

Sign and Speech in Family Interaction: Code Choices of Deaf Parents and Their Hearing Children

Research Question

Studies of the hearing children of deaf parents have found significant variation in their sign language fluency and their code choice practices (e.g., Preston 1994). This project analyzes communication in three American families with deaf parents and hearing children and investigates whether the parents' code choices directly influence their children's.

Families

- Deaf mother and her 2 ½ year-old hearing daughter.
- Deaf parents with three hearing sons ages 3-4, 5-6, 9-10.
- Deaf parents with three hearing sons ages 4, 11, 16.

All of the children are fluently bilingual in English and ASL, based on parental report and their videotaped language use.

Data

The families were videotaped at home during mealtimes and play times, four to five times over the course of several months. The current analysis is based on the episodes below.

- Mother and Daughter:
 - Two 15-minute games: 30 minutes total
- Family of Younger Boys:
 - Dinner with all family members: 20 minutes
 - Game with mother and all three children: 16 minutes
 - Game with father and two younger children: 15 minutes
 - > 51 minutes total
- Family of Older Boys:
 - Dinner with all family members: 20 minutes
 - Game with mother and two younger children: 20 minutes
 - Game with youngest child and both parents: 15 minutes
 - > 55 minutes total

Coding System

For each communicative turn:

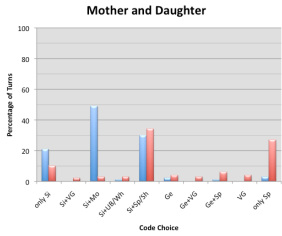
- Role of each person present: speaker/signer, addressee, participant, bystander (based on Bell 1984, 2000)
- Communicative behavior: sign (Si), gesture (Ge), fingerspelling (FS), speech (Sp), shout (Sh), under breath (UB), whisper (Wh), mouthing (Mo), singing (Sing), vocal gesture (e.g., shriek, whine) (VG)
- Gaze direction of non-speaker/signers
- Attention-getting cues

Ginger Pizer
Mississippi State University
Department of English
gpizer@english.msstate.edu

Results

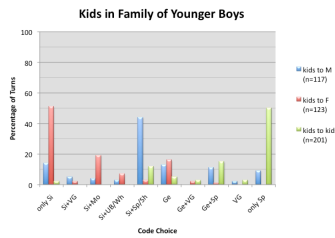
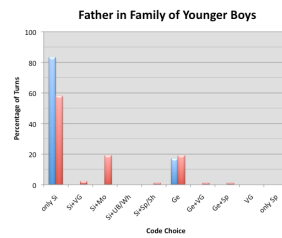
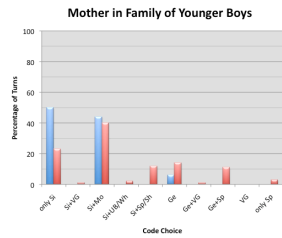
Mother and Daughter

Both mother and daughter produced relatively frequent speech compared to the other families. 34% of the mother's turns included at least one spoken word, as did 67% of the daughter's turns.



Family of Younger Boys

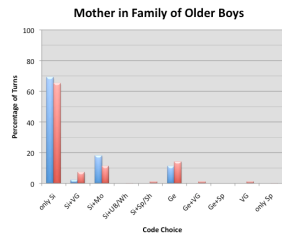
The two parents in this family demonstrated different language behavior. The father used almost exclusively sign or gesture. He used a larger amount of English-based mouthing when addressing his children (19% of turns) than when addressing his wife, but he almost never produced a spoken word (only 3 of 178 child-addressed turns). The mother used English-based mouthing in over 40% of her turns, both to her children and to her husband. She included a spoken word in 26% of her turns to her children.



The children in this family distinguished between their parents when choosing which code to address them in. They addressed their father in sign or gesture, sometimes with English-based mouthing. Only 5 of the 123 turns they addressed to their father included any spoken words. In contrast, their preferred medium for addressing their mother was simultaneous sign and speech (44% of turns), and 9% of their mother-addressed turns consisted of speech alone.

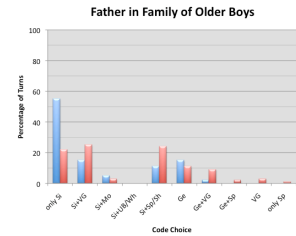
The children addressed each other almost exclusively in speech, sometimes with co-speech gesture. This pattern held true even though at least one of their parents was present and engaged in the interaction underway in all of the episodes reported here.

Family of Older Boys

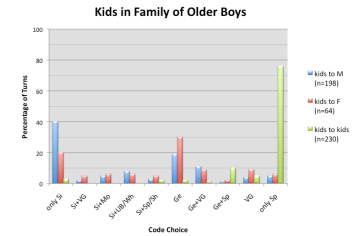


In this family also, the parents behaved somewhat differently from each other. The mother used almost exclusively sign or gesture, regardless of her addressee.

When addressing his wife, the father used sign alone a majority of the time, but when addressing the children, he used sign alone only 22% of the time. More than a quarter of his child-addressed turns included a spoken word.



Older Boys



Like the other brothers, these three boys addressed each other almost only in speech. Unlike the other family, however, they used hardly any more speech in addressing the parent who spoke more to them—their father—than they did to their mother.

Discussion and Conclusions

The mother with the daughter and the mother of the three younger boys have somewhat more hearing and better speech-reading skills than the other three parents. It is likely these receptive abilities for spoken language that allow the children to address these parents with more speech, rather than the parents' code choices when addressing the children. This finding is consistent with that of van den Bogaerde and Baker (2008), who found in a study of deaf parents and hearing children that "the children's output does not seem to be driven by the input" (p. 119).

Studies of of language variation (e.g., Kerswill 1996) and of families who use two spoken languages (e.g., Caldas & Caron-Caldas 2002) have found children to orient to their peers rather than to their parents as language models. Although the children in this study do have social contact with deaf children, their primary peer group is hearing.

It is also possible that the convenience of not needing to obtain the addressee's visual attention before beginning a communicative turn may motivate these hearing children to prefer speech. A separate analysis of data from these families (Pizer 2010) found a larger percentage of signed turns than spoken turns to include explicit attention-getting cues.

Whether for reasons of social identity or of attention-getting convenience, these fluent bilingual children clearly prefer to use speech whenever communicatively possible. In family interaction, they adjust their messages for reception by their addressees rather than mirroring each addressee's behavior.

References

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