

## Bimodal Bilingual Development of Discourse Referencing of Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing Children

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This paper investigates the bimodal and bilingual development of discourse referencing in the Cantonese and Hong Kong Sign Language (HKSL) narratives of a group of Deaf/hard-of-hearing d/hh) children who study in a sign-bilingual (i.e. sign and spoken language) co-enrolment (i.e. D/hh and hearing students) programme entitled The Jockey Club Sign Bilingualism and Co-enrolment in Deaf Education Programme. In this program, Hong Kong Sign Language and Cantonese are two major teaching languages.

Discourse referencing refers to the means by which referents are introduced, maintained, and reintroduced in a discourse. Developmental patterns of discourse referencing in narratives provide a good window to children's acquisition of nominal forms and the process through which children gradually master the pragmatic knowledge of using appropriate forms to meet the communication needs of the listeners (Wong & Johnston 2004). For hearing children, complete mastery of discourse referencing in spoken languages is attained after the age of ten (Hickmann 2003). Prelingually deaf children very often show significant delays in the development of spoken language relative to hearing age-mates due to limited auditory input. Acquiring NP structures and discourse referencing skills in Cantonese apparently represents an even bigger challenge to d/hh children in Hong Kong as they are also exposed to written Mandarin in school, which differs significantly from Cantonese in terms of the role of bare nouns and classifiers in encoding (in)definiteness. Like other sign languages, HKSL relies heavily on space in reference tracking. Relevant spatial referencing devices include spatial indexing of referents, verb agreements, classifier predicates and role shift (cf. Morgan 2002, 2005; Morgan & Woll 2003). How do d/hh children gradually master these spatial devices? What strategies would d/hh children use before they learn to use space? What happens when d/hh children develop discourse referencing skills in a spoken language and a sign language at the same time? Can they distinguish the two language systems? Would there be any interlinguistic transfers? If yes, what are the transfer patterns? This research project aims at answering these questions by looking into the spoken

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Cantonese and HKSL narratives of 15 d/hh children studying in the co-enrolment programme.

Our data suggest that d/hh children initially use a high percentage of bare nouns for referencing purposes in both languages. They use more spatial devices such as pointing signs and verb agreement in signing narratives as their signing proficiency improves, resulting in a gradual drop of bare nouns. Such developmental patterns reflect that the d/hh children are approximating adult HKSL grammar over time. In contrast, in their Cantonese narrative productions, bare nouns predominate across all four spoken language proficiency levels. This naturally begs the question, 'Is the high % of bare nouns in the Cantonese data a transfer effect, given that bare nouns can occur in both definite and indefinite contexts in HKSL?'. Since no clear-cut correlation can be found in the production of bare nouns in the spoken and signed narratives across the d/hh children, we would like to argue that the predominance of bare nouns in the Cantonese productions cannot be fully attributed to transfer from HKSL. Other factors such as possible influence from written Mandarin, general developmental issues, and delayed acquisition due to deprived auditory input will be discussed.

## References

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