**Acquisition of Perspective and Role Shift in Deaf Children: Evidence from British Sign Language**

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**Background**  
Sign languages such as British Sign Language (BSL) make regular use of a strategy known as role shift (aka referential shift, constructed action, constructed dialogue), which involves enactment - use of the signer's head, face, hands, and/or body to describe a referent's actions, thoughts or feelings. Role shift is a way for a signer to take on the perspective of a referent, e.g. a character within a narrative. Fluent signers are able to seamlessly switch between different roles/perspectives (including that of the signer himself, or an additional role of narrator), while still maintaining referential & discourse cohesion. Figure 1 shows two examples of role shift. Generally signers establish a referent nominally then shift into the role of that referent. Discourse markers such as lexical signs THEN, KNOW and deictic points (functioning as determiners, pronouns, or adverbials) also are used to aid in discourse cohesion throughout narratives in which role shift is used.

**Methods (continued)**  
The table below shows the alias name for each child participant, their ages in years/months, and their preferred language as reported in parental questionnaires.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>DD</th>
<th>DH-bi</th>
<th>DD-TC/Oral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alias</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Prof lang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>5;1</td>
<td>BSL</td>
<td>Hunter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>7;0</td>
<td>BSL</td>
<td>Connor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gromit</td>
<td>7;0</td>
<td>BSL</td>
<td>Kyle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penny</td>
<td>6;6</td>
<td>BSL</td>
<td>Isabel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oliver</td>
<td>5;1</td>
<td>BSL</td>
<td>Sally</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Results**  
All but 2 of the children (Isabel and Millie) used some form of enactment in their narratives. Note that 2 other children (Oliver and Hunter) only produced one of the two narratives.

**Discussion**  
These findings suggest an effect of sign language experience, consistent with other studies identifying age of acquisition effects in linguistic abilities of native vs. non-native signers (e.g. Newport 1990). Additionally we suggest that late acquisition of Theory of Mind in non-signing deaf children (Woolfe, Want & Siegal 2002; Morgan & Kegl 2006) may be related to late role shift acquisition, given the pragmatic difficulties of shifting perspective (Courtin 2000).

**Acknowledgments**  
We thank Kate Brownley for coding much of the data discussed here. Figures 1-3 are from Wall, B., Sutton-Spence, R., & Waters, R. (2004). *B.B* data set for British Sign Language (BSL). London: City University.  
http://www.lcu.ac.uk/sign-lang/echo

**References**  


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**Figure 1:** Two examples of role shift: a) depicts a bear which is about to attack a person, and b) depicts the person who is about to be attacked pretending to be dead.

**Figure 2:** Role shift as person being attacked, with entity classifier depicting approach of a bear.

**Figure 3:** Role shift as bear looking down, with lexical sign LOOK.

**Figure 4:** Stills from the two stimulus clips.

**Figure 5a:** Tokens of enactment across all children, both narratives.  
**Figure 5b:** Example enactment token (Gromit, see Fig. 4a).

**Figure 6:** Use of lexical discourse markers (e.g. THEN, KNOW, deictic points).

**Figure 7:** Percentage of enactment tokens (from Fig. 5a) which were accompanied by BSL lexical sign(s) or entity classifier(s) (or equivalent).

**Figure 8a:** Lexical establishment of reference (visually) before first enactment for each referent.  
Note: Two of the DD-TC/Oral children, Maya and Andre, gave their narratives in spoken English and established initial reference for all characters verbally. Maya additionally used some BSL lexical signs as well. Andre did not.

**Figure 8b:** Example of establishment of reference at first mention.  
MAN (with deictic point as discourse marker), followed by enactment of man starting fire (Rachel, see Fig. 4c).

**Figure 8:** Percentage of enactment tokens which were accompanied by BSL lexical sign(s) or entity classifier(s) (or equivalent).