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To cite this version:
Elise Guy-Guyenet, Caroline Bogliotti, Anne Lacheret-Dujour. Early communicative gestures and signs in French Sign Language acquisition. Nijmegen Lecture 2018, Feb 2018, Nijmegen, Netherlands., 2018. hal-01786751

HAL Id: hal-01786751
https://hal.science/hal-01786751
Submitted on 21 Sep 2018

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Early communicative gestures and signs in French Sign Language acquisition

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1. BACKGROUND
- Sign-exposed children (SI-E) acquiring Sign Languages follow a developmental sequence similar to their speech-exposed (SP-E) counterparts acquiring spoken languages.
- SP-E and SI-E children communicate through gestural means – mainly Deictic Gestures – before they are able to produce their first Lexical Units — words or signs (Volterra, Iversion & Castrataro, 2006).
- Throughout the second year, two other types of communicative gestures complement the SP-E children’s repertoires:
  - Conventional Gestures (CG: codified gestures shared among a given community)
  - Representational Gestures (RG: or iconic gestures, representing a referent based on its formal aspects or the action associated with it).
- During the « bimodal period » between 12 and 16 months, gestural and lexical repertoires are equipotential, then a reorganization occurs. From 20 months on, children show a preference for the modality of the input (Capirci et al, 1996, Bates et al, 1981).

2. METHODOLOGY
Corpus-based study: longitudinal design
Participants: 4 sign-exposed children between 3 and 36 months.

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Data collection:
- Spontaneous child-caregiver interactions at home
- Video recording with 2 cameras
- 45-minute sessions at monthly intervals (2 years)
- Notes: contextual information per session

Coding procedure: ELAN software: 10-minute sample per session
Focus on manual behaviours: identifying and categorizing DEICTIC and NON DEICTIC behaviours.

All NON DEICTIC types are then coded as:
- SIGNS (LSF and Sign-like)
- REPRESENTATIONAL Gestures
- CONVENTIONAL Gestures
- G/S? (unclear ones)

Annotation of functional aspects: (Acredolo & Goodwyn, 1988; Petitto, 1988)
- Meaning
- Manner of use
- Gaze direction
- Caregiver’s response

3. THIS STUDY
What is specific to the language acquisition of SI-E children is that gestural and lexical development occurs in the same visual-gestural modality :
→ How signing children reorganize their gestural communication system (gestural communicative and gestural linguistic repertoires) during early language development?

GESTURES
18-22 months
First combinations of 2 lexical units

SIGNS & GESTURE+SIGN COMBINATIONS
9-13 months
~ 12 months
First signs
Representational and Conventional gestures

3.1.POINTING gestures (PT) start between 11 and 13 months and are the most frequently used type of DG (Fig. 1).
3.2. First LEXICAL UNITS (LU or signs) are observed between 11-12 months. Their frequency increases between 12 and 15 months (Fig. 2). CONVENTIONAL gestures (CG) emerge around 12-13 months (Fig. 2).

4. PRELIMINARY RESULTS
The spontaneous gesturing and signing of 3 children (1 deaf and 2 hearing) were coded and analyzed between 9 and 15 months.
- The first communicative behaviours observed are DEICTICS (DG) and emerge between 10 and 13 months (Fig. 1 and 2).
- DG are the most frequently used type and their frequency increases over the study period (Fig. 2).

<table>
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5. DISCUSSION & PERSPECTIVES
From a qualitative perspective: so far, the developmental progression of communicative gestures and signs observed is in line with previous research. The types of gestures used by the child change over time. The different types and tokens of communicative gestures and signs will be analyzed and described further. Data from the sessions between 16 and 24 months are currently being annotated.