

Age-related changes in children’s real-time American Sign Language comprehension

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Abstract

Children learning sign language must use vision to process linguistic information *and* to attend to objects in the world, creating a challenge for young learners’ real-time language comprehension. Extensive research with children learning spoken language shows that the ability to interpret speech in real time with high efficiency is critical to language development (Fernald & Marchman, 2012). But we know relatively little about how visual language learners develop this critical language skill. This cross-sectional study develops the first measures of real-time American Sign Language (ASL) comprehension abilities, and explores links between these skills and children’s vocabulary development. 29 native ASL-learners (16-53 mos) and 19 fluent adult signers completed a novel measures of ASL processing efficiency. Children’s comprehension skills improved with age, and adult signers were more efficient than children. Importantly, children’s processing skills strongly correlated with their vocabulary size, providing evidence that the ability to efficiently establish reference in real-time is linked to meaningful linguistic outcomes. These novel findings show that visual language learners, like children learning spoken languages, make impressive gains in the efficiency of language interpretation over the first few years of life as they progress towards adult-like levels of fluency.

Introduction

Understanding language rapidly and accurately is central to our ability to function effectively in daily life. One fundamental component of language understanding is establishing reference: linking abstract symbols (i.e. words and signs) to concrete objects in the world.¹ While children learning spoken languages can simultaneously attend to objects and listen to their caregivers, children learning American Sign Language (ASL) must rely on vision to both look at objects and to process linguistic information. This dual functionality requires children to disengage from the source of language to seek out the named object, increasing the likelihood of a mapping error or potentially creating a situation where subsequent linguistic information is missed. Thus it is critical to understand how young ASL users learn to efficiently establish reference during real-time language understanding. In the current work, we aim to develop the first measures of young ASL-learners' real-time language comprehension skills, and we explore links between these skills and children's age and vocabulary development.

Spoken language processing

To follow a typical conversation, skilled listeners must rapidly apprehend meaning in combinations of words from moment to moment as the speech signal unfolds at rates of 10-15 phonemes/second. Extensive research with adults using online measures² shows that skilled listeners can identify spoken words before their acoustic offset, evaluating hypotheses about word identity incrementally based on what they have heard up to that moment, typically within 150 ms of word onset (Marslen-Wilson & Zwitserlood, 1989). Moreover, adults are adept in the parallel processing of multiple streams of information, rapidly integrating the acoustic speech signal as it unfolds in time with information from the visual scene to derive intended meaning (Altmann & Kamide, 1999; Dahan & Tanenhaus, 2004; Tanenhaus, Spivey-Knowlton, Eberhard, & Sedivy, 1995).

Over the past fifteen years, research with infants and young children has incorporated the same high-resolution measures of language processing (Fernald, Pinto, Swingley, Weinberg, & McRoberts, 1998; Snedeker & Trueswell, 2004), making it possible to obtain continuous measures of speed and accuracy that enable sensitive assessment of efficiency in spoken language processing even by very young children. Using these procedures, researchers have found systematic age-related changes in the speed and accuracy of responses to familiar words (Fernald et al., 1998), and that efficiency in word recognition is correlated with both individual differences in vocabulary knowledge (Fernald, Swingley, & Pinto, 2001; Zangl, Klarman, Thal, Fernald, & Bates, 2005) as well as faster rates of vocabulary growth across the second year (Fernald, Perfors, & Marchman, 2006). While studies have also found associations between faster word recognition and more advanced linguistic development in both English (Fernald et al., 2001; Zangl & Fernald, 2007) and Spanish (Hurtado, Marchman, & Fernald,

¹This problem is also known as referential uncertainty (Quine, 1960): that a speaker's utterance could refer to many possible objects in the visual scene, to parts of those objects, or even to something that is not present.

²Here online measures refer to measuring participants' eye movements during language comprehension in order to provide a rapid and detailed metric for determining the target of their visual attention.

2008; Lew-Williams & Fernald, 2007), this is the first study to adapt these online processing efficiency measures to be used with children learning ASL.

ASL processing with adults

ASL is a visual-gestural language expressed with hands, arms and face, a modality difference with potential consequences for how linguistic information is processed. In many ways, language processing appears to be parallel in spoken and manual modalities. Signers show effects of: (a) lexicality, response times to identify non-signs are slower than for actual signs (D. P. Corina & Emmorey, 1993)), (b) frequency, high frequency signs are recognized faster than low frequency signs (Carreiras, Gutiérrez-Sigut, Baquero, & Corina, 2008), and (c) phonological parameters, the sublexical units of sign – handshape, location, and movement – influence sign recognition (Carreiras et al., 2008; D. P. Corina & Emmorey, 1993; Hildebrandt & Corina, 2002). But, differences in linguistic structure and surface features of lexical forms in the spoken vs. manual modality have consequences for the efficiency with which signs are understood (Carreiras, 2010; D. P. Corina & Knapp, 2006). Using a gating procedure, Emmorey & Corina (1990) found that deaf participants identified monomorphemic signs after approximately 35% of the sign form had been seen; in contrast, in spoken English approximately 83% of a word must be heard before words are uniquely identified (Grosjean, 1980).

Another line of research has explored the consequences of delayed first language acquisition for language processing, finding consistent processing advantages for early learners. For example, Mayberry & Fischer (1989) had native and non-native signers complete a linguistic shadowing task and found that non-native signers expended more cognitive resources processing signs at the phonological level. Native signers processing advantages also show up in sentence recall tasks (Mayberry & Eichen, 1991), grammaticality judgments (Boudreault & Mayberry, 2006), and a variety of receptive and productive tasks (Newport, 1990). In addition, Emmorey & Corina (1990) found that late signers were delayed relative to native signers in isolating signs as well as in individual phonological parameters (i.e. handshape, movement, location) in lexical recognition.

More recent work using a novel adaptation of the visual world paradigm (Tanenhaus et al., 1995) has investigated questions about the on-line comprehension of sign language. By measuring adult signers' eye movements as they process ASL, Lieberman, Borovsky, Hatrak, & Mayberry (2014) found that early, but not late-learners, show evidence of real-time activation of sublexical features of sign. Also using online measures, Thompson, Vinson, Fox, & Vigliocco (2013) showed that both semantic and phonological aspects of signs affect real-time lexical processing. Thus, there is considerable evidence that signs, like spoken words, are processed incrementally by adults, and that there are substantial individual differences in adults' linguistic processing skills, but we know very little about how young ASL-learners develop these critical, real-time language processing skills.

Lexical development in ASL

Since the seminal work of Bellugi (1979) established that signed languages are natural human languages not derivative from spoken languages, researchers have explored the effects of a visual-manual communication system on lexical development. The upshot of the majority of this work is that acquisition of ASL in native, natural contexts follows a strikingly similar developmental path to children learning spoken language (Lillo-Martin, 1999; Mayberry & Squires, 2006). For example, like children learning spoken languages, young signers produce first signs are typically before the end of the first year and two-sign sentences by their 2nd birthday (Newport & Meier, 1985). Moreover, young ASL-learners show a preponderance of nouns in the early lexicon (Anderson & Reilly, 2002). However, data on the developmental trajectories of deaf children learning signed languages has been largely confined to diary studies and small-group investigations. These studies have also overwhelmingly focused on aspects of language production, for example, the development of ASL articulatory skills (Meier et al, 1998) or the appearance of specific grammatical forms (Lillo-Martin, 2000). Few studies have systematically investigated the online comprehension of signs in real time in emerging language learners.

Another line of research has investigated how deaf children develop strategies for alternating gaze between linguistic information and objects and people in the environment to achieve coordinated joint visual attention with their caregivers (Waxman & Spencer, 1997). For example, Harris & Mohay (1997) found that at 18 months, deaf children frequently shifted visual attention towards their mothers during a free play interaction, and these shifts were either spontaneous, in response to an event, or elicited by the mother. Harris et al. (1989) found that deaf children around 16 mos develop an attentional switching strategy - momentarily breaking off from an activity, looking up at the mother, then resuming the activity.

Our own work has examined how deaf children accomplish the visual demands of perceiving language and picture books in a coordinated way. By the age of two, deaf children exposed to ASL from birth showed frequent shifts in gaze during mother-child interaction, shifting between their mother and a book 15 or more times per minute in order to perceive both linguistic input and the non-linguistic context (Lieberman, Hatrak & Mayberry, in press). Thus, frequent and meaningful gaze shifts are a natural and necessary component of sign language comprehension from an early age.

Current study

This study will be the first to explore the early development of real-time processing of signs by very young children learning ASL. First, we adapt a well established paradigm for measuring spoken language processing efficiency to be used with young children learning ASL. Next, we ask whether the development of early ASL comprehension follows a similar developmental trajectory as that of spoken language. Finally, we test whether individual variation in ASL processing skills show similar concurrent relations to children's vocabulary size.

Method

Participants

16 deaf and 13 hearing children with native exposure to ASL (17 females, 12 males, Mage = 28.5 months, range = 16-53 months) and 19 fluent adults were recruited from several locations by bi-cultural/bilingual researchers fluent in ASL. All children were exposed to ASL at birth from at least one fluent ASL caregiver and currently used ASL as their primary mode of communication at home. The majority of children attended a center-based early childhood education program in which ASL was the primary mode of instruction. Thus, children were immersed in ASL early in life, both at home and in the daycare setting. An additional 20 participants were tested, but not included in the analyses due to fussiness ($n = 5$), being too far outside the target age range ($n = 3$), and not receiving enough ASL exposure ($n = 12$). For visualization purposes, children were divided into two groups using a median split by age: Younger (< 26.5 Months), Older (> 26.5 Months), but we conducted all analyses on individual-level data.

Measures

Parent report of vocabulary size: Parents completed a 90-item vocabulary checklist designed based on the M-CDI (CITATION HERE) to be culturally and linguistically appropriate for children learning ASL. Vocabulary size was computed as the number of reported signs produced.

ASL Processing: Efficiency in online comprehension was assessed using a version of the looking-while-listening procedure (LWL) (Fernald et al., 2006) adapted for ASL-learners, which we call the Visual Language Processing (VLP) task. Since this was the first study to measure online ASL processing efficiency in young signers, several critical modifications were made, which we describe below.

Apparatus

To facilitate recruitment³, we created a portable version of the VLP with stimuli presented on a portable 27" monitor using a Macbook Pro laptop. Video of the child's gaze was recorded using a digital camcorder set up behind the monitor. To minimize visual distractions, children sat on their caregivers' laps inside of a portable 5' by 5' tent with opaque walls.

Trial Structure

Figure 1 shows an example of the stimuli and the timeline of one trial in the VLP task. On each trial the child saw two images on the screen for two seconds before the signer appeared.

³Native ASL-learners are difficult population to recruit. Approximately 95% of deaf children are born to hearing parents with little prior exposure to a signed language [Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004].

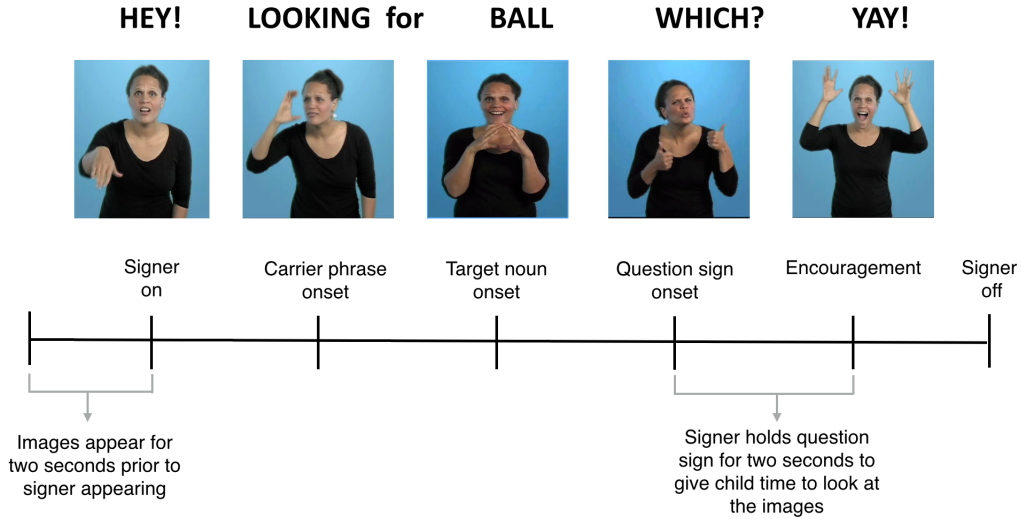


Figure 1: Timeline of a trial on the VLP task.

This gave the child time to explore both images prior to the start of the sentence. Next, children saw a still frame of the signer for one second, which gave them the opportunity to orient to the signer prior to the sentence onset. Each sentence lasted for approximately five seconds and was followed with a two second “hold” that allowed children to shift away from the signer to the images on the screen. After the hold, the signer gave neutral, positive feedback to help maintain the child’s focus throughout the task.

Linguistic and visual stimuli

The linguistic stimuli were designed to be comparable to those used in previous research and to allow for generalization beyond characteristics of a specific signer and sentence structure. To accomplish this, ASL stimuli were recorded by two different native ASL-users using two different but acceptable ASL sentence structures for asking questions⁴:

- Sentence-initial wh-phrase: “HEY! WHERE [target noun]?”
- Sentence-final wh-phrase: “HEY! [target noun] WHERE?”

Before each sentence, the signer used a prototypical hand-wave gesture commonly used in ASL discourse to initiate a linguistic utterance.

Four yoked pairs of eight target nouns (cat—bird, car—book, bear—doll, ball—shoe) were used. These nouns were selected such that they would be familiar to most children learning ASL at this age and have minimal phonological overlap. To prepare the stimuli, a female

⁴See Neidle, Kegl, Bahan, Aarons, & MacLaughlin (1997) for a detailed discussion of the acceptability of these two question structures. We analyzed responses for the two sentence frames separately and found no significant differences between the two. Thus all analyses we report collapse across the two datasets.

native ASL-user recorded several tokens of each sentence, matching them closely in prosody. These candidate stimuli were then digitized, analyzed, and edited using Final Cut Pro software. The final tokens were chosen based on naturalness and prosodic comparability. The mean duration of target nouns was TODO ms (range = TODO ms). Five filler trials were interspersed among the 32 test trials (e.g. “YOU LIKE PICTURES! MORE WANT?”). Images were digitized pictures presented in fixed pairs, matched for visual salience with 3–4 tokens of each object type. Side of target picture was counterbalanced across trials.

Coding and reliability

Children’s gaze patterns were videotaped and coded frame-by-frame, yielding a high-resolution record of eye movements aligned with target noun onset. 25% of videos were re-coded to assess coder reliability – agreement within a single frame averaged 98% on these reliability assessments.

Calculating linguistic processing efficiency

Accuracy: Correct looking is a function of the child’s tendency to shift quickly away from the central signer to the target picture in response to the target sign, and also to remain fixated on the target picture. To determine the degree to which participants fixated the appropriate picture across trials, mean proportion looking to target was calculated for each participant at each 33 ms frame from the onset of the target noun. Accuracy was defined as the mean proportion of time spent looking at the target picture out of the total time spent on either the target picture, the distracter picture, or the signer from 500 to 2000 ms from target noun onset. We selected this window after looking at the distribution of children’s first shifts with the goal of maximizing the amount of meaningful looking behavior. This window includes 90% of children’s first shifts off the center signer. Importantly, the VLP task includes a central signer, which functions as a central fixation point similar to adult psycholinguistic experiments. Thus children could produce four different types of responses on a given trial: (1) signer-to-target shift, (2) signer-to-distracter shift, (3) signer-to-away shift, (4) no-shift. All four trial types contribute to accuracy analyses.

Reaction Time: Reaction time (RT) corresponds to the latency to shift away from the signer to the target picture, measured from the onset of the target sign. Incorrect shifts were not included in the computation of mean RT. Additionally, responses prior to 500 ms from noun onset were excluded because few responses occurred before this cut point, likely because the child did not have enough time to process sufficient linguistic input and to mobilize an eye movement; responses slower than 2000 ms were excluded because these delayed looks are less likely to reflect a response to the target sign (see (Fernald et al., 2001)). In addition, 8% of trials were excluded because children never shifted off the signer. Note that RT can be calculated only on those trials on which the child is looking at the signer at the onset of the noun and shifts within the designated time window. Since children vary in the likelihood that they will shift on a given trial, mean RTs are based on different numbers of trials across participants ($M = 13.4$ trials, range = 3–25). Finally, 5 children were excluded from RT

analyses because their initial shifts were just as likely to be to the target as to the distractor. This looking behavior provides evidence that RTs for these children are not a meaningful measure of language processing.

Results

First we present an overview of performance on the VLP task, showing that children become faster and more accurate at comprehending familiar signs as they get older and progress towards adult levels of language fluency. Then we present analyses of the links between children’s real-time ASL processing skills and productive ASL vocabulary.

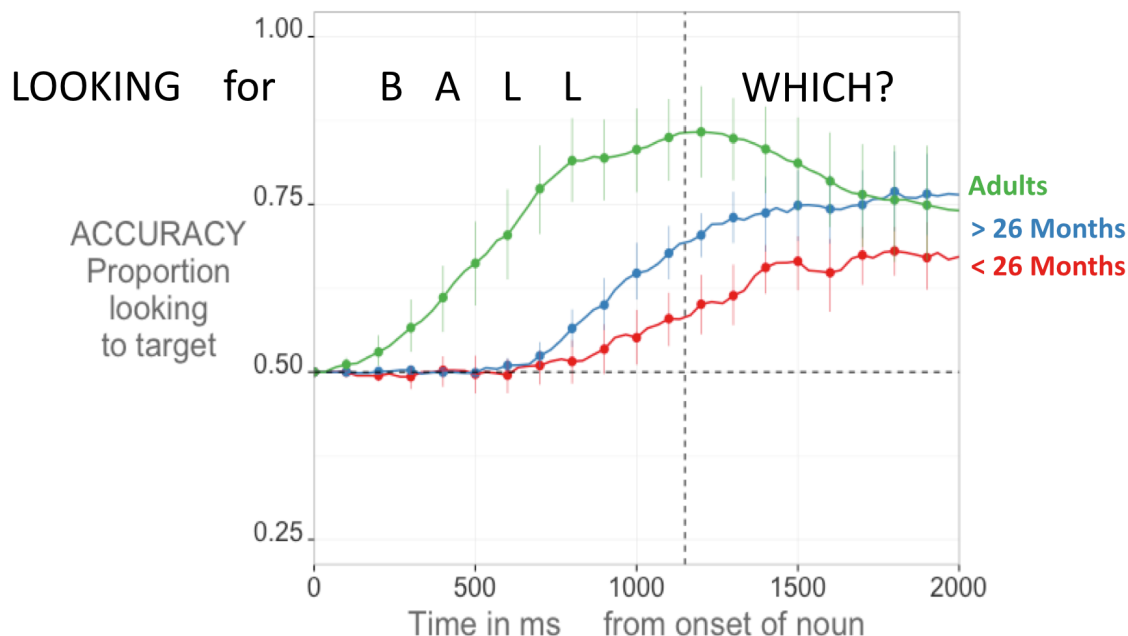


Figure 2: The timecourse of participants’ responses to the target picture in relation to the unfolding sign for younger children, older children, and adults. Curves show changes over time in the mean proportion looking to the correct picture, measured in ms from noun onset; error bars represent +/- 95% CI computed by non-parametric bootstrap. The dashed vertical line indicates mean offset of target noun (TODO ms).

ASL processing efficiency

Figure 2 provides an overview of the timecourse of correct orienting to the referent in response to the target sign. The three curves show changes in the mean proportion of trials on which participants in each age group fixated the correct referent at every 33 ms interval as the target sign unfolded. Before seeing the target sign, all participants fixated on the signer.

Interestingly, both adults and children began to increase their looking to the target picture before the offset of the target noun, providing evidence that signers were not waiting until the end of the linguistic utterance to seek out the target image. Children were slower to respond and less accurate than adults. They maintained their gaze on the center signer for approximately 700 ms and reached a lower asymptote. The youngest children took the longest to orient to the target and were less accurate than both older children and adults.

Accuracy: Mean accuracy scores, computed over the 500–2000 ms window from noun onset, were examined as a function of age. Accuracy was strongly correlated with age ($r(27) = 0.64$), indicating that older ASL-learners were more reliable than younger children in fixating the target picture.

Reaction Time: Mean reaction times were negatively correlated with age ($r(22) = -0.38$), indicating that older ASL-learning children were faster to shift to the target picture than younger ones. Mean reaction times were also negatively correlated with mean accuracy scores ($r(22) = -0.59$) such that those children who were faster to shift to the target were also more likely to stick on the target image throughout the analysis window.

Together, the Accuracy and Reaction Time analyses show that signers will reliably leave a central signer to shift to a target image in the VLP task, even before the end of the linguistic utterance. Importantly, signers varied in their response times and accuracy, and this variation was meaningfully linked to age. Thus, like children learning spoken language, ASL-learners improve their real-time language processing skills over the second and third years of life, progressing towards adult levels of language fluency.

Links between processing efficiency and ASL vocabulary

Figure 3 shows the relationships between both VLP processing measures and children’s productive ASL vocabulary. Mean accuracy was positively related to vocabulary size ($r(26) = 0.46$) such that children with higher accuracy scores also had larger productive vocabularies. Mean reaction times were negatively correlated with vocabulary ($r(21) = -0.51$) indicating that children who were faster to recognize ASL signs also had larger vocabularies.

It is important to point out that age and vocabulary were strongly intercorrelated in our sample ($r(21) = 0.72$). In a multiple regression analysis... (TODO: figure out how to talk about regression analysis)

Discussion

Processing words/signs and linking them to objects in real-time is a fundamental component of language acquisition. ASL-learners must resolve an apparent conflict between attending to the source of linguistic information and disengaging to establishing reference. With this study, we aimed to develop and validate the first measures of young ASL-learners’ real-time language comprehension skills and explore the links between these skills and both age and vocabulary. There are three main findings from this work.

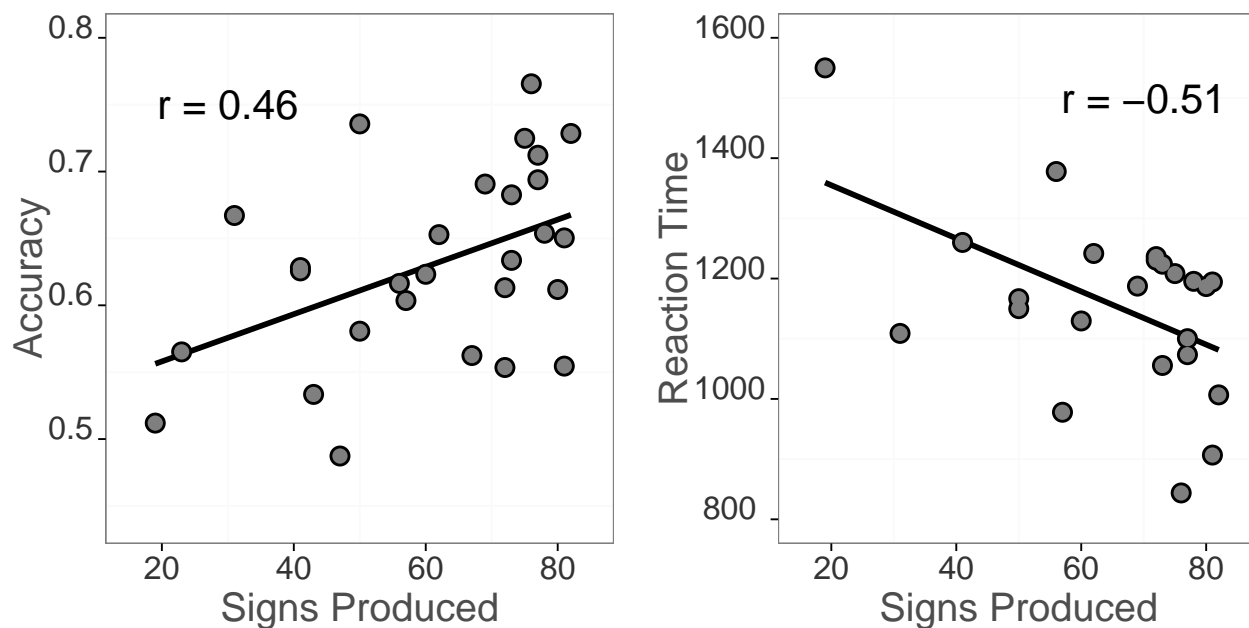


Figure 3: Relationship between VLP measures and productive ASL vocabulary. Each data point is an individual child. Panel A shows the positive relationship between accuracy and vocabulary. Panel B shows the negative relationship between RT and vocabulary

First, tracking eye movements during sentence processing is a valid way to measure young ASL learners' linguistic processing skills. Because gaze serves a variety of functions using eye movements as an index of language skill might not have been possible. For example, proficient ASL users rely on vision for: (a) processing linguistic information, (b) looking at objects, (c) regulating turn-taking during conversation (Baker & Padden, 1978), and role shifts and direct quotation during narrative production (Bahan & Supalla, 1995). Gaze also plays a syntactic role in ASL, marking pronominal reference and supplementing manual marking of verb agreement (Metzger, 2002; Neidle, MacLaughlin, Bahan & Lee, 2000; Thompson, Emmorey, & Kluender, 2006). Thus it could have been the case that measuring eye movements during sentence processing would not have revealed individual or group differences in language skills.

Moreover, the VLP task also requires a gaze shift away from the source of linguistic information to an object on the screen. However, despite these modality-driven differences we found that ASL-learners exhibit remarkably similar patterns of looking behavior compared to children learning spoken language. But children in our study reliably shifted to the target image as soon as they have enough information, showing the signature of incremental processing skills thought to be so important for fluent language comprehension.

Second, like children learning spoken language (Fernald et al., 1998; Zangl & Fernald, in press; Zangl et al., 2005), ASL-learners' show age-related improvement in the efficiency with which they processed language. All of the target signs were familiar to children in this age range, yet older children more quickly and accurately identified the correct referent than younger children. Thus, like children learning English, young ASL learners showed significant developmental gains in speech processing abilities over the second and third years of life.

(Discussion about lexical access vs. learning to disengage from signer)

The third result was the discovery of a link between early ASL processing skills and children's productive ASL vocabularies. Several studies have found that English-learning two-year-olds who were lexically more advanced were also faster and more accurate in spoken word recognition, even after controlling for age (Fernald et al., 2001, 2006; Zangl et al., 2005). Here we found that ASL-learning children who knew more signs were also faster and more accurate in speech processing than those who were lexically less advanced. However, the factors of age and vocabulary size were highly intercorrelated in this sample and the majority of the associations between vocabulary and efficiency of spoken language processing were attributable to variance that was shared between these two factors. Nevertheless, these results with children learning ASL were consistent with previous studies with English- and Spanish- learning children that demonstrate relations between efficiency in online language comprehension and other concurrent measures of linguistic achievement.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the many children and parents who participated in this research, and to the staff of the California School for the Deaf in Fremont. Special thanks to Shane Blau, Kat Adams, Melanie Ashland, and the staff of the Language Learning Lab at Stanford University. This work was supported by a grant from the

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