

Acquisition of location classifier constructions in Israeli Sign Language

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*We note with sorrow the recent, untimely death of Irit Meir, our coauthor, colleague and dear friend.

Introduction

Classifiers are observed in almost all sign-languages (Emmorey, 2003) and occur early on in acquisition (Supalla, 1982).

The current study reports on preliminary acquisition data of location classifier constructions in Israeli Sign Language (ISL).

Method

Participants: 11 native ISL signers aged 3;7-6;8 participated in the study. All children were bimodal-bilinguals: they use ISL at home with their parents and Hebrew in school (ISL or signed Hebrew in simultaneous communication).

Materials: Six items representing location classifier constructions of spatial relations (**on, in, aside-to, behind**) between two stative objects were tests. The objects were: *a boy, a dog, a tree, a car, a rock and a cup*, one object functioning as a *figure*, and the other as *ground*. These spatial relations are acquired in preschool age (Zimmerman, Steiner & Pond, 2002).

Task:

The child sat behind the screen opposite the researcher. The child was shown six pictures with two objects. S/he had to arrange the objects as depicted in the picture, and explain to the researcher how the two objects are positioned. The researcher had to arrange the objects according to the child's signed description.



The task included production and comprehension components. Here we report on the former. The data from 3 adults were used as a baseline.

The data were analyzed according to: handshape, location, and orientation of *ground* object (CL1), *figure* object (CL2) and the order of CL1 and CL2.

Results

- With age, production was more adult-like (Figure 1).
- With age *Ground-Figure* was more adult-like (Figure 2).
- Whereas CL1 (average signing of handshape, location, and orientation) showed development with age, CL2 showed more variability (Figure 2).

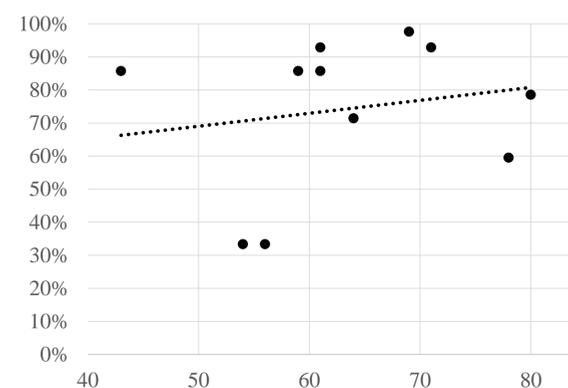


Figure 1. Sum correct production per age (months)

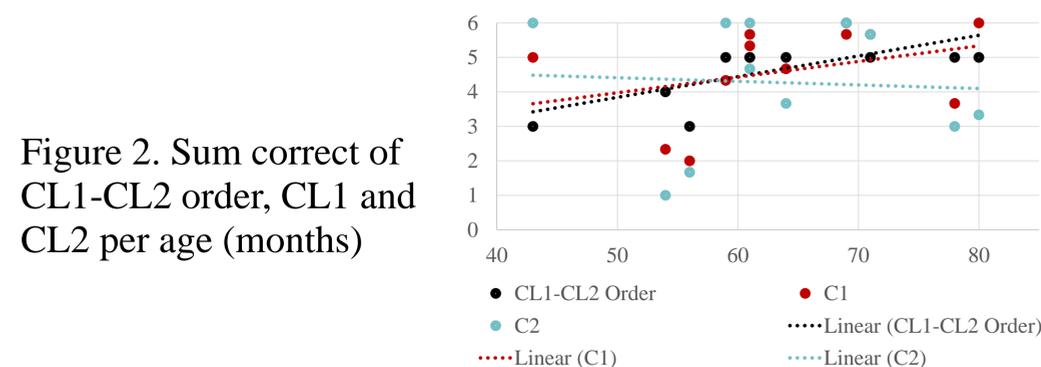


Figure 2. Sum correct of CL1-CL2 order, CL1 and CL2 per age (months)

Type of errors:

- Lexical signs, and signed Hebrew for the spatial word (e.g., DOG ON CAR).
- Crossing over arm (e.g., The signer crossed over arm when indicating the location of the boy by the tree).
- Incorrect handshape signing.

Conclusions

- Native ISL preschoolers use location classifier constructions.
- With age, their signing is more adult-like.
- Errors represent the linguistic complexity of classifiers and the influence of spoken Hebrew.

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