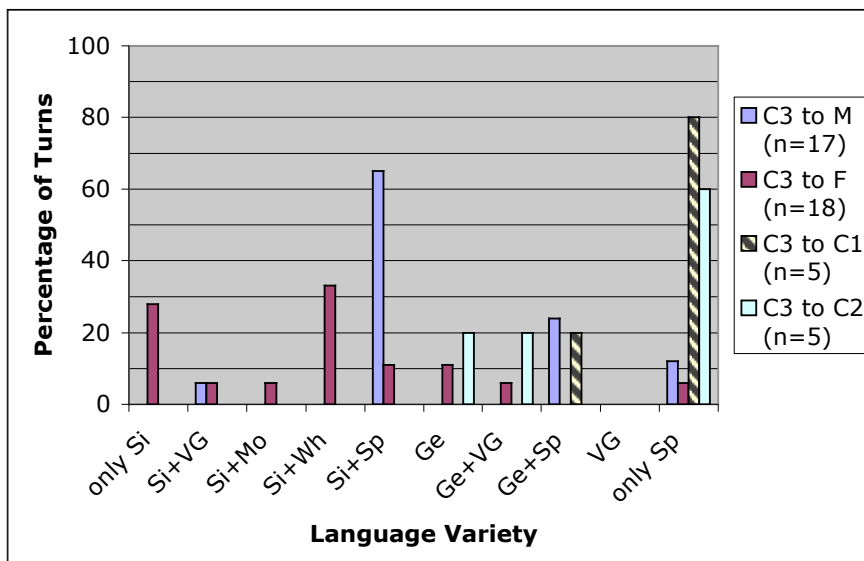


Sign and speech in family interaction: Code choices of hearing children whose parents are deaf

Hearing children whose parents are deaf live between two linguistic and cultural communities. As in other bilingual families, parents and children make choices in their home language use that influence the children's competence in the minority language—ASL—and the maintenance of that language across generations. Previous reports indicate wide variation among hearing children of deaf parents in ASL competence, language practice, and Deaf community affiliation. This paper presents case studies of two families, each with two deaf parents and three hearing sons (ages 4, 6, 10; 4, 12, 16). Analysis of the family members' code choices in two hours of videotaped naturalistic interaction at home was supplemented by observation and interviews. Results reveal that the children generally restricted their signing to times of communicative necessity.

Using an analytical framework based on Bell's (1984; 2000) theory of audience design, I coded every communicative turn for the role of each family member (speaker/signer, addressee, participant, bystander) and for the communication medium: Si=sign, Ge=gesture, Sp=speech, Wh=whisper, Mo=mouthing, VG=vocal gesture. The graph below shows the behavior of one family's youngest child (C3) during 20 minutes at dinner.



Four-Year-Old's Code Choices: Dinner

At age 4, this child already demonstrated the code choices typical of his older brothers. Turns addressed to the father cluster on the left "sign" side of the graph, those to his brothers cluster on the right "speech" side, and those to the mother span a wide spectrum, including much simultaneous sign and speech.

The difference in how the children addressed their two parents was likely motivated by their mother's stronger hearing and lipreading. The children knew that addressing her in

speech—with or without signing—could be communicatively successful, although she reported preferring the clearer signing that they produce when they do not speak. The other family's children behaved with both parents like this family's children did with their father. They showed almost complementary code choices, signing with their parents and speaking with their brothers.

In both families, the children occasionally signed to each other, almost always for an obvious purpose, e.g., keeping a secret. Only the oldest brother in each family showed any tendency to accompany speech to a sibling with signing when a deaf parent was an unaddressed participant. Between these bilingual children, signing was available as a communicative resource but never the default option. The children's demonstrated and reported ASL fluency at home and in the larger Deaf community indicates that signing competence was not a limiting factor for them. Given that the hearing children even in these culturally Deaf families tended toward speech whenever communicatively possible, it is no surprise that children in families with two parents with strong receptive skills for spoken English might end up with limited signing skills, which would limit their acceptance as members of the Deaf community, regardless of their parents' affiliations. Despite the best efforts of deaf parents, maintaining ASL as a minority language across generations encounters the obstacle of their own hearing children's speech-heavy patterns of code choice at home.

References

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