

Research Update: Bimodal Bilinguals as Heritage Signers

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One of the unique things about Codas is that we are bimodal bilingual, that is, we have some proficiency in two languages that are in different modalities. Researchers have long been intrigued by us because in many ways we are like typical bilinguals and in some ways we are unique. We can language mix in extraordinary ways that are just not possible for your run-of-the-mill bilingual. Data about Codas has challenged some of the assumptions linguists have made about the architecture of the language faculty and researchers interest in us has continued to grow.

The latest trend puts forth the idea that Codas are heritage signers. This means we are akin to heritage speakers of Chinese, Russian and Spanish that come from immigrant households in that we all have exposure to our native minority language in the home while being exposed to the dominant language both in school and out in the wider community. Framing Codas as heritage signers in my view is empowering. Being a heritage signer means you are a native signer but recognizes since your sign language is in constant competition with the dominant spoken language and often not supported outside the home, it is highly vulnerable. This is why Codas display a wide range of sign language proficiency. The variability could be the result of not completely acquiring the language (incomplete or divergent acquisition) or the loss of fluency over time (attrition). Examining the various factors that impact Coda sign

language proficiency can help inform sign language teaching, interpreting training programs, and may be a useful introspective tool for identity development.

For my doctoral dissertation, I was interested in learning more about how bimodal bilinguals from signing families acquire the early word orders in American Sign Language (ASL). The word orders I investigated were as follows: subject-verb or SV (e.g., HAT FALL), verb-object or VO (e.g., WANT STICKER), verb-subject or VS (e.g., EAT IX), object-verb or OV (e.g., DRUM BRING). We know from previous research that Deaf children from Deaf families begin using all four of these word orders at the age of 23 months. This is pretty remarkable because the child at a very young age has to quickly figure out when to use each word order type. In my study I wanted to see how closely the bimodal bilinguals mirrored Deaf children. I transcribed and annotated 34 hours of video recording that tracked 4 children's ASL development from age 20 to 40 months. In summary, I found that bimodal bilinguals pattern similarly in some ways to the Deaf children and dissimilar in other ways. They are similar in that they produce all four word order types and make very few errors. The children produced SV and VO word orders, which are also permissible in English, at 23 months just like Deaf signers. However, they are different in that they did not start producing VS and OV word orders reliably until nearly a year later (protracted development). These are the word

orders that only occur in ASL and not in English. In addition, they did produce nearly as many instances of these two word orders which suggests divergent development. This is not necessary a good or bad thing, it is just different. The type of verbs used with OV word order in ASL are morphologically complex and appear to be vulnerable to the lack of robust exposure. This aligns with previous research that states heritage speakers often have difficulty acquiring complex morphosyntax. My study demonstrates that like heritage speakers, certain grammatical domains are vulnerable for heritage signers as well.

The work on Codas as heritage signers has and will continue to gain momentum. In 2013, the American Sign Language Teachers Association (ASLTA) made mention of heritage signers in their standard practice paper and recently mentioned heritage signers in greater detail in their standard practice paper for ASL teaching in the K-12 setting. In 2014, Wanette Reynolds and I helped spread the notion that Codas as heritage signers at the CODAZona conference by presenting a workshop on the topic. In 2015, Amy Williamson's thesis reports out on a large-scale survey of Deaf-parented interpreters detailing the linguistic environments of their formative years and various routes of induction into the interpretation profession. Su Kyong Isakson's thesis (2016) urges instructors to differentiate instruction for Codas in ASL classes by relying on a language tool she adapted that helps carefully profile each heritage signer's unique background. Wanette Reynolds is completing her doctoral study (2016) that examines how elementary-aged Coda children develop the skill of keeping track of characters in ASL narratives, highlighting the linguistic parallels between heritage speakers and heritage signers.

I look forward to seeing more Codas get involved in research and continue to explore this fascinating and empowering topic.

CODA Scholarships

Since 1990, CODA International has been awarding scholarships to help Codas further their education. Beginning the university experience can be a difficult transition for any student. For Codas, this transition may include leaving their deaf family and the deaf community for the first time. In addition, unlike most of their classmates, many Codas will have to act on their own behalf to get financial assistance from their college or university. Leaving home to enter a culturally different world and taking on greater

financial responsibility can combine to challenge a new student's academic success.

The CODA scholarship helps ease the transition to college in two important ways. First, of course, is by providing \$3,000 in financial assistance towards university-related expenses. But the second is by showing Codas that there is a community that stands behind them and their pursuit of their college dreams. Scholarship winners are additionally offered up to \$500 towards their travel and registration at the next CODA conference.

If you have any questions about the scholarship contact Dr. Jennie Pyers. We count on you to help spread the word about the CODA scholarship.

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