

Deaf children use hands to invent own way of communicating

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Deaf children are able to develop a language-like gesture system by making up hand signs and using homemade systems to increase their communication as they grow, just as children with conventional spoken language, research at the University of Chicago shows.

"Other studies on this 'homesigning' have usually stopped at the point the children go to school, but I have been able to follow children in Nicaragua who are not near a special education school and accordingly continue developing their homesigns independently," said Marie Coppola, a Research Associate at the University of Chicago, who presented her findings Sunday, Feb. 15 at a news briefing, "Languages without Ancestors," at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Coppola's research is the first to show that homesigning forms a foundation leading to more sophisticated, complicated communication.

The capacity of homesigners to adapt and improve their communication based on language learning underlies the growth of a new sign language, Nicaraguan Sign Language, which a community of deaf children developed independently at a school for the deaf in the country's capital of Managua, Coppola said. Homesigning is common throughout cultures, but Nicaraguan Sign Language is one of the few established sign languages that a deaf community invented and scholars have studied.

"Since 1996, I have been working with deaf adolescents and adults in Nicaragua who have not learned Nicaraguan Sign Language, but who have invented their own sign languages that they use with their families, friends and neighbors. I have learned that these small languages have many characteristics of languages that are signed and spoken around the world," said Coppola, who has videotaped and studied the interactions with colleagues.

Coppola observed Nicaraguans using gestures frequently when they spoke, and she noticed many, such as those used to describe eating, were consistent in their form. Deaf children are able to pick up on these gestures and their meanings, as well as invent others to communicate, she said.

In order to serve deaf children, Nicaraguan leaders created a special education school in Managua, but staffed it with teachers who did not use sign language. They tried to get the children to speak and read people's lips so they could better adjust to the speaking world. The children developed their own sign language as a way of communicating with each other.

"When children and adolescents first came together at the school (the Melania Morales School for Special Education) in the late 1970s, they brought with them their homesign systems. These signs and ways of combining signs into sentences that children used at home served as the seeds for the new sign language that developed as they began interacting with each other regularly.

"We do not have videotape of the earliest years of Nicaraguan Sign Language from 1978 to 1986. Therefore, studying homesign systems can give us an idea of what Nicaraguan Sign Language looked like at its very beginning."

Source: University of Chicago

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