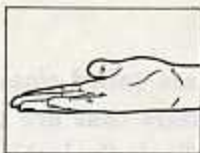
1→CL

cigarette, pencil, rifle, log,
pole (on its side), hot dog



B↓CL

piece of paper, leaf, kite,
bed



B-CL

book, piece of paper, pan



V:↓-CL

chair, person seated, (with certain movements, also a snake, cat, dog, or mouse)



V-CL

person standing (with alternating finger movement, a person walking)

Some of the other classifiers will be described later in other units. As mentioned earlier, most classifiers give specific information about the location of the nouns they represent. For example, the 1-CL 'person' classifier can be placed to the Signer's right or left or directly in front of the Signer to show where a particular person was standing.

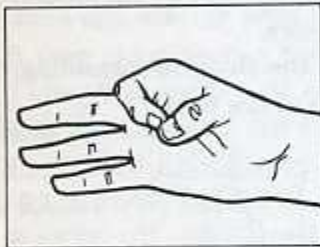
Many classifiers can also function as verbs. For example, if the 1-CL 'person' classifier moves toward the Signer, it has the meaning 'one person comes up to me'. If that person has already been identified (e.g. as 'Pat'), then the meaning is 'Pat comes up to me'. In addition, the classifier can show the direction of 'Pat's' movement. This is shown in the illustration below in which the Signer has already made it clear that the 1-CL classifier represents 'Pat'.



1-CL 'pat come up to me from right'

Further discussion of how classifiers give information about the location of the nouns they represent and their actions will be found in Unit 6. In addition to showing the locations and actions of people or things, classifiers can also show the 'manner' of an action (like adverbs in English). For example, the 1-CL 'person' classifier could have approached the Signer 'quickly' or 'slowly' or 'in a zig-zag fashion'.

The second type of classifiers (SASSes) can be used to more carefully and accurately describe the particular size, shape, depth, and/or texture of something (as well as give it a location in space). Thus, these classifiers are more like adjectives (although some are also used as pronouns). SASSes are used to describe nouns that share certain physical features (like 'flat and smooth' or 'thin and cylindrical'). For example, notice the common feature(s) that are shared by the nouns in the first list below (opposite the F-CL). Are they big? Are they flat? Are they rectangular? Are they circular? What are the common features shared by nouns in the second list (opposite the RECT-CL)?



F-CL

coin, spot, eye, piece of
candy, poker chip, button, hole



RECT-CL

check, index cards, credit card,
bricks, tiles, invitation

The nouns described by the three classifiers illustrated below also share certain features. But notice how the handshape and the position of the hands shows that the 'poles' have very different sizes.



(2h)F-CL'pole'



(2h)L-CL'pole'



(2h)C-CL'pole'

Obviously, the first is the smallest pole and the third is the largest. The difference in size is indicated not only by the choice of classifier but also by the different facial expressions which indicate the size (width) differences.

Certain handshapes can also be used to describe the shape of something. Generally, these handshapes 'trace' or 'outline' the shape of the thing.



For example, suppose the Signer is talking about a table and does what you see in the illustration below. From this 'tracing' description, we know that the table is 'round' and is about 'medium' size.



1outline-CL'circular'

In the next illustration, the Signer is describing a surface that 'continues for a long distance' and appears to be 'smooth' or 'very even'. This classifier uses a variant of the B-CL, which is called the 'bent B' classifier, or B:-CL. Notice that the Signer's pursed lips and eye squint also emphasize the smooth, continuous nature of the surface.



(2h)B:-CL 'smooth, continuous surface'

Classifiers can also be seen in more standard, commonly used signs in ASL, although they are generally not recognized as classifiers. For example, the 1-CL 'person' classifier occurs in signs which are often glossed as **MEET**, **HIT**, **FLATTER**, etc. Likewise, the signs which are glossed as **STAND**, **JUMP**, **FALL**, **GET-UP**, **SIT**, and **KNEEL** are made with common classifiers. Signs like **FENCE**, **CAGE**, **RAINBOW**, and **EYELASHES** use the '4' handshape classifier; signs like **FIRE**, **WAVES**, **TRAFFIC**, and **WAR** use the '5' handshape classifier. Notice again how each of these last two groups of nouns share common features.

Throughout the remaining units, many more classifiers will be illustrated and described. These descriptions will explore how classifiers are used to show, for example, the location, action, and number of various nouns. Further discussion of classifiers and their use will be found not only in the *General Discussion* sections but also in the *Text Analysis* sections.

F. General Discussion: Locatives

Locatives are ways of describing the spatial relationship between two or more people, places, or things. In English, prepositional phrases are used to describe spatial relationships. For example, the prepositional phrases in the sentences 'The boy is *under the car*' and 'The girl is *in the room*' describe the spatial relationship between the 'boy' and the 'car' and between the 'girl' and the 'room'. The following diagram illustrates several different types of spatial relationships and how these are described with English prepositions.

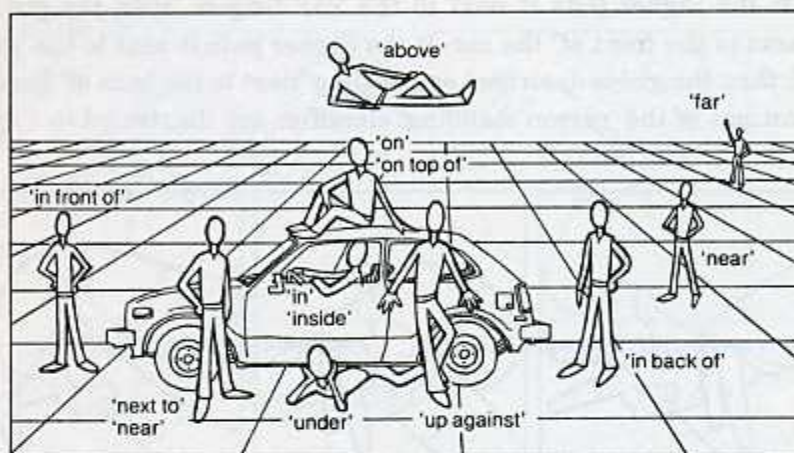


Fig. 6.1 Some spatial relationships

Unlike English, ASL generally does not use a separate sign (like a preposition) to describe a spatial relationship. Instead, ASL tends to use the signing space to illustrate how people, places, or things are spatially related. Very often this involves using a classifier in a specific location or using a directional verb to show where something happens. For example, to describe the location of a 'boy' in relation to a 'car', the Signer would probably use two classifiers: 3→CL 'car' and V ↓-CL 'person standing'. The 3→CL 'car' would be made with one hand, and the V ↓-CL 'person standing' would be made with the other hand and positioned in the spatial relationship to the car that the Signer wants to describe. Figure 6.2 shows three possible relationships between the car and the person.

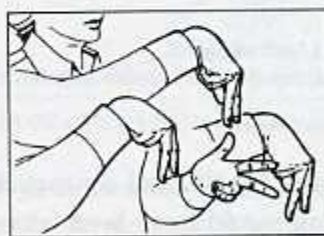


Fig. 6.2 A person standing 'behind', 'above', and 'in front of' a car

