

Conference hommage à Maya – Maya's tribute

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Title: Sign language development by Deaf children: reference to person and space

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Abstract

Maya Hickmann had a great influence on the theoretical background and methodology we used from the beginning of our research in our respective sign languages (Brazilian Sign Language, French Sign Language, various Emerging Sign Languages, etc.). Since 1998, we used Maya's experimental materials (Horse story, Cat story, Motion event stimuli, etc.) and we have been in constant reflection with her to adapt these stimuli for visual-gestural languages. We also had a long-term partnership with Maya concerning the annotation of the sign language data collected with these stimuli, using for example CLAN and ELAN software.

Thus, we propose to articulate our talk in two directions.

Firstly, we will present some results obtained with the Horse story narratives by Deaf children and adults from various countries (among others, Fusellier-Souza 1998, 2004, 2006, Sallandre 1998, 2003, Sallandre et al 2016, Sallandre & Di Renzo 2021). The results on almost twelve different sign languages offer impressive typological comparisons on discourse cohesion, and reference to person and space in these languages, compared with spoken languages.

Secondly, we will discuss the work carried out with Maya Hickmann in the context of our supervision of Camille Schoder's thesis on motion events (Schoder 2019, Sallandre et al 2018). This research examines how signers (Deaf children aged 5–10 and adults) of French Sign Language described clips showing voluntary motion events with variable Paths and Manners. Using mainly iconic structures, children frequently expressed both Path and Manner early on. However, responses varied with the structures used and they increased with age for some event types (downward motion, boundary crossing). In addition, serial constructions appeared, typically expressing two perspectives (observer and character). In conclusion, iconicity invites signers to combine motion components, notwithstanding variation in structure and developmental changes observed with some event types.