

Sign Language Acquisition by Deaf and Hearing Children

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Overview of This Book

- This text presents information about the process of sign language acquisition. It covers a variety of contexts in which sign language acquisition takes place, including
 - first-language (L1) acquisition of sign language (SL) by Deaf children
 - bilingual acquisition of SL and spoken/oral language (OL) by Deaf and hearing children
 - special contexts of language for Deaf people: delayed or absent **input**, **atypical signers**
 - second-language (L2) acquisition of SL by hearing adults.

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Overview of This Book

- Particular importance is given to the role of SL as L1 for Deaf children, as it provides a foundation on which knowledge about the world and an L2 can be built.
- Our focus is on typical SL development, but we also consider
 - parallels between SL and OL acquisition
 - ways in which the **modality** or context of acquisition may affect the course and outcome of language development.

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Overview of Chapter 1

- Universal and specific properties of L1 acquisition (section 1.1)
 - aspects of acquisition that are the same for sign language (SL) and oral language (OL)
 - the effect of modality on acquisition
- Contexts for SL acquisition (section 1.2)
- Research questions addressed by SL acquisition studies (section 1.3)

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1.1 Universal and Specific Properties of Language Acquisition

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Guiding Questions for Research on the Universal Aspects of Language

- What aspects of language development are universal and observed in all languages?
 - What parallels exist between SL acquisition and OL acquisition?
- What aspects of language development vary by language?
 - Specifically, what effect does modality have on language acquisition?

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Universal Properties of Language

- Users of a language follow tacit rules, even in casual, informal contexts.
- Language is creative: users can produce or understand sentences they have never encountered before.
- Languages are products of human cognitive mechanisms operating in different social contexts.

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Universal Properties of Language

- All languages have multiple levels of grammatical structure.
 - lexicon
 - phonology
 - morphology
 - syntax
 - semantics
 - discourse

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Language in Social Contexts

- Language is acquired and used in interactions with others.
- Language use varies according to factors such as register, purpose, and status of interlocutors.
- Interlocutors need to share the same linguistic system.

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Universal Properties of Language Acquisition

- Children acquire language in steps that reflect their growing understanding of the language used around them.
 - 0 to 12 months: **segmentation of the input**, **babbling**, first words
 - 12 to 18 months: lexicon, phonology
 - 18 to 36 months: lexicon, **morphosyntax**
 - 36 months and beyond: advanced syntax, discourse

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Universal Properties of Language Acquisition

- SL acquisition follows many of the same stages found in spoken languages.
 - Many studies highlight parallel processes in sign and spoken language acquisition.
 - This research supports the view that sign languages are full languages and are on a par with spoken languages.

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Universal Properties of Language Acquisition

- Petitto (2000) makes a strong claim that SL and OL are acquired exactly the same way.
 - *Deaf children acquiring signed languages from birth and hearing children acquiring spoken languages from birth achieve all linguistic milestones on an identical time course.* (p. 96)
- The extent to which this view is accurate is currently under debate.

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Notable Modality Effects

- Specific aspects of SL modality that could potentially affect acquisition include the following:
 - simultaneity
 - **iconicity**
 - grammatical use of space
 - requirement for visual accessibility

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Modality Effects in Acquisition

- In what ways could aspects of the SL modality affect acquisition?
 - Simultaneity: may affect aspects of phonological development
 - Iconicity: may affect lexical development, development of highly iconic structures
 - Use of space: may affect morphosyntactic development
 - Visual accessibility: important for [joint attention](#)

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1.2 Various Contexts for Sign Language Acquisition

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Acquisition Contexts for SL

- Children acquiring SL as their L1 fall into various categories.
 - Deaf children with deaf parents (DCDP)
 - Deaf children with hearing parents (DCHP)
 - Hearing children with deaf parents (HCDP)

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Other Acquisition Contexts

- Late SL acquisition
 - Deaf children with late exposure to SL
- SL acquisition as L2
 - Hearing people learning SL in a second modality (M2): M2-L2
 - Deaf people learning a second SL in the same modality (M1): M1-L2
- Signing bilinguals
 - SL plus printed or spoken form of OL

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1.3 Research Questions Addressed by Sign Language Acquisition Studies

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Using Acquisition to Find the Right Grammatical Model

- Competing **grammatical** models make different predictions about how children will develop linguistically.
- SL acquisition data can be used to test competing models.

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Using SL Grammatical Models to Guide Acquisition Work

- In turn, grammatical models for SL direct researchers to look for new patterns of acquisition, sometimes leading to helpful re-analyses of old data.

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Using SL Acquisition Data to Refine General Theories of Language Acquisition

- Alternative theories of how language develops should be tested and refined using real-time acquisition data from both sign languages and spoken languages.

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Unique Insights on the Nature of Language

- SL acquisition research brings new insights to the study of language.
- Recent study findings on [homesigners](#), [late signers](#), and new sign languages offer unique information about variation across languages, the resilient properties of language, and language emergence.

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