Acquisition of the syntax of functional signs in HKSL: a case study on CAN and NOT-HAVE produced by child late learners of HKSL in Jockey Club Sign Bilingualism and Co-enrolment in Deaf Education Programme

Scholastica Lam* and Betty Cheung

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Abstract

A number of functional signs, specifically modals and negators, in HKSL are observed to occur in a clause-final position (Lee, 2006; Lam 2009). A case study shows that a severely deaf child CC produces modals and negators in both preverbal and clause-final positions (Lam, 2009). Lam (2009) suggests that the occurrence of preverbal functional signs may be resulted from Cantonese input in the form of oral Cantonese and Cantonese--based signing, a variety of signing that is in between HKSL and Signed Chinese. However, the data on CC is limited. Research on more deaf bilinguals may help us to understand better the development of modals and negators under a bilingual context.

Since the set up of the Jockey Club Sign Bilingualism and Co-enrolment in Deaf Education Programme, a group of deaf students develop Cantonese and HKSL simultaneously under a school setting. This paper attempts to explore further the early syntax of modals and negators, specifically CAN and NOT-HAVE by examining the assessment data collected via the Hong Kong Sign Language Elicitation Tool (HKSL-ET). The modal test is a story retelling task where the deaf student needs to retell a story shown earlier in a video clip. The negation test is a find-a-difference test in which the student needs to describe what is missing in a set of pictures. Data was collected from 22 deaf late learners studied in the Programme. Most of these students only start to learn HKSL from age 4 or older. Previous studies suggest that late learners with 30 years of usage usually do not have problems with word order (Emmorey, 2002). Can late learners with shorter period of exposure acquire the syntax of modals and negators in HKSL? Our preliminary study shows that deaf students produce both preverbal and clause final modals and negators:

Preverbal position
CAT MOUSE **CAN** CATCH (C4-3-CWL, 7;0)
'The cat can catch the mouse.'
Clause-final position
CAT CATCH MOUSE **CAN** (C4-1-CNW, 7;0)
'The cat can catch the mouse.'
Preverbal position
PIG **NOT-HAVE** TAKE VEGETABLE (C1-2-HST, 12;0)
'The pig did not take the vegetables.'
Clause-final position
CAT COOK EGG **NOT-HAVE** (C1-2-HST, 12;0)
'The cat did not cook the eggs.'

Do deaf students produce more preverbal than clause-final functional signs? Do the same students use preverbal functional sign at one time and clause-final functional signs at another time (as in examples (3) and (4))? To what extent language transfer and language dominance explain the results? This paper attempts to address all these questions.

* schola_cslds@cuhk.edu.hk