

Entering the fray: Debating what early ASL word order tells us about ASL syntax  
Deborah Chen Pichler  
Gallaudet University

There have been only a handful of reports on the acquisition of word order in American Sign Language (ASL), each one faithfully reflecting the theoretical climate that prevailed in the field of sign language linguistics at the time. Because linguistics research is inevitably influenced to some degree by the theoretical/"political" context in which it is conducted, it is worthwhile to occasionally reexamine earlier reports for findings which, for whatever reason, were overlooked or minimized at the time, but which are significant to current theoretical discussions. This talk will summarize the history of word order acquisition research in sign languages (mostly ASL) and its interaction with the changing theoretical climate in sign language linguistics. Our reexamination of published research in this area sets the stage for discussion on the increasingly politicized climate of this sub-field today.

Investigation of early ASL word order began with Hoffmeister (1978), during a time when sign language linguists were struggling for recognition of ASL as a full, natural language equivalent to spoken languages in all but modality. During this period, researchers drew attention to a number of striking parallels between ASL and spoken languages, particularly in the timing and course of language acquisition. Accordingly, the earliest discussions of ASL word order acquisition heavily emphasized similarities to word order acquisition in spoken languages, to the point of overlooking important counter-evidence reported in the original Hoffmeister study. Thus the received wisdom among sign language linguists was that early ASL word order was strictly canonical, parallel to what had been widely observed for early English.

Nearly twenty years later, when the next formal study of ASL word order acquisition was conducted (Schick and Gale 1996), the fixed word order pattern of English acquisition was no longer assumed to be a universal trait of early syntax. Children acquiring certain languages with high word order variability, such as Turkish, exhibited target-like variation from their earliest word combinations. Schick and Gale (1996) reported that their subjects also produced highly variable word order, seemingly contradicting the long-standing claims of Hoffmeister (1978). Schick (2002) proposed various accounts for the findings of Schick and Gale (1996), including an analysis adopting the Verb Island Hypothesis (Tomasello 1992), a usage-based approach rejecting the nativist assumptions of the generative approach hitherto dominating sign language research. By the late 1990s the latter had begun to be seriously questioned by some sign language linguists, who argued that generative treatments obscured important modality differences in the blind interest of aligning sign language syntax with that of spoken languages.

Meanwhile, a third and final study of early ASL word order, Chen Pichler (2001), reported new data compatible with early setting of the word order parameters, as well as early use of order-modifying syntactic operations, resulting in variable word order. This analysis is potentially extendable to the findings of Schick (2002), as well as those of the original Hoffmeister (1978) report. Unfortunately, given the rapidly polarizing environment of sign language linguistics, a staunchly principles and parameters account of ASL word order acquisition would appear to risk aggravating conditions under which nativist and usage-based camps are already openly hostile towards one another. Yet in this growing conflict, language acquisition research, ostensibly

based on observation of unbiased children's language, has emerged as a potential arbitrator, opening at least the possibility of discussing how alternative theoretical approaches can elucidate different aspects of a single phenomenon, language development. The talk will conclude with a brief discussion of implications of Chen Pichler (2001) for ASL syntax, as well as some thoughts on how these implications could affect the current theoretical conflict in the field.

#### References

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