Index points (IX) serve pronominal functions in American Sign Language (ASL). Because of their apparent similarity to co-speech pointing, there have been many discussions of the analysis of points in sign languages.

- Are all IX points in ASL linguistic or are they equivalent to co-speech gestures? (Johnston 2013; Comerri et al. 2013)

- Given their grammatical characteristics, some have argued that there is no formal difference between IX (addressee) and IX (non-addressee); others argue for analysis as 2nd and 3rd person pronouns. (Meir 1990; Lillo-Martin & Meir 2011; Wilbur 2006)

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Gestural vs. Linguistic points?
- How different are the points used by signers when compared to the points used by non-signers?
- Many analyses or few?
- Do the different functions of points in sign languages require different analyses, or are they different realizations of the same thing?
- Data from ASL acquisition can contribute to this discussion
- Do signing and non-signing children use pointing in similar ways?
- Are the different pronominal functions acquired together or separately?

Previous studies of IX development

Patullo (1987) observed discontinuity in production of points to people by 2 Deaf signers, and pronounced reversal errors when points to people came back in.

- Is assumption that hearing children point early true for points to people?
- Would other children acquiring ASL show the same pattern?
- Would they show a different pattern for different pronouns?

METHOD

Analysis of Spontaneous Production Data

Deaf children of deaf parents from SLAASiH project
- All productions of IX tabulated
- 3-way contrast: IX (1), IX(person), IX (objectification/unclear)
- FRU of IX, IX_1, IX (addr), IX (non-addr) for each child determined (FRUs for First of Repeated Uses – first month followed by at least one month with usage)
- Noted FRU of POSS.1 and appearance (not repeated) of NS(elf) and SELF.1 as possible alternative means of self-reference
- Statistical comparisons using binomial test with Bonferroni correction

CONCLUSIONS

- All pointing is not the same! We have observed (here and elsewhere)
- Pointing to self, addressee, and non-addressed persons by Deaf children
- Deaf, Indo and Hearing children in pointing to self/persons
- Children and adults in use of points to self and others
- Gestural vs. Linguistic points?
- How different are the points used in signing when compared to the points used by non-signers?
- Both signers and non-signers frequently point to objects and locations, but
- Only (Deaf) signers point to themselves and other people
- (At least the latter) points are part of a linguistic system for signers

Many analyses or few?
- Do the different functions of points in sign languages require different analyses, or are they different realizations of essentially the same thing?
- The different timing of acquiring points to self, addressee, and non-addressed persons by the signers suggests that these different pointing functions are not acquired together – casting doubt on analyses that combine the types

CONCLUSIONS

- In both speech and sign, pointing can be used with language and can be abstract
- In speech, pointing can complement spoken words
- In sign, pointing accomplishes the equivalent of speech point

- Despite surface similarities, different functions of points are acquired differentially
- Deaf children exposed to a sign language learn how pointing works as part of the linguistic system
- Though many factors contribute to explaining acquisition patterns, Acquisition data can shed new light on long-standing theoretical issues