Perspective-taking in American Sign Language (ASL) is not a simple matter of a signer choosing a viewpoint from among several options, such as observer, character, or narrator perspective (e.g., Parrill 2012). Instead, it appears that perspective-taking operates along several dimensions, first regarding conceptualized mappings of real-world scenes, as in narratives, where physical and relational interactions are mapped onto the signer’s present articulation space. Here, data from narratives embedded in spontaneous ASL conversations show that they blend character, observer, and narrator perspectives, making it necessary for addressees to keep a running track of which gesture spaces are associated with which perspective simultaneously, including the temporal dimension of past and present. Second, while some perspectives are based on physical and perceptual properties, signers move between these and conceptual perspectives that are not grounded in physical events, but have to do with cognitive organization and discourse planning. In all this, signers do not just position elements within and around their articulation space; they also have an (embodied) view of that space, as do their addressees, and are therefore positioned within it in highly subjective ways. This talk explores these complexities of perspective-taking and asks the question of how such uses of gesture space might regularize into patterns we might call grammar.

Free and open to the public. ASL-English interpreting will be provided. Persons with disabilities who need an accommodation in order to participate in this event should contact Zena Levan at zena@uchicago.edu.

Organized by The Center for Gesture, Sign, and Language.