

Development of discourse referencing in Hong Kong Sign Language narratives by Deaf/hard-of-hearing children (English)

This paper investigates the development of discourse referencing in signing narratives of a group of Deaf/hard-and-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). It is well-known that space plays a crucial role in reference tracking in sign languages. This begs the question of whether space poses an additional hurdle to D/hh children's acquisition of discourse referencing, and what referencing strategies they adopt when their ability to use space still falls short of the adult targets.

This paper addresses these issues by probing into the HKSL narratives of 16 D/hh children (with 1-3 years of sign language exposure in a formal classroom setting who participated in a story-retelling task adapted from Hickman's (2003) study. Following Morgan's suggestion (Morgan 2002, 2005; Morgan & Woll 2003) that nominal expressions, verb agreement, role shift/constructed actions and entity classifiers all perform referencing functions in BSL, we look at these aspects in the D/hh children's narratives and compare them with the adult baseline data. Our findings basically concur with those of Morgan's. From an early age onwards, D/hh children use bare nouns to refer to the animate entities in a narrative most of the time, particularly among those with the shortest duration of sign language exposure. Use of null forms is observed, and in inappropriate contexts this gives rise to ambiguity in the interpretation of the intended referents. Role shift and agreement verbs with not-always-consistent spatial inflections can be found in D/hh children with the longest duration of sign language exposure. The use of classifier predicates over an extended discourse and spatial indexing such as pronominals or demonstratives for referent-tracking purpose remain rare. This contrasts with the narratives of native

signing adults, in which discourse referencing heavily relies on spatial anchoring of the referents. Among these 16 D/hh children, 5 participated in the same elicitation experiment for three more consecutive years. Such longitudinal data show similar developmental patterns. Our findings point to the hypothesis that while D/hh children gradually develop their ability to make clear reference to characters in signing narratives as required by the discourse functions, namely, introduction, maintenance and reintroduction, it takes a much longer time for them to acquire adult-like strategies due to the cognitive load of manipulating the 3-dimensional space.

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