

# The acquisition of topic and focus in Brazilian Sign Language

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## Abstract

This paper aims to show the results of a case study about the acquisition of topic and focus in Brazilian Sign Language (LSB) and its influence on the variability of the word order. It is well known that the most basic word order in this language is SVO (subject-verb-object). However, there are other possible orders that are derived from the movement of certain elements licensed in specific linguistic contexts. So, we can also find OSV, SOV and VOS orders in LSB (Quadros, 1999; Quadros & Karnopp, 2004). For this study we have analyzed data from a deaf child, born from deaf parents, observed by means of a longitudinal study in early stage of language development, from 1:8 to 2:5 years old. He was in contact with LSB since birth, which means that LSB is his first language. Thus, the acquisition of sign language occurs spontaneously and it is through it that the child will have his first contacts with the world around him. In the child data analysis, it was found constructions with topic and focus. These structures appear in the data of this child since the beginning of language acquisition, in the stage of first combinations, although there is inconsistency in the use

of non manual markers associated with these phenomena. Sometimes, the child produced sentences with the appropriate non manual marker for each construction but in other moments, the child produced sentences with an inappropriate or without a non manual marker for a determinate construction. The deaf child showed evidence of the occurrence of all possible types of topic and focus in LSB (Lillo-Martin & Quadros, 2005). The occurrence of these types of construction is one of the factors that generate variability in word order of the LSB. Similar results were found by Pichler (2001) in the acquisition of American Sign Language. In the child data analysis, it was possible to identify the production of sentences with varied orders, according to the adult language standard. The SOV and OSV orders were observed in contexts of topic constructions, and also with focus of information and focus of emphasis. On the other hand, the order VOS was observed in cases of contrastive focus. These results show that there is a similarity between the data of deaf children with the data of hearing children. It also indicates no effect of modality in language acquisition.

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