Experiencer object (EO) constructions in ASL: Another myth bites the dust!
Ronnie B. Wilbur, Purdue, and Sandra K. Wood, University of Southern Maine

There is a long history of recognizing that 'psych' verbs with experiencer arguments are in many ways different from other verbs with clear agent subjects and causation semantics. Careful analysis suggests two main relevant factors: (1) degree to which the stimulus of the experiencer's state is causative, and (2) degree to which the experiencer object is sufficiently like a syntactic object. It has been claimed that experiencer arguments do not occur in object position (henceforth EO) in SLs. Frederiksen & Mayberry [F&M] 2021 cite such claims: for ASL, Edge & Herrmann 1977; Kegl 1990; Winston 2013; Healy 2015; Sign Language of Netherlands, Oomen 2017; Israeli Sign Language, Meir et al. 2007; Greek Sign Language, Sapountzaki 2005. Winston reported that English EO stimuli elicited biclausal structures: a causing event and a caused event, often linked by light verb LOOK-AT, ex. [1]. Most of Healy's results are biclausal; she concludes ASL psych verbs "almost exclusively encode the experiencer as the subject". Winston used elicited production and online rating, whereas Healy used retelling of video clip stories; they both reached the same conclusion- ASL does not favor the occurrence of experiencer objects.

However, as noted in F&M, experiencer objects *do occur* in ASL. Winston's ratings of EO were comparable to ES (scale 1-7: EO 4.7, ES 5.2). F&M indicated 58% of 69 EO verbs were fully/mostly acceptable in a frame 'person-A VERB person-B' as in MAYA EMBARRASS LISA, and 'body anchoring' did not rule out EO (contra Oomen 2017). These data present a linguistic puzzle.

Historically, Kegl 1990 argued ASL verbs like FRIGHTEN/SCARE, which could be an EO verb, were transitive verbs with agent subject and *theme* object; this reanalysis contributed to belief that ASL did not have EO structures. Recent research on spoken languages (Temme 2018) notes 'frighten' and others are *lexically ambiguous* between eventive and stative-causative readings [exs 2-3]. Therefore it is critical to test EO verbs with *inanimate* subjects, which has not been systematically done for SLs. For example, in F&R's frame MAYA ANNOY LISA, it could be EO 'Maya annoys Lisa' or ES 'Maya is annoyed at Lisa', due to the animate subject.

We provide examples extracted from existing literature (exs. [4-7]) as well as new EO data ([8-11]) showing relevant distinctions from Temme: internal vs external causation; eventive (sequential) vs stative (simultaneous); causer vs subject matter stimulus [9]; and propositional attitudes (10), evaluatives (ES only), and dispositional uses (11). Our methodology involves translation tasks (in both directions), elicited production based on explicitly described contexts, and acceptability judgments of felicity in particular contexts, with reliability checks over time.

We argue that many ASL EO structures have been rejected or re-structured to ES for pragmatic/prosodic reasons, especially dispreference for syntactic objects as *narrative focus* items, a factor which may explain why *embedded* EOs are widely acceptable (e.g. exs 4, 6). Previous conclusions on the absence of EO structures are the result of an unfortunate coincidence of choosing contexts and environments that are heavily biased against EO structures. Note 'bias', not 'ban', see main verb uses in [2, 3, 5, 7, 9]. These data serve as a necessary corrective against the prevailing myth.

(1) The clown amused the children.   English EO
    a. CLOWN$_b$ IX$_b$ CHILDREN$_a$ $_a$[$_a$LOOK-AT$_b$ BELLY-LAUGH-AT$_b$]$_b$ ASL ES: children are amused
    b. [CLOWN$_b$ ACT-SILLY, DO+, ACT]$_b$ CHILDREN$_a$ $_a$[$_a$LOOK-AT$_b$ BELLY-LAUGH-AT$_b$]$_b$
(2)   TRUE-BUSINESS STOP THINK+ FAIL **CALM** MARY   [not ambiguous]   (ASL; Authors)
       That she stopped thinking she will fail has calmed Mary
(3)   STOP THINK+ FAIL **CALM** MARY   [ambiguous]
       ES: Having stopped thinking she will fail, Mary is calm
       EO: Stopping thinking she will fail calmed Mary
(4)   PRO-Xclown CLOWN WANT **FEAR/SCARE** SOMEONE   (ASL; Healy 2015)
       The clown wanted to scare someone.
(5)   EACH VOTE.Nmz-Red_pl-dist **BOTHER** IX1   (ASL; Abner 2012:145)
       Each election bothers me.
(6)   FINISH ADOPT BABY DOG FOR-FOR **SURPRISE** IX$_{j,pl-arc}$ KID   (ASL; Abner 2012:148)
       He adopted a puppy to surprise the kids.
(7)   IXa DRINK TEA **SURPRISE** IX1   (ASL; Kastner and Davidson 2013)
       That she drinks tea surprises me.
(8)   HIS BEHAVIOR **BOTHER** IX1 WHY, (SEEM) IX3 THINK NO-ONE NOTICE.   (ASL; Authors)
       His behavior bothers me because he seems to think that no-one notices.
(9)   TRUE-BUSINESS THINK FAIL **FRIGHTEN** MARY
       The thought that she might fail frightened Mary
(10)   a. He knows that Laura made a mistake.   non-Exp
       a'. HE KNOW-THAT LAURA TRUE-BUSINESS MISTAKE++
       b. It surprised him that Laura made a mistake.   Exp
       b''. TRUE-BUSINESS LAURA MISTAKE++ **SURPRISE** HIM   EO exp
       b'''. LAURA MISTAKE++, HE **SURPRISED**   ES exp
(11)   a. That Laura made a mistake ruined him.   non-Exp
       a'. LAURA MISTAKE++ RUIN/THROW-OFF HIS BUSINESS
       b. That Laura made a mistake annoyed him.   Exp
                      _____br_____
       b'.   LAURA MISTAKE++ HE IRRITATED/**ANNOYED**   ES exp
       b''.   TRUE-BUSINESS LAURA MISTAKE++ **ANNOY** HIM   EO exp

References: Edge, Herrmann 1977. Verbs & determination of subject in ASL. In Friedman (ed.) *On the other hand,* 137–180. Academic; Frederiksen, Mayberry 2021. Implicit causality biases and thematic roles in ASL. *Behavior Research Methods*; Healy 2015. *Construing affective events in ASL.* PhD diss, Gallaudet; Kegl 1990. Predicate argument structure & verb-class organization in the ASL lexicon. In Lucas (ed.) *Sign Language Research: Theoretical Issues*, 149–175. Gallaudet; Meir, Padden, Aronoff, Sandler 2007. Body as subject. *Journal of Linguistics* 43(3). Oomen 2017. Iconicity in argument structure: Psych-verbs in NGT. *Sign Language & Linguistics*; Sapountzaki 2005. *Free functional elements of Tense, Aspect, Modality& Agreement as possible auxiliaries in Greek Sign Language*. PhD diss, Bristol. Temme 2018. *The peculiar nature of psych verbs & experiencer object structures.* PhD diss, Humboldt Berlin; Winston 2013. *Psychological verb constructions in ASL*. Masters thesis, Purdue.