

Multilingualism in the Deaf Community: Learning and using more than one sign language

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Most research addressing multilingualism in the deaf community is concerned with bilingualism in one signed (SL) and one spoken (SpL) language. However, signers often know and use more than one SL. In all bilinguals, there is evidence of code mixing and switching, but research on SL bilingualism illuminates issues of relevance both to theory within the SL field and to theories of bilingualism more generally. This presentation explores SL multilingualism, starting with studies of children brought up bilingual in two SLs, then discussing the early stages of acquisition of a second SL by deaf adults, followed by a description of code- and language switching in fluent bilinguals.

There have been a small number of studies of children acquiring more than one SL, for example, Pruss-Romagosa's work on two hearing children of deaf parents of different nationalities (mother Spanish, father German), exposed to LSE and DGS.

Data on adult learners of a second SL is drawn from the study *Bilingualism in Deaf and Hearing People: Learning and neuroplastic processes*. The topic discussed here is the relationship between mouthings and the SLs with which they are associated, as this has been the subject of considerable debate. The continuum of opinions ranges from seeing mouthings as always representing instances of online code-blending, where signers freely and simultaneously combine elements from an SpL and SL, to regarding mouthings as part of a sign's phonological description.

In the present study, 17 Deaf native or near-native signers of RSL underwent a 12 week course in BSL. Learners exhibited varying degrees of code-mixing between RSL and BSL. Additionally, all students used mouthings: these included both Russian and English mouthings co-occurring with RSL and BSL signs respectively; rarely, Russian mouthings co-occurred with BSL signs. Analyses suggest that during initial stages of learning a second SL, mouthing is processed as part of a sign's phonology, but that learners also build lexical representations through mouthing, independent of their knowledge of the associated SpL.

Research on code mixing by fluent bilinguals is taken from Adam's 2016 study of elderly signers fluent in AISL and Auslan, two historically unrelated SLs. As well as differences between the SLs, the manual alphabets differ: the Irish manual alphabet is a 1-handed alphabet, while the Auslan manual alphabet is 2-handed. Various types of switching and mixing involving fingerspelling and signs occur. Manual alphabet switching is of particular interest; as switching in this case does not involve a language switch, since in both languages fingerspelling is used to represent English.

The presentation concludes with a discussion of the findings in relation to understanding the differences and similarities between code blending, code switching and language switching, and the implications for sociolinguistic theory.