Acquisition of Perspective in Deaf Children: Evidence from the Production of Classifier Constructions and Constructed Action in British Sign Language

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Background

Notions in sign languages such as British Sign Language (BSL) make use of two main types of perspective: character perspective where events are relayed from the perspective of a referent in the story, and observer perspective where events are relayed from the perspective of a narrator observing the scene from the outside, or the signer him/herself. Character perspective largely involves use of constructed action (CA), which involves use of the signer’s hand, face and/or body to describe a referent’s actions, thoughts or feelings, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Character perspective via CA: a) depicts a bear about to attack a person, and b) depicts the person who is about to be attacked pretending to be dead.

Observer perspective is marked primarily by the use of entity classifier constructions (CL), to describe the motion and location of referents within the signing space, as shown in Figure 2. It is also possible to combine perspectives such that entity classifiers and constructed action are used at the same time (CL+CA), as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 2: Observer perspective via CL

Figure 3: Character and observer perspectives combined via CL+CA depicting bear wandering off

Research questions

Fluent signers are able to switch clearly and easily between perspectives. However, even by ages 9-10, deaf children struggle with various discourse and pragmatic functions of CA and CL (Ralli, 2000; Stolin et al. 2003).

- How do deaf children’s production of CA and CL compare to deaf adults?
- Given that most deaf individuals are raised to hearing non-signing families, are there differences between native and non-native signers in use of CA and CL?

Methods

Participants consisted of 15 severely/profoundly deaf children aged between 5;1 and 7;5, and 18 parents (or proxy caregivers) of the children. The child participants were divided into three groups: Deaf from deaf families (DHF), Deaf from hearing families who have acquired BSL natively since birth (DHF-bi), and Deaf from hearing families who have acquired BSL natively after birth (DHF-T-C). We measured use of CA and CL in the signing productions of these children, as well as whether or not the children used both of these perspective types in the same signing production.

Results

Figure 4a: Average number of constructed action (CA) tokens, without classifier constructions represented all or part of an entity in order to describe location and/or motion of that entity). Figure 4b: Average number of entity classifier constructions (CL) without constructed action (or any form of enactment), including which body part(s) were representing each role. Signed productions were also coded for constructed action (or any form of enactment), including which role(s) the child was taking on and which body part(s) were representing each role. Signed productions were also coded for observer perspective via entity classifier constructions (or any construction where the hand represented all or part of an entity in order to describe location and/or motion of that entity).

Discussion

The higher frequency of CA as compared to CL or CL+CA in all groups is consistent with the notion of embodiment within cognitive linguistics (MacWhinney 1999) – specifically that some aspects of language are truly and fully embodied. The higher frequency of observer perspective via CL in native signing children compared to non-native signing children is consistent with Werner & Kaplan’s (1963) notion of “distanting” in child development where children’s gestures begin as bodily functional actions and then later take on more symbolic functions (cf. also Piaget 1934). Thus for all children we can think of character perspective (CA/enactment) as primary with observer perspective (CL/symbol formation) as a later development.

The fact that the native signing children used far more observer perspective (CL) and somewhat more simultaneous perspective (CL+CA) than the non-native signing children suggests that these perspectives may be more linguistically complex, may require more of a cognitive load than character perspective (CA) alone, and/or that native input of a signed language provides an advantage for native over non-native signers (Mayberry & Eichen 1991).

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References


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