Multilingual Aspects of Signed Language Communication and Disorder

COMMUNICATION DISORDERS ACROSS LANGUAGES

Series Editors: Dr Nicole Müller and Dr Martin Ball, *University of Louisiana at Lafayette, USA*

While the majority of work in communication disorders has focused on English, there has been a growing trend in recent years for the publication of information on languages other than English. However, much of this is scattered through a large number of journals in the field of speech pathology/communication disorders, and therefore not always readily available to the practitioner, researcher and student. It is the aim of this series to bring together into book form surveys of existing studies on specific languages, together with new materials for the language(s) in question. We also have launched a series of companion volumes dedicated to issues related to the cross-linguistic study of communication disorders. The series does not include English (as so much work is readily available), but covers a wide number of other languages (usually separately, though sometimes two or more similar languages may be grouped together where warranted by the amount of published work currently available). We have been able to publish volumes on Finnish, Spanish, Chinese and Turkish, and books on multilingual aspects of stuttering, aphasia and speech disorders, with several others in preparation.

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Edited by
David Quinto-Pozos

MULTILINGUAL MATTERS
Bristol • Buffalo • Toronto

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Multilingual Aspects of Signed Language Communication and Disorder/Edited by David Quinto-Pozos.
Communication Disorders across Languages: 11
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Sign language. 2. Multilingual communication. 3. Communicative disorders. I. Quinto-Pozos, David, editor of compilation. II. Series: Communication disorders across languages.
P117.M85 2014
419–dc23 2013034247

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN-13: 978-1-78309-130-0 (hbk)
ISBN-13: 978-1-78309-129-4 (pbk)

Multilingual Matters
UK: St Nicholas House, 31–34 High Street, Bristol BS1 2AW, UK.
USA: UTP, 2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, NY 14150, USA.
Canada: UTP, 5201 Dufferin Street, North York, Ontario M3H 5T8, Canada.

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Typeset by Techset Composition India (P) Ltd., Bangalore and Chennai, India.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Antony Rowe.

Contents

Contributors

Joanna Atkinson is a Clinical Research Fellow at Deafness Cognition and Language Research Centre, UCL, London. She is also a certified clinical psychologist with additional qualifications in applied clinical neuropsychology. Her research includes: the impact of neurological conditions such as stroke, dementia and autism on BSL; schizophrenia, psychosis and voice-hallucinations in deaf people; and the clinical assessment of acquired and developmental neurological conditions in Deaf BSL users. Jo works as an Honorary Clinical Psychologist providing cognitive assessment of Deaf BSL users at the Cognitive Disorders Clinic, National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery in London.

Anne Baker is professor emeritus of linguistics and sign linguistics at the University of Amsterdam. She does research on variation in language acquisition, developmental and acquired language disorders, and explores the relationship between cognition and language. She has published widely on the acquisition of sign languages, in particular on Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT).

Deborah Chen Pichler is Associate Professor in Linguistics at Gallaudet University. Since 2002, she has taught courses on first and second language acquisition (of both signed and spoken languages) and generative syntax. Her research interests focus on L1 acquisition of ASL and English by Deaf children of Deaf families (both with and without cochlear implants) and hearing children of Deaf families (bimodal bilingual children or kodas), as well as L2 acquisition of ASL by hearing adults. She also has a strong interest in the use of technology in teaching, particularly in Deaf classrooms.

Marielle Fieret has a Bachelor's degree in sign linguistics (University of Amsterdam). Her Bachelor's thesis was about the influence of dementia on the language of deaf sign language users. Currently she is following a Masters program in applied linguistics with the specialization of Dutch as a second language.

Tobias Haug studied sign language linguistics at Hamburg University and Deaf education at Boston University, where he received his masters in 1998. In 2009 he earned his PhD in sign languages with the specialization on sign language assessment at Hamburg University. From 2000 to 2004 he worked as a sign language interpreter and researcher. Since 2004 he has been the programme director and lecturer in the sign language interpreter programme in Zurich, Switzerland. One of his main research interests is sign language development and assessment for different target groups (L1 and L2 learner) in connection with computer-assisted language testing. Since 2002 he has hosted a website on sign language tests.

Peter C. Hauser, PhD, is a deaf clinical neuropsychologist and an associate professor in the Department of American Sign Language and Interpreter Education at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, NY, USA. He is on the Executive Team of the National Science Foundation Science of Learning Center on Visual Language and Visual Learning. His laboratory develops sign language assessment instruments and consults with other countries on how to develop similar tests.

Ros Herman is a speech and language therapist and Reader in Communication and Deafness at City University, London. Her research interests include language acquisition in British Sign Language (BSL) and communication interventions and literacy development. Ros works closely with colleagues at the Deafness, Cognition and Language Research Centre, where she is a Research Associate. Ros runs a sign language assessment outreach service at City University's on-site clinic, offering clinical assessments of communication in BSL and reading to deaf children and adults.

Jimmy Lee, MS, CCC-SLP, first worked with kodas as a graduate student in the Gallaudet University Hearing and Speech Center (GUHSC). He returned to working with kodas as a clinical educator in the GUHSC. For many years, Mr Lee conducted and refined speech and language evaluations and the interpretation of the findings/results. He also conducted language stimulation groups working with kodas and their families to promote lifelong, fully bilingual, bimodal communicators. During these years, he was a staunch advocate for kodas and a cultural broker between public schools and Deaf families. He has published and presented many of his observations.

Susan C. Levine received her BA from Simmons College in Mathematics, Psychology, and Education and her PhD from MIT in Psychology. Upon graduating she joined the faculty at the University of Chicago, where she is the Rebecca Anne Boylan Professor in Education and Society in the Department of Psychology. She is also a member of the Department of Comparative Human Development and the Committee on Education at

Chicago. Her research focuses on the role of input variations on young children's language, numerical and spatial development. As part of a collaborative longitudinal language project, she is studying the relation of early language and gestural input in the home to the development of children's language, literacy, and mathematical skills, both in typically developing children and children with pre- or perinatal brain injury. Her studies range from basic laboratory investigations of children's cognitive development and learning to naturalistic studies of how children learn at home and at school. Her work also examines socio-emotional factors that may impact children's learning, including the anxieties and stereotypes of teachers, parents, and children themselves.

Diane Lillo-Martin is Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor in Linguistics and Director of the Cognitive Science Program at the University of Connecticut. She is also a senior research scientist at Haskins Laboratories. She has been conducting research on the structure and acquisition of sign languages since her graduate training at the University of California, San Diego and the Salk Institute. Her current research focus is on the development of bimodal bilingualism and ASL acquisition by Deaf children; she is also working on developing sign language corpora, and she continues to have an interest in theoretical studies of ASL morphology and syntax.

Wolfgang Mann received his PhD in Special Education from the University of California, Berkeley. Since then, he has worked as researcher/part-time lecturer in the Division of Language and Communication Science at City University London and at the Deafness Cognition and Language Research Centre (DCAL) at University College London (UCL). Dr Mann's areas of interest include language development and language difficulties in deaf children as well as (sign) language assessment. He is currently a Marie Curie Research Fellow, studying deaf children's response to dynamic assessment procedures within a language-learning context, as part of a collaborative project with the University of Texas at Austin.

Chloë R. Marshall, PhD, is Reader in Psychology and Human Development at the Institute of Education, University of London, where she is Programme Leader for the Masters in Special and Inclusive Education. Her research investigates typical and atypical language acquisition in hearing and deaf children, with a focus on specific language impairment and dyslexia.

Kathryn Mason is a psychology graduate with a masters degree in psychological research methods. Before starting her PhD at UCL, Kathryn worked with deaf children in schools in the UK and Hong Kong, and as a researcher at the Deafness Cognition and Language Research Centre and City University, London. Her research interests include language impairment in

deaf signing children, sign language acquisition and the development of executive function in deaf children.

Richard P. Meier received his doctorate in linguistics from the University of California San Diego in 1982. After postdoctoral work in psychology at the University of Illinois and at Stanford, he joined the Department of Linguistics of the University of Texas at Austin in 1986; he has been department chair since 2006. Beginning with his dissertation work, he has been particularly interested in the questions of whether and how language modality (that is, the transmission channel in which a language is produced and perceived) interacts with the structure and acquisition of language.

Gary Morgan is Professor of Psychology at City University, London and deputy director of the Deafness, Cognition and Language Centre at UCL. He has worked on the acquisition of BSL, cognitive development of deaf children, and gesture and language disorder. Together with Bencie Woll he is the editor of *Directions in Sign Language Acquisition* (2002, John Benjamins), and with Eleni Orfanidou and Bencie Woll he is an editor of *Methods in Sign Language Research* (forthcoming 2014, Wiley-Blackwell).

David Quinto-Pozos, PhD, is a signed language linguist and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Texas, Austin, TX. He is an affiliated researcher at the National Science Foundation Science of Learning Center on Visual Language and Visual Learning. In addition to his research on developmental signed language disorders, David's current work includes projects on the interaction of language and gesture and trilingual (Spanish–English–ASL) interpreting. David has also written about signed language contact and language teaching. He is also a certified ASL–English interpreter and President of *Mano a Mano*, a national organization for trilingual (Spanish–English–ASL) interpreters.

Kate Rowley graduated in Deaf studies before completing an MA in linguistics. She worked as a researcher before embarking on her PhD at University College London. She has carried out research into: language impairments in sign language; the development of sign language assessments; semantic and phonological organisation in BSL; and changing languages and identities in the British Deaf community.

Aaron Shield earned his doctorate in linguistics at the University of Texas at Austin in 2010. His dissertation examining the effects of autism spectrum disorders on the acquisition of American Sign Language (ASL) by deaf children won the Outstanding Dissertation Award at the University of Texas at Austin. After a postdoctoral research fellowship in psychology at the University of Chicago, in 2011 he became a postdoctoral research fellow in

psychology at Boston University, where he is further investigating the effects of autism on ASL acquisition in deaf children. His research seeks to probe the relationship between language and non-linguistic social cognition, especially theory of mind, perspective taking and the development of the concepts of self and other.

Jenny L. Singleton, PhD, is an educational psychologist and a Full Professor at the School of Psychology at Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, GA, USA. She is a collaborating scientist with the National Science Foundation Science of Learning Center on Visual Language and Visual Learning. Her laboratory focuses on how deaf infants and toddlers learn from their environments, particularly in activities that involve joint attention. She has published scholarly work on sign-based specific language impairment and sign language assessment.

Patricia Spanjer studied sign linguistics at the University of Amsterdam. She completed a Bachelor's thesis on the topic of language symptoms of dementia in an older signing population. Prior to that she created her own company and has advised the public sector for more than 10 years.

Martha E. Tyrone is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders at Long Island University – Brooklyn, and a senior research scientist at Haskins Laboratories. She has studied the phonetics of typical and atypical signing in ASL and BSL, with an emphasis on neuromotor disorders in adults. Her current research focuses on quantitative measures of sign language production, with the ultimate goal of developing measures of accent, cross-linguistic variation and language deficits in the sign modality.

Beppie van den Bogaerde is Professor of NGT [Sign Language of the Netherlands] at the University of Amsterdam, and Professor of Deaf Studies at the Utrecht University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands. Her main focus on research is on L1 and L2 acquisition of NGT, on issues in the Deaf community, and on interpreting studies. She is also involved in the UUAS Bachelor and Master program for teacher/interpreter NGT, and curriculum development. Recently she has been working on developing language descriptors for different levels (CEFR) in L2 acquisition for signed languages, in an international context.

Geoff Whitebread began his study of sign language stuttering for his Honors thesis at Gallaudet University. He graduated with a Bachelor's degree in psychology and a Master's in linguistics. Geoff is continuing his graduate studies at The George Washington University in political science and teaches in the Honors Program at Gallaudet University.

Bencie Woll is Professor of Sign Language and Deaf Studies at University College London and Director of the Deafness Cognition and Language Research Centre. Her research interests embrace a wide range of topics related to sign language, including the linguistics of BSL and other sign languages; the history and sociolinguistics of BSL and the Deaf community; the development of spoken and signed language in young children; sign language and the brain; and developmental and acquired sign language impairments.

Foreword

While writing a book on children with specific language impairment (SLI), I once stated that the prevalence of this disorder should be approximately 7% in children who are acquiring a sign language. This estimate was based on the fact that the prevalence figure for hearing children with SLI – the only children with SLI studied at that point – was 7.4%. Although the sentence flowed easily from my fingertips to the keyboard at the time, I realized only later that I was making an important assumption in offering the 7% estimate. My statement assumed that the cause of SLI is unrelated to auditory perception, even though some accounts prominent in the literature at the time argued to the contrary. I still believe that deficits in auditory perception are not a principal cause of SLI. But what if such deficits account for some smaller proportion of cases of SLI? The implications are twofold: first, of course, it might mean that the prevalence of this disorder is not 7% in children acquiring sign language, as auditory perception is unlikely to serve as a factor in these cases. Less obviously, it suggests that, in the sign language learning population, too, there may be modality-specific sources of language impairment, just as auditory perception problems might cause SLI in a select number of hearing children. These are important questions, and the current volume provides a wonderful start in trying to answer them.

Of course, the issue is not limited to SLI. It applies to other communication disorders as well. For each of several communication disorders, there may be common neurological, motor and linguistic processes that are responsible for the deficit in speaking and signing individuals alike. However, there may well be processes more affected by limitations in one modality than the other. It will be important for researchers to discover the proper mix, for this will not only benefit individuals having difficulty with sign language but will also provide scientists with a deeper understanding of the communication disorders themselves. The diversity of communication disorders covered in this volume will give readers an excellent appreciation for how these factors may interact.

My original comment about the prevalence of SLI in the signing population also glossed over the logistical challenges in pursuing such a question.

In my previous writings on the obstacles in diagnosing SLI in children acquiring very diverse spoken languages, I have pointed out how the culture surrounding the child must be the first consideration. Diagnosis depends not only on a child's relative standing among peers but also on whether members of the child's society view the symptoms as problematic. Competent individuals and proper tools for assessing the condition are also critical. A strong sense of what the typical child can say or understand at each age is also of the utmost importance. It is probably clear that these observations can apply equally well if we replace 'diagnosing SLI in children acquiring diverse spoken languages' with 'diagnosing a communication disorder in sign language users'. The issues are similar, including the need to develop norms on the language milestones of children who are developing sign language in typical fashion.

I am pleased to see that all of these considerations – and many more – are discussed in the present volume. The authors provide many insights into the complexities of communication disorders in the signing population, and their contributions reveal a level of sophistication that is quite remarkable for such a young field of study. This is a ground-breaking volume and I have learned much from reading it.

Laurence B. Leonard

Preface

This book is intended to serve as a resource for language and development researchers, students who are learning about language and development, and school professionals (e.g. speech and language therapists, school psychologists, teachers) who are interested in a signed language user's linguistic and cognitive abilities. Research on users of signed language is not new, yet there exist many questions about atypicality with respect to production and comprehension of signed language – for children and adults. This collection brings together work on various aspects of signed language, and it considers various profiles of a signed language user: deaf and/or hard of hearing, hearing, childhood, adolescent, adult, geriatric, cognitively intact and impaired, and motorically typical and impaired. The work that is represented in this book spans multiple research labs (including various countries and signed languages), and it approaches language and communication from a variety of theoretical frameworks. Yet, the various works are united by a central theme of aiming to understand the language and development of signed language users throughout their lifespan, whereby gaining a wealth of knowledge about signed language structure, processing, acquisition, and use by bilinguals.

The book is divided into several parts, which contain writings by established researchers in their fields and junior investigators who are breaking ground in areas of inquiry that have received little attention over the years. Part 1 covers developmental language disorders and Part 2 addresses fluency disorders, neurogenics and acquired communication disorders. Both of these first parts focus on deaf and hard of hearing users of signed language. As a complement to the first two parts of the book, Part 3 presents the case of hearing children who are raised in signing households. Together, the three parts cover much ground with respect to common populations of signed language users throughout the world.

The book is both multilingual from the points of view of covering different signed languages and also recognizing that signed language users are typically bilingual. Data from different signed languages (American Sign Language, British Sign Language, Sign Language of the Netherlands) are