

Sign Languages - Mother Tongues: Access to Insight, (Self-) Expression and Opportunities
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The way of sign language from two hearing parents of deaf children to the extended family

Riitta Takkinen
University of Jyväskylä
Sign Language Centre



Introduction

- Often one deaf child is growing up among the hearing parents and hearing siblings
- Even if the hearing members of the family are signing (in addition to a spoken language), the **deaf member is in the minority** in relation to language use at home.
- This paper presents a **bilingual language environment** in a big nuclear family with 16 members:
 - two hearing parents
 - seven hearing children
 - seven deaf children



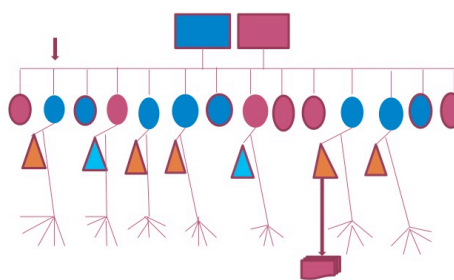
The aim of the study

- 1) How a small signing community in a big family of hearing parents affects the language and social development of deaf children?
- 2) How the hearing children acquire the sign language from their siblings?
- 3) What is the everyday language environment like in the family?
- 4) What role does sign language play in the children's families?



Subjects:

Hearing parents: hearing children
deaf children + hearing spouses + grand children



Method & data

The data

- gathered using **ethnographic interviews**
- **Ethnographic information** through 40 years
- analysed by **content analysis**
- The method is based on a long relationship with the family in their living environment and common get-togethers.



What I want to know?

- How SL came to the family?
- Languages and the school of the deaf children?
- Languages and the vocational school of the deaf young?
- Deaf children's communication with their friends?
- Starting a family and languages?
- Languages with new relatives?
- Language in the family?
- Languages at work?
- Languages in the gatherings of extended family?
- The bilingualism of the hearing siglings.



Getting data

- Video recorded interviews using photos of the family
 - parents
 - (today) adult deaf children
 - Hearing spouses of the deaf
 - Children of the deaf families (photos and drawings, communication situations in everyday situations)
 - Hearing children of the core family (photos from childhood and later family gatherings)
- Video recorded activities among cousins



Results

Parents:

- When the deaf child (2/14) was born, no knowledge about deafness or sign language
- Recommended to start learning sign language and use it with their deaf child
- No experiences of learning other languages
- Decided to strive to learn to sign in order to help the deaf child to acquire a language and learn to communicate
- When the next hearing and deaf children were born the sign language was already used in the family
- SL became stronger along with the new users
- Even the youngest hearing children acquired sign language first and then the spoken language.



The experiences of hearing children in the family

Two youngest, hearing children:

- 1) How the hearing siblings have experienced the bilingual language environment?
- 2) How they have acquired the two languages?
- 3) What kind of language identity they have acquired?



Results

- The children started to sign first and later to speak
- Both languages developed evenly; they used
 - spoken language with parents and the hearing siblings
 - sign language with the deaf children
 - when all were around, the parents used speech and signing simultaneously and the hearing children sequentially
- Used both languages actively and reached good skills in both languages
- Their language identity also became bilingual (comfortable using whichever language)
- Sign language is nowadays used in personal settings with deaf siblings and other deaf



In conclusion

- The **language environment** for the children **bilingual** from the beginning (for the two first children fairly early)
- The deaf children have not been in the minority in relation to language
- They have had a rich signing environment from the beginning
- A strong ground to develop a good self-esteem as a deaf sign language person



In conclusion...

- The large language community in both languages in the family gave the hearing children a balanced possibility to acquire both languages and a bilingual identity
- They have become "the most deaf from the hearing siblings" as one of their deaf siblings characterised them



In conclusion..

- The parents are satisfied that they have started to learn and use sign language
 - All children – hearing and deaf – feel equal in the family
 - All have a strong identity
 - The relations of the siblings are close; fluent communication!

