

# Acquisition of Verb Agreement in Hong Kong Sign Language by Late Learners in Jockey Club Sign Bilingualism and Co-enrolment in Deaf Education Programme

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## Background

- Deaf children of hearing parents, who do not receive fully accessible language input from birth, are natural test cases of Critical Period Hypothesis (Lenneberg 1967).
- Berk 2003, 2004: Two deaf children who receive ASL input after the age of 6 show that delayed sign language input affects the development of verb agreement.

## Research goal

- To explore the impact of delayed sign language input on the acquisition of Hong Kong Sign Language (HKSL) verb agreement.

## Methods

- Participants:
  - 11 severely to profoundly deaf children of hearing parents
  - Initial exposure of HKSL: age 3;11-6;8
- Method:
  - A story retelling task (part of the Hong Kong Sign Language Elicitation Tool)



GIVE<sub>3i</sub>



2mGIVE<sub>10</sub>

No.	Target GIVE-containing utterances	S	O
1	THINK GIVE <sub>3</sub> DANNY THINK gesture [= good] CL:CARRY_A_BAG GO HOME. '(I) thought I would give (a sweet) to Danny, yes, I bought the bag of candy back home.'	1 <sup>st</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>
2	IX-1p CL:TAKE_THE_SWEETS_FROM_THE_BOX TWO SWEETS TWO CL:TAKE_THE_SWEETS_FROM_THE_BOX 10GIVE <sub>3i</sub> DANNY. 'I took out two sweets and gave them to Danny.'	1 <sup>st</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>
3	Assume the role of Danny----- IX-obj ONE_LEFT IX_obj THINK GIVE <sub>3</sub> LISA gesture [= good]. 'There is one sweet left, I thought I could give it to Lisa.'	1 <sup>st</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>
4	IX-1p SEE <sub>3i</sub> DANNY 3iGIVE <sub>3i</sub> LISA. 'I saw Danny gave (a sweet) to Lisa.'	3 <sup>rd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>
5	IX-2p 2mGIVE <sub>3i</sub> . 'You give (the sweet) to (Lisa).'	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>
6	Assume the role of Lisa----- IX-3p LISA FORGET_IT TOLERATE, 3iGIVE <sub>3i</sub> . 'Lisa thought "Ok, forget it, I just bear this." (Lisa) gave (the sweet) to (Danny).'	3 <sup>rd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>
7	WHAT_TO_DO FORGET_IT 2mGIVE <sub>10</sub> gesture [= give me]. 'What could I do? Alright, just give (it to me).'	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>

- Data was collected at two time points with a 2-year interval.

## Results

### 1. Overall results

- The deaf children produced a total of 56 and 74 tokens of GIVE in the first and second time points respectively.

### 2. Errors

- Time point 1: 17.86%
- Time point 2: 14.86%

#### 2.1 Use of location marking

- (1) take+CL\_sass:box ONE tear+CL\_hand:hold\_sweet THROW gesture [=eat] gesture [= look at the sweet]  
take+CL\_hand:hold\_sweet+CL\_sass:box ONE\_LEFT GIVE<sub>3i</sub> LISA gesture [= that's a good idea] take+CL\_sass:box  
aGIVE<sub>3i</sub> GIVE<sub>3i</sub>  
(C1-5-TKH, 12;3, 5;6 years of HKSL exposure)  
'(I) took one sweet from the box and put it in my mouth, (I) ate the sweet. (I) saw that one sweet was left and I thought it was a good idea to give it to Lisa, (I) took a sweet from the box and gave it to Lisa.'



Classifier for the box of sweets (locus-a)

a-GIVE-3i

The student is directing the verb to a side to denote third person value of the object LISA (locus-3i).

#### 2.2 Use of sequential production

- (2) IX\_1 IX-mouth EAT\_FINISH ONE SWEETS ONE gesture [= give me] 3i-give+CL\_body:hand\_a aGIVE<sub>10</sub>  
(C2-5-WCY, 8;5, 3;8 years of HKSL exposure)  
'I had one sweet already; (she) gave me one sweet.'

Third person subject (locus-3i)



Classifier for the hand (locus-a)

Classifier for the hand

3i-give+CL\_body:hand-a

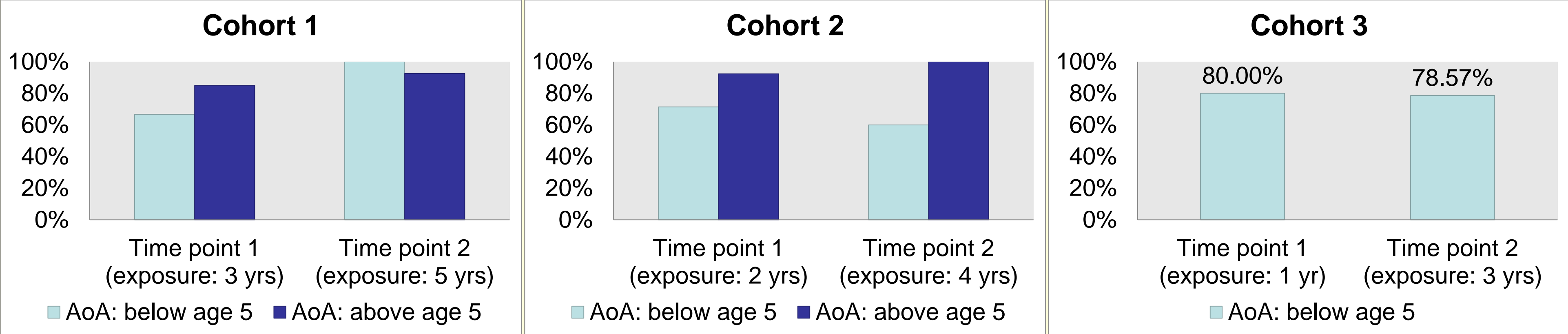
Classifier for the hand (locus-a)



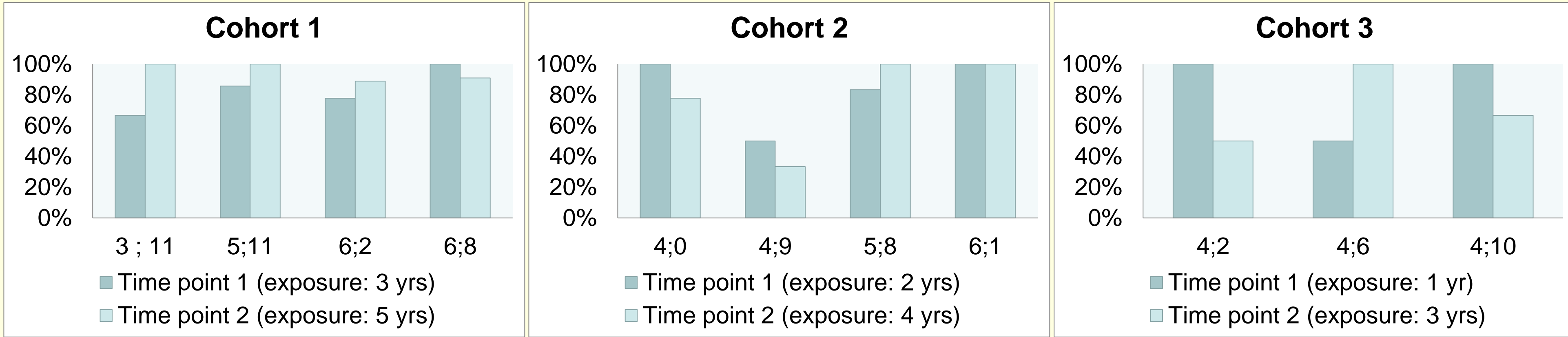
First person object (locus-1o)

a-GIVE-1o

### 3. Age of acquisition effect?



- The AoA effect only seems to hold with Cohort 1 deaf children at time point 2.
- No clear AoA effect is observed with Cohorts 2 and 3.



- Cohort 1: AoA effect seems to hold when the age of initial exposure is below 5.
- Cohort 2: Children began to learn HKSL after age 5 performed better than children who began to learn HKSL below age 5.
- Cohort 3: All children are exposed to HKSL below age 5. The performance is diverse.

## Concluding Remarks

- The deaf children of hearing parents go through similar developmental stages as native learners acquiring sign language as the first language.
- The age of acquisition effect only seems to hold with cohort 1 students, but not with other groups of students with shorter period of exposure.

## Acknowledgements

- We would like to thank the hearing and Deaf researchers who developed the Hong Kong Elicitation Tool.
- Thanks also go to the children for participating this research project.

