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The Acquisition of Classifiers in Verbs of Motion and Verbs of Location in Brazilian Sign Language

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This dissertation explores the relationship between the language model to which children are exposed and their resulting language acquisition. Bickerton (1981) and others claim that children can become proficient in a language even whether a particular threshold of proficiency in the input is required for complete acquisition in the child. The acquisition of Brazilian Sign Language (LSB) is an ideal testing ground to assess the limits of Bickerton's claim. Most deaf children in Brazil are born to hearing parents and learn LSB at schools from teachers who are not proficient signers. This dissertation explores the effect of the variation of proficiency of LSB input on the acquisition of one linguistic structure, in 61 children ages 4;6 to 11;10. Two other variables are examined as controls: length of exposure to LSB and chronological age.

The structure under study is the classifier. In signed languages, classifiers are used with verbs to indicate properties of the Theme including visual and geometric characteristics, abstract semantic category, and instrumental function. This study assesses the effect of the earlier mentioned variables on the age of onset of production of classifier handshapes, the relative difficulty of production of different handshapes, and errors produced indicating the sequence of classifier acquisition.

Four hypotheses were tested and confirmed in this study: The first hypothesis stated that quality of exposure is a significant factor in determining output. The results showed that the children of deaf parents, who are exposed to a natural signed language in the normal process, benefit from this input in the acquisition process. The second hypothesis stated that the quantity of exposure has a significant effect in determining output, but it cannot fully compensate for quality of exposure. The results have shown that the deaf children of hearing parents who have longer exposure to a signed language performed better than the other children who have less exposure time; however, their mean proportion of correctness does not equal their peers who have deaf parents. The third hypothesis stated that age has a significant effect in the

production of output. The results confirmed this hypothesis showing that younger deaf children, both of deaf or hearing parents, performed more poorly than older children, as a consequence of their developmental process. The fourth and last hypothesis stated that the children with high quality and/or quantity of exposure would produce output within the linguistic system, whereas children with low quality/quantity of input would produce output based on processes outside the linguistic system. Both the children of deaf parents and the children of hearing parents who have more time of exposure produced more classifier handshapes in both their correct and inaccurate attempts. When the children who have less time of exposure exhausted their linguistic inventory, they resorted to gestures such as mimicry and pointing to represent what they intended to describe.

Results show that even children with highly impoverished input attain some proficiency and provide partial evidence for Bickerton's hypothesis. Children selected similar handshapes to represent objects, regardless of a plethora of choices based on object form and regardless of degree of fluency in the input. Deaf children also consistently categorized the objects differently, using handshape, whereas hearing children organized these objects using other properties. The quality of input also creates differences; for example, children exposed to more proficient input were more consistent in demonstrating handshape orientation in space.

Although exposure to nonfluent speakers is not a sufficient condition for internalizing the parameters of language resulting in fluency, and increasing exposure to skilled language models *helps* improve language skills, children with impoverished input show consistent patterns in their acquisition providing evidence for some innate cognitive process underlying language learning.

REFERENCE

Bickerton, D. (1981) *Roots of Language*, Karoma Publishers, Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan.

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