

Sign Language Acquisition by Deaf and Hearing Children: 4 Reasons Linguists Should Care

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Why should linguists who don't specialize in sign languages care about sign language acquisition? This presentation will provide four reasons, with supporting data from recent research. Even though we sign linguists think that sign languages should be included with spoken languages in presentation sessions, journals, and the like, we also think that sign languages are pretty special and deserve everyone's attention. This presentation will give some of the reasons why.

1. **Understanding cross-modal characteristics of language acquisition.** There are many ways in which sign languages are acquired as any language is, but in these ways, the fact that sign languages are not special is pretty important. Many of the processes required to find linguistic regularity are a-modal, and knowing which ones those are will improve theories and models of language acquisition. In this domain, I will summarize recent findings from studies using naturalistic production data collected from deaf children who are acquiring American Sign Language (ASL) as their native language.
2. **Using acquisition to help us understand sign language grammars (and vice-versa).** Language acquisition researchers are interested in two overarching questions: i) What are the mechanisms that make language acquisition possible? ii) How can language acquisition data help us understand the mechanisms used by adults? In sign language research, we can also use acquisition data to help bear on analyses of the adult grammar. In this domain I will discuss a series of papers that provide acquisitional evidence more in line with one analysis over an alternative to account for cases of doubling of signs including wh-words, modals, time markers, and negation.
3. **Sign+speech (Bimodal) bilinguals show us even more about what bilingualism can be.** Bilinguals are amazing, and bimodal bilinguals are even more amazing. Code-switching and code-blending push our typical notions of language architecture and force us to consider new possibilities. In this part of the talk, I'll show how even two-year-olds can force us to rethink our notions of the architecture of language. I will also show how, in opposition with the a-modal aspects of sign language acquisition, bimodal bilinguals highlight distinctive effects of the role of the visual modality.
4. **Sign language acquisition and language deprivation.** Sign languages are awesome, but you can't acquire one if you're not exposed to one. Unfortunately, for many deaf children, access to a full natural sign language is not provided, and development of a

spoken language is delayed or distorted. How is language development affected in this context? What do findings on the cognitive effects of delayed language development tell us about mechanisms for language? And what can and should we linguists do about this problem?