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## Book review: Carolina Plaza-Pust, Bilingualism and deafness

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Carolina Plaza-Pust, *Bilingualism and Deafness*, De Gruyter Mouton: Berlin, Germany. 2016; xiii + 498 pp.: 9781501513961, £90.99 (hbk), 9781501504938, £90.99 (ePUB).

**Reviewed by:** Rachel O'Neill, *University of Edinburgh*, UK

This beautifully produced book offers an in-depth examination of the progress of six deaf children, between the ages of 6 and 8, in their narrative skills in two languages: German Sign Language (DGS) and written German. The children are attending a school for deaf children in Berlin. This is the first detailed longitudinal analysis of productive skills in sign and writing in a bilingual educational setting. The very clear organisation of the book helps the reader navigate easily; one particularly strong feature is the excellent use of tables throughout to summarise concepts and findings.

In Chapter 1, Plaza-Pust outlines the language policies and socio-political context which lead to sign bilingualism as a realistic option for education. The overview is well structured and useful, drawing on research from Germany which has not been previously available. The Berlin school for deaf children is introduced, where most of the classes are taught using team teaching: DGS from the deaf teacher and spoken / signed German from the hearing teacher for over half the lessons, with the remainder being mostly in signed German with speech. Plaza-Pust makes a convincing case for language profiling, i.e., for looking at the range of proficiency children demonstrate in several modes and languages. She challenges theoretical approaches to bilingualism such as Cummins (2016), who expects there to be a causal relationship between fluency in one language supporting the development of a second. Most deaf children do not have a well-developed signed language; fluency does not happen by chance or by contact with signed German. Plaza-Pust sets out issues to be explored (p. 54) in relation to the actual bilingual trajectories in a signed and oral language, by which she means a written form of the oral language. She wants to explore factors such as creativity, differences between the languages as they develop, and language contact phenomena.

In Chapter 2, Plaza-Pust explains the theoretical basis for the study, which is Universal Grammar (UG). Other approaches are not considered, but within a generative framework, Plaza-Pust outlines clearly the language development processes, particularly the amount of individual variability expected in the Structure Building hypothesis as elements learnt whole are later analysed, and functional categories emerge as a critical lexical mass is reached. The author pays particular attention to language mixing, and the ways this can be seen as interference, or alternatively as bootstrapping as one language supports the other. The focus is firmly on syntax and word order rather than the development of genres or pragmatic range. Details of the participants are given, and a little more focus on the Berlin deaf school's approach, namely to use many age appropriate narratives in DGS and German in the classroom, and to focus on speech. However, we never find out more about this aspect of the bilingual programme.

Chapter 3 is ambitious: Plaza-Pust sets out a concise grammar of DGS, informed by the work of deaf and hearing linguists from 1999 – 2007, and drawing not only on studies of DGS itself, but also on what is known about the linguistics of American Sign Language (ASL) and British Sign Language (BSL). The descriptive grammar of DGS has not yet been able to benefit from the DGS corpus, starting in 2009, which has so far mainly focused on lexical rather than grammatical findings (DGS Korpus, Hamburg, 2018). However, the author goes beyond the clause to discourse level and features of the narrative genre such as maintaining reference. The complexity of sign language acquisition for the majority of deaf children who don't have a fluent sign language in the family is discussed clearly, using examples from several sign languages. Currently only two deaf children from deaf families have had their DGS development described. In keeping with her UG theoretical approach, Plaza-Pust believes that the transition phases are important to focus on as structures develop, and that much individual variation will be evident. The remainder of the chapter outlines the progress from Year 1 to Year 2 of primary school in DGS for the six children in the study. This is a real tour de force using both qualitative and quantitative approaches, with a mass of examples illustrating proportions of forms used to introduce, reintroduce and maintain reference. This evidence shows that orchestrating reference in a DGS narrative is a challenging task even for the most confident child signers in the study.

Chapter 4 repeats the process for the written stories in German, where there is already much more evidence about developmental trajectories. Plaza-Pust uses second language studies of development of written German in hearing children, including some of her earlier work, to show that lexical growth (e.g. *if/so long as*) makes new syntactic choices possible, such as verb-final embedded clauses. The analysis of the children's writing expects to see influence from DGS, and also that the SOV German order will slowly become more target-like. The analysis of three years of data is complex. Using the children's written stories, Plaza-Pust proposes a typology or developmental profile of error types with verb inflection in relation to uninflected forms from the lexicon, person number, subject verb and irregular verb errors. Some of the conclusions about language mixing and borrowing between DGS and signed German are impossible to verify and so must be tentative. The author suggests that signed German and invented sign-words such as the case marking AUF may negatively influence both the children's DGS development as well as their written German. This suggests that a classroom observational element to subsequent studies of deaf children's language development would be useful, as teachers of deaf children often use a signed version of spoken language which may behave differently from a spoken language or a sign language used by deaf people.

In the final chapter, Plaza-Pust returns to wider issues in deaf education, though she maintains a position that spoken language is not accessible to deaf children, which is not borne out by other longitudinal studies such as LOCHI (Macquarie University, 2018). The author notes how difficult it is to make claims for sign bilingual programmes when there is so much variation in provision, often a result of the many conflicting language policies. Deaf children's delayed acquisition of sign and their only seeing a sign language in interpreted contexts

are two common consequences of these policies. Plaza-Pust ends with a plea for more materials, more curriculum resources and better-trained teachers to ensure sign bilingualism has a chance of success. Here she acknowledges that a clearer discussion of what sign bilingualism means in relation to deaf children's spoken language development also needs to be urgently examined. This point I would consider very true: we have had 30 years now of sign bilingual education and over the same time child cochlear implantation, so we surely must consider how implanted children operate in sign bilingual settings.

The strength of this study is the analytical rigour Plaza-Pust employs which will be useful for educational and sign linguists around the world. The detail is probably not accessible enough for teachers to use, but the monograph moves the field on considerably in exploring both written and narrative sign language development in deaf children.

### **References**

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