S2

Deaf vs Hearing L2 Signers: Comparison of M1L2 and M2L2 Narratives

Deborah CHEN PICHLER and Shane BLAU
(Gallaudet University, USA)

ABSTRACT

Introduction: This study compares Deaf and hearing signers who are learning American Sign Language (ASL) as a second language (L2). The Deaf participants are "first modality-L2 (M1L2) signers" because their L2 is in the same modality as their L1, Japanese Sign Language (JSL). M1L2 signers are increasingly common in the international Deaf community, but their process of L2 acquisition has remained virtually undocumented. In contrast, the hearing participants are "second modality-L2 (M2L2) signers" because this L2 marks their first experience with the signed modality. For both groups, our preliminary goal is to document clausal structure and the viewpoint used in short elicited narratives. This direct comparison of M1- and M2L2 signers offers a novel opportunity to study the role of modality on L2 learning.

Methodology: All participants watched short videos showing one or two characters performing simple transitive or ditransitive actions, then described each event in short ASL narratives. For this initial analysis, we coded narratives elicited from four native Deaf JSL signers with varying proficiency in ASL, and four M2L2 signers who had just completed an intensive 2-week ASL immersion course. For comparison, we also coded JSL narratives from the Deaf Japanese participants, and gestured narratives elicited from the M2L2 participants before and after they had begun their first ASL class. utterances signed with eye gaze to the camera were coded as observer viewpoint, whereas utterances signed with averted eye gaze were coded as character viewpoint (McNeill 1992, Cormier et al. 2012).

Results: Although the stimuli were designed to elicit single clause descriptions (e.g. *The girl pushes the boy; The boy steals the iPad*), Deaf participants favored multi-clause structures in their ASL narratives, establishing background information before describing the main event. Hearing participants also employed a multi-clausal approach in their gestured narratives, but once they had completed their 2-week ASL course, they switched to single-clause narratives, mostly in Subject-Verb-Object order but with occasional other orders as well. With respect to viewpoint, all four Deaf participants were strikingly similar in their preference for rapid alternations of observer viewpoint and very restrained character viewpoint, a pattern that also
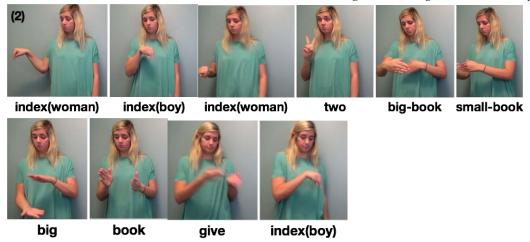
characterized their JSL narratives. In contrast, hearing signers' ASL narratives relied on observer viewpoint (1), although their gestured narratives at this time continued to make heavy use of character viewpoint (2). These results suggest that character viewpoint is novice as a pre-existing gestural strategy of M2L2 signers, but that two weeks of intensive ASL coursework was insufficient for them to transfer that strategy into ASL. Future sign language curricula can examine ways to exploit hearing learners' gestural intuitions to help them acquire more natural alternation of character and observer viewpoint in signed narratives.

Examples:

(**1**) M2L2 ASL narrative after 2-week ASL course: *The man helps the boy.*

BOY   MAN   HELP

M2L2 Gesture after 2-week ASL course: *The woman gives the big book to the boy.*

index(woman)   index(boy)   index(woman)   two   big-book   small-book

big   book   give   index(boy)

Selected References:

Cormier et al. 2012. Lexicalisation and De-lexicalisation Processes in Sign Languages: Comparing Depicting Constructions and Viewpoint Gestures. *Language & Communication* 32: 329–348.