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Metaphor in American Sign Language

Phyllis Perrin Wilcox



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Only recently have linguists ceased to regard metaphors as mere frills on the periphery of language and begun to recognize them as cornerstones of discourse. Phyllis Wilcox takes this innovation one step further in her fascinating study of metaphors in American Sign Language. Such an inquiry has long been obscured by, as Wilcox calls it, "the shroud of iconicity." American Sign Language's (ASL) iconic nature once discouraged people from recognizing it as a language; more recently it has served to confuse linguists examining its metaphors. Wilcox, however, presents methods for distinguishing between icon and metaphor, allowing the former to clarify, not cloud, the latter. "If the iconic influence that surrounds metaphor is set aside, the results will be greater understanding, and interpretations that are less opaque." Wilcox concludes her study with a close analysis of the ASL poem, "The Dogs," by Ella Mae Lentz. In presenting Deaf Americans', Deaf Germans', and Deaf Italians' reactions to the poem, Wilcox manages not only to demonstrate the influence of culture upon metaphors, but also to illuminate the sources of sociopolitical division within the American Deaf community. Metaphor in American Sign Language proves an engrossing read for those interested in linguistics and Deaf culture alike.

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