

The emergence of a visual phonological system by hearing learners of British Sign Language (BSL)

Gerardo Ortega (g.ortega@ucl.ac.uk)

University College London

Gary Morgan (g.morgan@city.ac.uk)

University College London / City University London

Despite the amount of research comparing first language (L1) acquisition in spoken and signed languages, little is known about second language (L2) acquisition in a second modality (M2). Within a single modality, learners of a spoken L2 acquire some of the linguistic structures of the target language in the same order as native speakers. However, there are important factors that affect L2 acquisition making it remarkably different from L1 acquisition. One such factor is the influence of the native language, which can shape learners' output of their target language in, for instance, phonetics. However, the different modality channels exploited by speakers and signers (oral vs. manual) may encourage one predict that the influence exerted by L1 on a signed L2 phonology would be minimal. This talk argues otherwise, presenting the results of two sign repetition tasks carried out by hearing adults of varying levels of BSL proficiency. These data suggest that learners' experience in producing and comprehending co-speech gestures allows them to match some signs with their referent. However, this skill appears to have a detrimental effect during sign articulation, such that these set of signs are produced significantly less accurately. Additionally, even when adults have full control of their motor system it was found that their phonological errors mirror those produced by deaf infants acquiring a signed language as L1. This poster will present data suggesting that while world knowledge influences the acquisition of some signed phonological forms there may be some perceptual constraints that hamper language acquisition regardless of age.