Baby Signing as Language Socialization: The Use of Visual-Gestural Signs with Hearing Infants

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Across America, hearing parents are encouraging their hearing 1-year-olds to use visual-gestural signs, either ASL signs or invented symbolic gestures, hoping to promote earlier and clearer parent-child communication. Most baby-signing families have no exposure to a natural sign language or to the Deaf community. Spoken English remains the families' main communication mode, with parents signing occasionally as they speak and children producing single signs, words, or sign-word pairs. Once the children become proficient in speech, most families stop signing. This paper investigates the role of baby signing in hearing children's language socialization, with attention to the language ideologies that underlie the practice. Data were collected from three sources: 1) videotapes of three baby-signing 1-year-olds interacting with other family members at home, 2) interviews with the children's parents, and 3) writings on baby signing in the mass media and online. Both the existence of baby signing and the ways that it is used are consistent with the portrait of middle class American language socialization given in Ochs and Schieffelin (1984), but individual families vary in their uses of signs depending on their children's development and on their families' interactional styles.

1. Introduction

This paper deals with young hearing children, their hearing parents, and the role that visual-gestural signs, called *baby signs*, play in their language socialization. In the families I studied, the major functions of the children's signs were requests, politeness formulas, labels, and displays of knowledge. The parents had chosen to introduce signs to their hearing children in the hope of promoting earlier and clearer parent-child communication. Although all of the children sometimes produced spontaneous signs, many of their sign productions were prompted by their parents, who generally signed only when they were either teaching a sign to their children or eliciting a sign from their children. Despite the stated goal of improved communication, signing rarely increased the amount of information communicated; instead, the parents' prompting served primarily to promote socially appropriate communication.

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2. Background

The primary data for this study were gathered from three baby-signing families in Central Texas, who were videotaped during mealtimes and playtimes. The children were Rebecca,[1] videotaped at the age of 17 months, 18 1/2 months, and 21 months; Daniel, videotaped at 18 1/2 months and 20 months; and Kai, videotaped at 15 1/2 months and 16 1/2 months. Interviews with the children's parents provided further information on the children's signing and on the parents' views of the practice.

According to writings on baby signing in the popular press and on the internet (e.g., Ahuja, 1997; Glazer, 2001; www.sign2me.com), there are baby signing families across the United States and in other countries, including England, the Netherlands, Australia, and South Africa. These families generally have little or no contact with the Deaf community or prior knowledge of sign language. They either look up signs online or in an ASL dictionary or invent their own gestures. The most common pattern appears to be that parents start producing occasional signs while speaking when their children are about 10 months old, sometimes earlier. The children generally begin producing signs at 11 or 12 months, producing first the sign alone, then the sign with a simultaneous spoken word, and later the word alone. The spoken language remains the main language of the household, and no one in the family learns the grammar of ASL, instead simply producing isolated signs along with speech. By the time the children are 2 or so, their spoken language has developed to the point that they use it almost exclusively, and the signs disappear from family communication.

The decision of hearing parents to introduce signs into their family communication is often motivated by the benefits popularized in best-selling parenting books, especially *Baby Signs* (Acredolo & Goodwyn, 1996) and *Sign with your Baby* (Garcia, 1999). These proponents of baby signing claim that it allows earlier and clearer communication with infants, reduced frustration, improved spoken language development, increased parent-child bonding, and higher IQ. While the point of the current paper is not to evaluate these claims, the idea of a sign or gesture advantage, meaning that children might tend to produce their first signs or symbolic gestures somewhat earlier than their first words, has empirical support from studies of sign language acquisition (e.g., Meier and Newport, 1990; Anderson and Reilly, 2002) as well as studies of gestural development (e.g., Acredolo & Goodwyn, 1988; Goodwyn & Acredolo, 1993).

The families that I worked with all shared the goal of earlier and clearer communication with their children. Following the pattern noted above, none of them learned the grammar of ASL, but all of them thought that the signs they looked up when they saw a need for them had decreased frustration levels for both parents and children. It is certainly also possible for baby signing to add pressure to parent-child interaction, if parents see it as a means of getting ahead. I saw some evidence of this kind of attitude online, particularly from one mother who was concerned that her 8 month-old had not yet signed to her after a month of teaching: "Am I doing something wrong?" (Hall, sign2me, November 1, 1999). This attitude was not evident in the three families I observed. These three families had the same general goals of easier communication; however, the ways that they used signs varied depending on each child's development and the family's interactional style.

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

3. Baby Signing as Language Socialization

Researchers of language socialization have pointed out that linguistic interaction between parents and children varies significantly across cultures. The Anglo-American middle class developmental story presented by Ochs and Schieffelin (1984) describes the families that I worked with well. Ochs and Schieffelin argued that one of the hallmarks of this social group is a large degree of adaptation of the environment, both linguistic and non-linguistic, to the child. Baby signing is a significant adaptation of the linguistic situation. In choosing to sign with their babies, parents learn parts of a code that they think is easier for the child, changing their own communication style to foster parent-child interaction. But even though the signing does sometimes seem to cause clearer communication, in the families I worked with, signing rarely increased the amount of information transmitted. Instead, it served as a way for parents to teach their children how to use language in socially appropriate ways; in other words, for language socialization. The types of socially appropriate interaction that signs were used for included requests, politeness formulas, labels, and displays of knowledge. Request signs were promoted to replace pointing or whining as a way of asking for something. To demonstrate politeness in the act of requesting or receiving something, signs were used for *please* and *thank you.* Using signs to label objects and display knowledge gave the children practice in kinds of interaction that will be useful to them later in their childhood, especially in school. Signing thus worked to integrate the children into their society's world of communication.

3.1. Requests

One of the most common functions of signs in these families was for requests. However, it was not usually the case that the parents did not know what the children wanted before the children signed. Instead, the parents prompted many of the children's request signs after determining the children's wants from their non-verbal, non-signing behavior (e.g., pointing, whining). The following example shows Rebecca signing DRINK[2] after a prompt from her mother.

(1) (Rebecca's cup is out of her reach on the table.)

Mother:	You need help? (stirs Rebecca's food)
Rebecca:	(pointing to cup) [mm]
Mother:	Drink? Drink?
Rebecca:	DRINK
Mother:	Drink? Please?
Rebecca:	[bii]
	(shakes hands, clasps together)
Mother:	(gives the cup to Rebecca) Thank you.

Rebecca's point and vocalization served to get the message across that she wanted her cup. By encouraging her to sign in this situation, her mother was teaching her a more appropriate way to ask for what she wanted. Her mother's prompt consisted of only the spoken word, something that was quite common once the children had learned a particular sign. The parents' preference for speech thus maintained the status of signing as

[2] Signs are represented in CAPITAL LETTERS. A vertical line represents simultaneous sign and speech. A horizontal line represents reduplication of the motion of the sign over a period of time. Contextual information is in parentheses. Phonetic transcriptions are in square brackets.

transitional, associated with children's limited abilities, not with adult communication. Signs were better than nonverbal gestures or sounds, but not the ultimate goal.

In example (2), Kai's mother explained to me how happy she was when he learned to use the sign MORE:

(2) There was a while before he was really using 'more' that he would just point and just make this really annoying æ æ æ æ æ. So we spent a couple of days just telling him, y'know like, "show us with your hands, show us with your MORE hands." And once he got that down, then the æ æ thing went away. Oh, that was so nice!

While her joy at Kai's learning this sign is understandable, it is hardly about clarity of communication, but rather about encouraging less irritating communication.

Another point evident in these examples is that prompting the children to sign encourages the production of a conventional or learned form, matched with a particular communicative function. As many language acquisition researchers have pointed out, learning this form-function mapping is a central part of early language acquisition (e.g., Bates, O'Connell & Shore, 1987). This characteristic of baby signing may be behind findings of accelerated spoken language acquisition for baby signing children (Goodwyn, Acredolo & Brown, 2000).

3.2. Politeness Formulas

In the first example, Rebecca's mother prompted her to say "please." In that instance, Rebecca said the word ([bii]), but she had actually learned the sign first, before the word. The teaching of politeness formulas was very important in her family, much more so than in the other two families. Out of the 78 sign tokens that Rebecca produced on videotape, 25 were tokens of PLEASE. She learned to reply to the prompt "What do you say" with the sign PLEASE, as shown in the following example.

(3) (Rebecca, eating lunch, points from her highchair to her bowl on the kitchen counter.)

Father:	Need this? (holds his hand over the bowl)
Rebecca:	Yeah.
Father:	What do you say?
Rebecca:	PLEASE

Rebecca's mother pointed out an additional benefit of signing with regard to politeness formulas, saying that signing would allow the parents to discretely remind children to say "please" and "thank-you" when in public. And in fact, she reported that Rebecca's 5 year-old brother had adopted this use of signing with his little sister, signing PLEASE to prompt her to say the word.

In contrast to Rebecca, Daniel and Kai did not know the sign PLEASE; Daniel knew THANK-YOU, but did not use it often. The difference in the use of politeness formulas between the three families could be taken as evidence of gender differentiation on the part of the parents, with Rebecca being taught to be ladylike, while the boys were not. I do not believe that this is what was going on, however, primarily because Rebecca's two older

brothers, ages 4 and 5, were fluent users of *please*, *thank you*, and *may I be excused.* The use of signs for politeness in this family was simply an integration of signing into their already-established ways of interaction.

3.3. Labels

Another common use of signs is for labels. Heath (1983) pointed out that labeling routines are not a universal part of language socialization, and specifically that labeling pictures in books is a common routine for some groups and not for others. All of the children in this study did some labeling of objects, but only Daniel frequently used signs for this function. Example (4) shows one instance of this labeling.

(4) (Daniel points to a picture in the book.)

Daniel:	[ə]
Mother:	dog
Daniel:	DOG
Mother:	That's right! DOG. That's right, dog. (Daniel points) Can you say dog? d-og. dog. (Daniel puts the ball that he is holding down Mother's shirt) Oh, thank you. (laughs) Thank you very much. (Daniel points to a picture) There's a ball. There's a ball. (Daniel points to a picture) What's that? What is it?
Daniel:	CAT [ə]
Mother:	It's a kitty! It's a kitty! CAT

For Daniel, labeling was the most common function of signing. He was very interested in the names of objects and would often go around the room pointing at things for his mother to name. The difference between Daniel and the other two children in this use of signs is probably related to his spoken language development. His vocabulary of spoken words was smaller than the other children's, and, unlike the other two, he almost never spoke while signing, as can be seen in the numbers below.

(5) Sign tokens accompanied by simultaneous speech:
- Daniel: 1 of 72 = less than 2%
- Kai: 4 of 22 = 18%
- Rebecca: 40 of 78 = 51%

(6) Sign types for which the child produced the corresponding word, either simultaneously with the sign or independently:
- Daniel: 1 of 24 = 4%
- Kai: 4 of 8 = 50%
- Rebecca: 10 of 12 = 83%

Rebecca spoke the most of the three children, while Daniel signed more than either of the others, especially for labels. So for him, signing really was useful: among other things, it allowed him to participate in the labeling routines that he enjoyed, which his spoken language ability wouldn't allow him to do yet.

3.4. Displays of Knowledge

Both Daniel and Rebecca were sometimes prompted to perform signs that had no obvious connection to the situation. Some of these displays of sign knowledge were clearly for the camera, as in the following example of Rebecca.

(7) (Rebecca goes up to the camera, reaches out to touch it.)
Father: What do you need? No, no. You have to show her bath.
Rebecca: | BATH
| [bæ. bæ]
Ginger: Oh, that's good!
Father: Can you show her shoes?
(Rebecca sits down, grabs her shoe. Ginger and Father laugh.)
Ginger: There they are. Yup, there's the shoes.
Father: Show her thank you.
Rebecca: | THANK-YOU (looking at F)
| [mmæŋgege]
Father: Look at her and say thank you. Look at the camera.
Rebecca: (gets up, points to camera) [ši]
Father: Say thank you.
Rebecca: | THANK-YOU
| [mmɪŋku]
Ginger: You're welcome.

This type of prompting for the camera was probably partially responsible for the large percentage of prompted signs in Rebecca's videotaped interactions: 64% of her sign productions were prompted by her parents. However, there are two pieces of evidence that the family had similar exchanges even when they were not being videotaped. First, Rebecca was very good at them: she must have had practice. Second, the prompting routines that the parents used for signs paralleled those that they used to elicit performance of other types of knowledge, such as body parts or animal sounds. Through these types of interchanges, Rebecca was learning to display her knowledge away from any obvious application for that knowledge. The ability to display decontextualized knowledge on demand will probably stand her in good stead when she enters school, where, as described by Cazden (1988), such displays are central to classroom discourse. Like the "mainstream" children in Heath's study who learned at home ways of talking, telling stories, and interacting with books that prepared them for classroom interactions, these signing families' socialization of their children into knowledge-display exchanges teaches them ways of speaking and acting that they will find useful as they get older.

4. Conclusion

All three families in this study used signs for functions that did not stem directly from a need for clearer communication. Their use of signs for requests, politeness formulas, labels, and displays of knowledge was part of a process of teaching the children socially appropriate communication. Variation in signing between the families occurred as signing was adapted to the needs and preferences of each child and integrated into the parenting and language socialization practices that the families already engaged in.

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