

Expression of reference with constructed action in British Sign Language narratives

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Narratives in sign languages, such as British Sign Language (BSL), make frequent use of a) a strategy known as constructed action (a.k.a. role shift), which involves use of the signer's head, face and/or body to describe a referent's actions, thoughts or feelings, from the perspective of that referent, and b) entity classifier constructions which describe the motion and location of referents within the signing space, from the perspective of an outside observer. Fluent signers are able to seamlessly switch between roles/perspectives of different referents, while still maintaining referential and discourse cohesion. Acquisition of these skills in native signers begins at about 3 years of age but progresses slowly; even by age 12, deaf children struggle with various discourse and pragmatic functions of these devices (Slobin et al., 2003).

The use of these strategies in signed language narratives, particularly those produced by signers with varying levels of fluency and with varying ages of acquisition, is not well understood. The current study examines how reference is established and maintained with constructed action in BSL narratives produced by severely/profoundly deaf adults (native, early and late learners, N=18 total) and deaf children (native, early and minimal BSL signers, N=12 total), with varying degrees of BSL experience. The children were aged between 5;1 and 7;5. Brief narratives from each child and adult participant were elicited using a short clip from a Pink Panther cartoon. Signed productions were coded for use of constructed action and corresponding subject expression or omission, as well as use of lexical predicates and entity classifier constructions.

Preliminary results indicate that, overall, contiguous subject expression (NP followed immediately by constructed action) was preferred for all adult groups in both introduction and reintroduction of a referent. Subject omission was preferred for all adult groups in maintenance. In the child data, as with the adults, contiguous subject expression was preferred in introduction, and subject omission preferred in maintenance. However, the children patterned differently from the adults with reintroduction of reference before constructed action, where subject omission was preferred. These patterns do not seem to show effects due to age of acquisition of BSL, but may instead reflect still immature narrative skills in the deaf children.

Results also show that a sequence of noun phrase followed by a classifier construction followed by constructed action occurred with native signers and with early signers in both adults and children (though there were very few tokens of this in the child data). This was used primarily in introduction of reference but in a few tokens for reintroduction of a referent. None of the late adult learners or the minimal BSL child signers used this type of sequence at all. Native or early acquisition of a signed language may be required for mastery of this type of sequence which requires a shift in perspective from observer to character. These findings support other work that has shown that native input of a signed language provides an advantage for native over non-native signers (cf. MacSweeney et al., 2008; Mayberry & Eichen, 1991; Newport, 1990).