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Early Language Acquisition in French Sign Language: preliminary data on the development of gestures and signs

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Background

Early language acquisition : same developmental sequence in speech- and sign-exposed children :

- The onset of gestures between 9 and 13 months precedes the onset of the first lexical units
- Children use both gestural and linguistic repertoires to communicate during the second year

Specificity of sign-exposed children language acquisition :

- Gestural and linguistic development occur in the same visual-gestural modality
- Both gestures and signs are produced by the manual articulators

Aim of the study

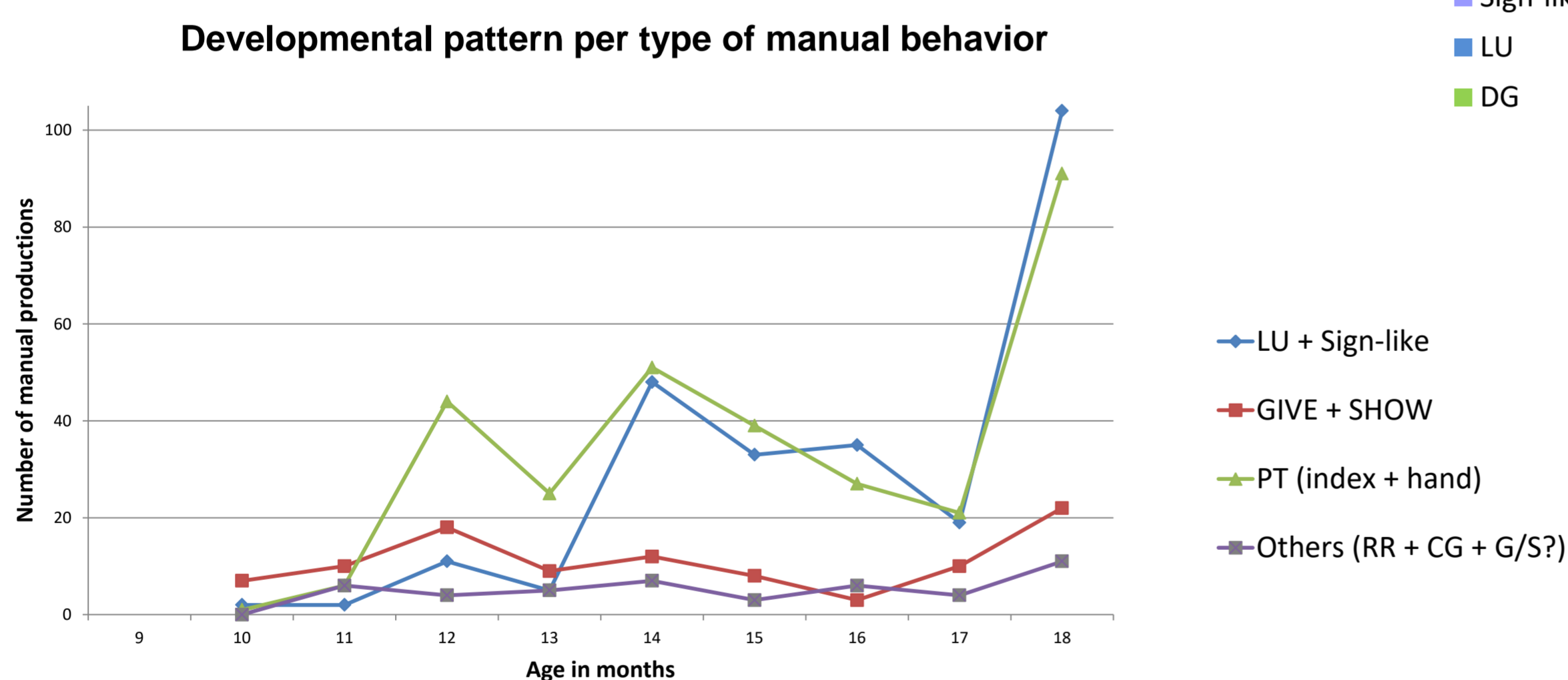
To collect developmental data on French Sign Language (LSF) acquisition from birth to 3 y.o :

1. To describe gestural and lexical development in LSF
2. To investigate the way children reorganize their gestural and linguistic repertoires during language development

Results

711 manual behaviours were analyzed for the 9-18-month period.

Deictic Gestures	Referential Gestures		
59.4%	40.4%		
PT-index	UL	Sign-like	Others (CG + G/S ?)
67.1%	50.5%	39.7%	9.8%



Results can be discussed in terms of:

1. **Stages of development for both communicative gestures and signs:** SHOWING/GIVING > POINTING > Lexical unit
2. **Frequency and types of gestures and signs**
Deictic gestures (mainly POINTING) are the most prominent type of manual behavior and are used productively not only in the early stage but also after the emergence of the first signs.
From 14 months on, POINTING and LU+SIGN-LIKE show the same developmental trajectories.
3. **Variability across children and across sessions**
Children exhibit different patterns according to onset (first signs and first deictic gestures) and productivity per type of manual production.

Acknowledgments :

We thank the children and their families for their participation in this study

Methodology

Corpus-based study: longitudinal design

Participants: 3 sign-exposed children

NAME	SEX	HEARING STATUS	BIRTH ORDER	NUMBER OF VISITS
Léna	female	hearing	1st	20
Soline	female	deaf	2nd	20
Paul	male	hearing	3rd	17

Data collection:

- Spontaneous child-caregiver interactions at home
- Video recording with 2 cameras
- 45-minute sessions at monthly intervals (for 2 years)

≈ 50 hours of parent-child interactions were recorded

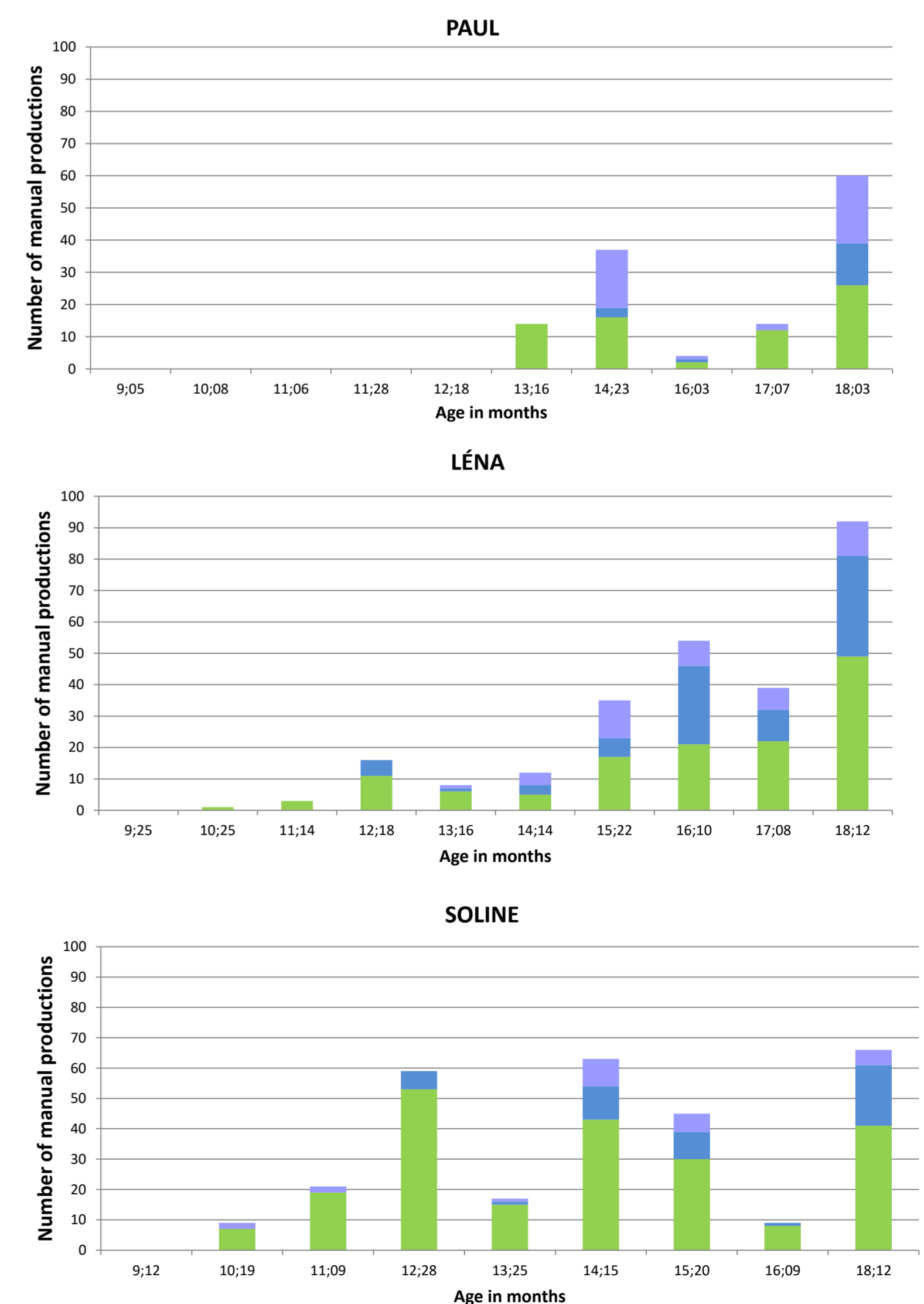
Coding procedure: ELAN software: 10-minute sample per session

Identifying and categorizing manual behaviours:

- **DEICTIC:** pointing, showing, giving, ritualized request
- **LEXICAL UNIT:** exact match or close to a form in the adult lexicon
- **SIGN-LIKE:** form that resembles SL but is not part of the LSF lexicon
- **CONVENTIONAL:** codified gesture shared among a community
- **G/S?:** form whose meaning is unclear, could be a gesture or a sign

+ Annotation of functional aspects :

- Meaning
- Manner of use
- Gaze direction
- Caregiver's response



Conclusion and perspectives

The developmental progression of communicative gestures and signs observed is in line with previous research studying language development in both sign- and speech- exposed children.

Further research is needed to investigate the SIGN-LIKE types. Annotations and analyzes of the parental input are ongoing.