

CGSL Winter Workshop

Friday, March 6, 12pm

5540 S Greenwood Ave., Cochrane-Woods Art Center 157

Lunch will be provided. Please [RSVP](#) for the workshop.

What acquiring language for the first time as a teen looks like:

Case studies of cross-cultural adoption

Infants who are born deaf may have little access to spoken or sign language and may consequently experience natural language isolation throughout childhood. A crucial unanswered question is how much language such individuals can acquire given their late start in language acquisition. Can they capitalize on their cognitive maturity, bypassing the early stages of language acquisition, and quickly use complex language as in L2 learning? Alternatively, must they acquire language from scratch as in infant L1 acquisition, or internationally adopted young children? Using a combined longitudinal and cross-sectional design, we followed the American Sign Language (ASL) acquisition of five children who had little or no access to natural language (spoken, signed, or written) prior to being fully immersed in ASL at ages ranging from 10 to 14 years. Three children emigrated from countries with few educational services; two American children received little available education. To investigate the trajectory and content of the children's language acquisition, we analyzed spontaneous ASL samples (n=1,100 utterances) collected from them after 12 to 72 months of language immersion: three longitudinal samples from two children, two longitudinal samples from three children, and one sample from one child.

Despite diverse cultural and familial backgrounds prior to ASL immersion, the children showed remarkably similar patterns of language development. Their initial acquisition of ASL signs was faster than that of young deaf children, but their subsequent development was asymptotic and uncharacteristic of the explosive lexical and MLU growth of child L1 learners. The bulk of their utterances were unstructured; utterances that were structured were primarily short and simple and contained little grammatical inflection, closed class signs, or pronouns. Their ASL discourse and pragmatic abilities showed limited development. This was true after 12 months of immersion and remained true after 6 years of ASL immersion. These results show that some language can be acquired after prolonged language deprivation in early childhood, but that language acquisition begun for the first time in adolescence does not display the systematic growth patterns of morpho-syntactic and pragmatic complexity characteristic of infant language acquisition.

The event is free and open to the public. Persons with disabilities who need an accommodation in order to participate in this event should contact Laura Tharsen at ltharsen@uchicago.edu. Organized by [The Center for Gesture, Sign, and Language](#) and the [Department of Psychology](#) with support from the [Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society](#).