

The Emergence of Grammar: Systematic Structure in a New Language



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Language Acquisition and Language Learning
September 20, 2011

Article Summary



- ❧ Research focuses on Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language (ABSL)
- ❧ Used among deaf and hearing members of a small community in southern Israel
- ❧ Highly conventionalized structure developed quickly, within one generation

ABSL Community



- ❧ Founded about 200 years ago
- ❧ Negev region of southern Israel
- ❧ Isolated Bedouin community
- ❧ Highly stable closed community
- ❧ Frequent intermarriages
- ❧ About 3,500 residents
- ❧ About 150 people with congenital deafness
- ❧ Almost everyone uses ABSL
 - ❧ ABSL recognized as community's second language
 - ❧ Signing not restricted to deaf people

Why examine ABSL?



"Authentic" development

- ❧ Created spontaneously during the last 70 years
- ❧ Little, if any, influence from neighboring languages
 - ❧ Distinct from Israeli Sign Language and Jordanian Sign Language
 - ❧ Distinct from Hebrew, spoken Arabic dialect, and Classical Arabic
- ❧ Development is characteristic of the use, acquisition and transmission of language

...unlike these examples

- ❧ Contact or trade languages like pidgins and creoles
- ❧ School sign language developed by Nicaraguan children
- ❧ Sign language used on Martha's Vineyard (now extinct)

Methodology



- ❧ Identified three generations of signers
 - ❧ First generation of deafness (fifth since community's founding) - fewer than 10 deaf individuals, all deceased
 - ❧ Second generation of deafness - adults
 - ❧ Third generation of deafness - young children to teens
- ❧ Selected members from the second generation
 - ❧ 8 signers - 7 deaf, 1 hearing
 - ❧ All in their 30s and 40s, except one in her 20s
- ❧ Interviews conducted in signers' homes
- ❧ One signer addressed another for communicative context

Methodology



- ❧ Videotaped signers completing two tasks
 - ❧ Spontaneous narratives given in response to a request to recount a personal experience
 - ❧ Descriptions of single events portrayed by actors in a series of short video clips
- ❧ Responses translated by a hearing signer from the same generation
- ❧ Translation transcribed with glosses given for each individually identifiable sign
 - ❧ Signs labeled as parts of speech or based on semantic or prosodic criteria

Analyzing ABSL



- ❧ Sandler et al. state that most ABSL signed utterances were easy to analyze syntactically, but some required paying attention to prosodic criteria and comparing them with a simultaneous audio translation provided by a hearing trilingual consultant (ABSL, Hebrew, English).

Prosodic Criteria



- ❧ Major prosodic breaks (intonational phrases) marked by a combination of manual and nonmanual phonetic cues
- ❧ Three distinct manual cues
 - ❧ Holding the hands in place
 - ❧ Pause and relaxation of the hands
 - ❧ Repeating the final sign in the phrase
- ❧ Nonmanual cues
 - ❧ A clear change in head or body position
 - ❧ A slight change in facial expression (sign language intonation)

Intonation in ABSL



- ❧ Sample signed statement:
 - ❧ MONEY COLLECT BUILD WALLS DOORS
- ❧ Translation was easy for the first sentence:
 - ❧ "I saved money."
 - ❧ O-V sentence structure (MONEY COLLECT)
- ❧ Tendency would be to translate second sentence as:
 - ❧ "I built walls and doors."
 - ❧ V-O sentence structure (BUILD WALLS DOORS)
- ❧ However, ABSL prosodics indicate that is not the correct understanding of that statement.

Intonation in ABSL



- ❧ Based on the prosodic features mentioned earlier, the correct translation is:
 - ❧ "I saved some money. I started to build a house. Walls, doors."
 - ❧ V. N-N structure (BUILD WALLS DOORS)
- ❧ Even though this example was difficult to translate without understanding ABSL's prosodic features, Sandler et al. state "the vast majority of sentences in our data were unambiguous, and straightforwardly (S)O-V" (p. 2663)

Results



- ❧ Tallied all sentences in their database consisting of more than one sign
- ❧ Excluded incomplete sentences
- ❧ Of 158 clauses, 136 are predicate final
- ❧ Subject preceded object (all 32 examples)
- ❧ Subject never follows verb
- ❧ Subject or object can be unexpressed
- ❧ Modifiers follow the head
- ❧ Negation follows head
- ❧ Numerals follow nouns
- ❧ Conclusion: ABSL uses S-O-V word order

Excerpt 1



- ❧ “Of greater significance to us than any particular word order is the discovery that, very early in the life history of a language, a conventionalized pattern emerges for relating actions and events to the entities that perform and are affected by them, a pattern rooted in the basic syntactic notions of subject, object, and verb or predicate” (p. 2664).

Question 1



- What can we learn about language acquisition and learning by studying new languages like ABSL? What conclusions, beyond the importance of grammar, can we draw from this study?

Excerpt 2



- “Many of the signers in this community are hearing, a highly unusual linguistic situation, but one that is predicted to arise as a consequence of recessive deafness in a closed community” (p. 2662).

Question 2



- What impact does intonation and other prosodic features have on language? In the case of ABSL, why did the researchers have to rely on more than word order to fully understand signers' utterances?

Excerpt 3



- "Once languages have had time to accrue such mechanisms as verb agreement, marking properties of subject or object, or case marking on noun to indicate their relation to the verb, the roles of participants can be made clear, even without consistent word order. In the absence of such mechanisms, word order is the only way to disambiguate a message linguistically" (p. 2665).

Question 3



As ABSL evolves over time, do you think signers will develop inflections like the ones suggested by the previous excerpt, or are inflectional endings more practical in spoken languages? What role will word order play in ABSL's development?