Mastering Depicting Constructions in the L1 Acquisition of Austrian Sign Language:

ISSUES OF LEXICALIZATION

ABSTRACT

- Depicting handshapes (DH) or sign language classifiers represent certain groups of referents in the morphological subsystem of depicting constructions (DCs).
- The degree of lexicalization varies for different DHs.
- Six native-signing Deaf children were tested on their production of DHs.
- DH type (object vs. handling) influences DH selection: With increasing age, children are more likely to select more lexicalized object DHs (but not more lexicalized handling DHs).

RESULTS

OBJECT HANDSHAPES

- Object DH productions are more likely to correspond to the lexicalized target DHs.
- With increasing age, children are more likely to choose lexicalized object DHs.
- Object DHs were more likely to be avoided, resulting in responses only containing citation forms.

- Acquisition according to the subjects' age

HANDLING HANDSHAPES

- Handling DHs are more likely to be replaced with less lexicalized forms.
- Selection of more lexicalized DHs does not correlate with age.

Potential explanations

- Higher degree of iconicity of handling DHs -> greater influence of gesture on acquisition?
- Higher tolerance towards less lexicalized handling DHs in OGS (or all sign languages)?
- Handling DHs cannot be avoided in the same way as object DHs.

METHODOLOGY

- Subjects: Six native-signing Deaf children learning Austrian Sign Language (ÖGS) aged 3;9 to 13;0.
- Each child was tested on their DH productions in two tasks:
  - In Task 01, children were asked to describe the differences between two picture cards at a time to elicit non-agentive sentences containing object depicting handshapes.
  - In Task 02, children were asked to describe short video clips to elicit agentive utterances using handling depicting handshapes.
- The target handshapes were documented (Hilzensauer, 2015) standard DHs in ÖGS varied for morphosyntactical (Schick, 1990) and phonological (Boyes Braem, 1990) complexity.
- Each child was seen individually and recorded, yielding ~90 minutes of total material. The tapes were annotated using ELAN and tokens were counted and rated according to type.

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