The challenges of research and assessment in sign language acquisition

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Abstract

The study and assessment of the acquisition of a sign language is an essential part of understanding communication in deaf children and in adults learning a sign language as a second language. However, this poses even more challenges than studying and assessing the acquisition of a spoken language. This is clear from the fact that there are relatively few instruments available for different sign languages (Haug 2008, 2013). This presentation will focus on these challenges and discuss the solutions that are being worked on in several countries.

Assessment of the acquisition of any language depends on there being enough known about that language and the acquisition process. How do researchers cope with this problem? The development of assessment instruments is hampered by the availability of only small samples and again the heterogeneity of the populations of deaf adults and children (Baker et al. 2008). Can this handicap be overcome? Assessment of language development often makes use of milestones. What do we know about milestones in sign language acquisition? Are there clear features that indicate a language problem? Deaf children most often grow up as bilingual bimodals (Emmorey et al. 2005). What should this imply for research and assessment? Using instruments to measure language and communicative ability with children with multiple handicaps is always difficult, but how do researchers tackle this when sign languages or signing is involved?

Assessment depends on a good overall picture of communicative and language ability. What kind of instruments are the best way to obtain the fullest possible picture of language ability? Are measures of spontaneous language use better than tests?

In the training of interpreters or teachers it is also important to measure signing ability. How can this be done in the most effective way? What can the Common European Framework of Reference add to this debate (Leeson & Byrne-Dunn, 2009)?

In this lecture an attempt will be made to review common practice and present some solutions to these issues.

References

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