Recognizing Complexity in Children's Signed Narratives

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Outline for today

1. Multimodality
   What does it mean to say that human language and language development are multimodal?

2. Child ASL Narratives
   What kinds of things do linguists notice when they analyze children's narratives in ASL?

3. Hands-on analysis
   What do children's ASL narratives tell you about their signing proficiency?
1a. Human language is multimodal.
Viewpoint

Depicting an experiencing self via signer’s facial affect
Depicting a body via signer’s body
Depicting scene from within—internal
Signer’s body external to depiction
Other

Different types of manual expressions that may be used with depiction

Different types of non-manual expressions, made with the mouth, face, head, and body, that can be produced with manual depiction
1b. Language acquisition is multimodal.
“...you can’t learn spoken language and sign language at the same time... if you start teaching little kids sign language... they’re going to get the visual and they’re not going to respond to the listening.”

Jane Madell, Audiologist
Actually...

Infants’ brains are designed to seek patterns in their linguistic environment. Newborns are especially good at finding prosodic patterns of language, both auditory and visual. Visual and auditory information are not competing, but rather complement each other.
Newborns are very attuned to prosodic patterns

Monolinguals babies can distinguish between certain spoken language pairs very early in life:

- French vs. Russian
- English vs. Italian
- English vs. Japanese

However, they could not discriminate English from Dutch, which have similar rhythmic and stress patterns (prosody). (Mehler et al. 1988, Nazzi et al. 2000)
Hearing babies are attuned to visual prosodic patterns, too

6-month olds: ✔ Looked significantly longer at ASL (complex +linguistic) than at pantomime (complex).

10-month olds: ✗ Showed no significant preference.

6-month olds: ✔ Looked longer at well-formed fingerspelling video

12-month olds: ✗ Showed no preference.

Krentz & Corina (2008)

Stone, Pettito & Bosworth (2018)
Hearing babies use visual information to learn oral language

French and English sound different, but do they look different? In which silent video is the woman reading French? In which is she reading English? (Weikum et al. 2007)
Bilingual babies maintain attention to visual patterns longer (a bilingual advantage)

At 4 & 6 months

At 8 months

Weikum et al. (2007)
Hearing infants’ sign language discrimination

**Habituation Phase**
Half of the infants watch JSL videos. The other half watch BSL videos.

- 6-month old hearing, non-signing babies looked longer at the unfamiliar (new) sign language; 12-month old babies did not. (Nácar et al. 2017)
- Blau (in prep) will test deaf babies’ discrimination of sign languages.

**Test Phase**
Infants watch 6 video clips of the same signer in the other sign language. Do they notice the change?
Natural language is multimodal, encoding important linguistic information in more than one channel. Visual information is important even for spoken languages.

All infants are born well-equipped to notice visual patterns of natural language and exploit them for language learning; these visual patterns are not a “distraction.”
2. Child ASL Narratives

What kinds of things do linguists notice when they analyze children's narratives in ASL?
Narratives as predictors of children's language skills

- In SpL, children’s narrative abilities at age 5 predict reading comprehension skills as age 8 (Griffin et al. 2004)
- ASL skills and English reading skills show a positive relationship throughout the lifespan (Strong & Prinz 1997; Chamberlain & Mayberry 2008)
Access the videos for this presentation at the website shown on the left, entitled "Workshop Videos for Analysis"

Go to http://signanalysis.weebly.com/workshop-videos.html
"The Lollipop" stimulus

Extrait de "L'attaque de la sucette rose" par Thomas Szabo (2006)
### Basic structure of a narrative (Labov 1972)

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Additional characteristics of adult ASL narratives

Video of Deaf adult retelling of Lollipop story (adult control)

EYE GAZE
Eye gaze towards addressee when signer is narrator; eye gaze shifts away during referential shift.

LABEL CHARACTERS
Characters often labeled before signer enters referential shift

BODY SHIFT
Body may shift to side during referential shift.

Reilly (2000)
What elements does the adult signer's narrative include?

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How do ASL narratives by Deaf children compare?
"The Lollipop" by a Deaf child from Deaf family [age 7;0]
Some elements Paul notices
Some elements Debbie notices

Use of null subject
FLY is introduced with fingerspelling, then maintained in the next sentence with an adult-like null subject.

Two-handed FALL
Two handed FALL, although only one stick is falling → sympathy error, common especially in younger signers.

Labeling SPIDER before shift
After she finishes the episode about the flies and ants, she labels SPIDER before entering into referential shift.
3. Hands-on Analysis

What do children's ASL narratives tell YOU about their signing proficiency?
What do you notice in the children's narratives? Here is a checklist of some elements to look for:
What about narratives by Kodas?
Reynolds (2016) found high use of pronouns in the signed narratives of heritage ASL signers.
"The Lollipop"
by a Koda child from Deaf family [age 6;9]
thank you