

Acquisition of verb agreement in Hong Kong Sign Language (HKSL)

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Abstract

Verb agreement is one of the widely-studied topics in sign language acquisition research. Similar to the hearing children, deaf children acquiring different signed languages produce agreement markings (as a kind of verbal inflections) at around age 2. Deaf children, like hearing children, also produce omission errors in sign language acquisition (Meier, 1982; Morgan, Barriere & Woll, 2006; Quadros & Lillo-Martin, 2007; among others). The early emergence of verbal inflections seems to be true regardless of which modality a language adopts.

By contrast, agreement markings in Hong Kong Sign Language (HKSL) do not appear until 3;4 in the longitudinal data of a severely deaf child CC borne to deaf parents in Hong Kong (cf. Lam, 2009). The occurrence of marked agreement verbs is also small in number, contrasting what has been reported in the acquisition of agreement markings in both spoken and signed languages. This calls for a question of why agreement markings appear later in HKSL than in other languages. In this paper, I propose that ambiguous input is the cause of such late acquisition of verb agreement in HKSL. The ambiguous input can be in the form of (i) ambiguous forms that may denote location marking or verb agreement and (ii) omission of agreement markings in child-directed signing. The results show that the majority of verbs (85.53%) look ambiguous to CC because they can be marked for spatial locations or verb agreement. The fact that adult agreement verbs are bare even in obligatory context provides additional ambiguous input data. I therefore propose that late emergence of agreement markings in HKSL is due to the presence of ambiguous input data.

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