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### Depicting from experience: learning to give directions in space

While the L2 acquisition of spoken languages has received much research attention over the years, the L2 acquisition of signed languages remains under-researched and largely anecdotal. In this study, we focus on the productive proficiency of hearing adults learning Norwegian Sign Language, which has never been studied. In particular, we examine how intermediate learner's use of a type of sign called depicting signs.

Depicting signs are unique to signed languages and can be described as partly lexicalized signs that integrate lexical and gestural elements. They also use the space in front of the signer in a meaningful way. Depicting signs are often used to describe the size and shape of entities, the movement of entities in space, and the arrangement of entities in space. They have been described in the literature as both difficult to acquire (McKee & McKee, 1992) and yet relatively easy even for hearing non-signers to understand and produce (e.g., Schembri, Jones, & Burnham, 2005; Marshall & Morgan, 2014).

In order to investigate the use of depicting signs, we asked a group of college students studying Norwegian Sign Language to complete several tasks. These tasks aimed to elicit depicting signs as part of naturalistic language samples that involved giving directions to and from various places and describing where places and things were located.

We then compared these learner productions with recordings of their instructors completing the same tasks. This research design reflects a usage-based approach to language acquisition by facilitating a comparison between the students' input and self-productions. In addition, it indicates differences in how these spatial categories are expressed by L1 and L2 users, thus increasing our knowledge of this under-described area of Norwegian Sign Language grammar.

Findings show that students were able to use space meaningfully in their descriptions, even though they were frequently unable to produce native-like forms of the depicting signs. To compensate, they sometimes language-mixed with Norwegian and/or drew on their ability to gesture about spatial meanings.

This preliminary study shows that the acquisition of depicting signs is both easy and difficult. Adequately describing the process requires differentiation between production and comprehension in addition to considering that there are different types of depicting signs.

#### References:

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