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Review article

Assessing language skills in adult key word signers with intellectual disabilities: Insights from sign linguistics

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ABSTRACT

Manual signing is one of the most widely used approaches to support the communication and language skills of children and adults who have intellectual or developmental disabilities, and problems with communication in spoken language. A recent series of papers reporting findings from this population raises critical issues for professionals in the assessment of multimodal language skills of key word signers. Approaches to assessment will differ depending on whether key word signing (KWS) is viewed as discrete from, or related to, natural sign languages. Two available assessments from these different perspectives are compared. Procedures appropriate to the assessment of sign language production are recommended as a valuable addition to the clinician's toolkit. Sign and speech need to be viewed as multimodal, complementary communicative endeavours, rather than as polarities. Whilst narrative has been shown to be a fruitful context for eliciting language samples, assessments for adult users should be designed to suit the strengths, needs and values of adult signers with intellectual disabilities, using materials that are compatible with their life course stage rather than those designed for young children.

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1. Background

Manual signing is one of the most widely used approaches to support the communication and language skills of children and adults who have intellectual or developmental disabilities, and problems with communication in spoken language. This paper considers some of the issues involved for professionals in assessing the language skills of key word signers and discusses some of the methodological problems raised by a recent paper on the topic.

1.1. The nature of key word signing

"Key word signing" is a shorthand for a complex form of human communication, defined by Meuris, Maes, and Zink (2014) as follows-

> KWS. . ..involves the simultaneous use of spoken language and manual signs, with the key words in the spoken sentence supported by a sign. . . (2588).

It is apparent what we as fluent speakers mean by key word signing: full sentences are spoken, and key words from those sentences are signed simultaneously. But what does it mean from the perspective of the primary users (those with communication impairments) who may – or may not – use accompanying speech? In this paper, it is argued that the term key word signing (KWS) describes the nature of the *input to*, but not necessarily *output by*, persons with intellectual disabilities (IDs), and that this insight has a direct impact on what we assess and how we do it. This argument demands that closer attention be paid to the relationships between key word signing, sign languages and natural gesture, and to consider the heterogeneity of the population of key word signers.

1.2. The history of sign supported speech and KWS

The use of signs by people with IDs has through long tradition been dissociated from the study of sign language as used by Deaf people, although the landmark research in both fields was contemporaneous. Distinctions are drawn between sign languages (which have their own grammatical structures) and the many sign systems developed within the broad taxonomy of Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC: Beukelman & Mirenda, 2013). Here, manual sign is defined as an "unaided" option ("aided" involving an external device), with the lexicon drawn from a natural sign language, and paired with speech, since most of the users are living and operating in the hearing, speaking world. Teaching manual sign to people with IDs has been seen as essentially an instructional task, often using strategies from behaviour modification (e.g. Conaghan, Singh, Moe, Landrum, & Ellis, 1992; Iacono & Parsons, 1986), with little or no attention being paid to the linguistic properties of the medium, and the process viewed as one essentially of learning, reproducing and generalising outside the teaching context.

There are several reasons why the division between sign systems and sign languages has characteristically been presented as absolute. Developers of sign systems have always been very clear that sign is used with disabled populations in the first instance as a supplement to speech; options need to be left open so that users who start by relying on sign may later transfer to speech (see Launonen & Grove, 2003); anxiety amongst parents and staff that the use of manual signs would interfere with speech acquisition meant that the role of speech needed to be emphasised; developers took account of the sensitivities and attitudes of Deaf people, whose language had long been regarded disparagingly as a pictorial gestural form of communication with no inherent structure. From the perspective of native users, within the context of deaf children's education signs had too often been employed as a kind of second best, with hybrid signed speech systems employed as an ineffective educational tool to teach the grammar of spoken language (Johnson, Liddell, & Erting, 1989; Marmor & Petitto, 1979). Thus the use of signs paired with speech came to be seen as a vastly inferior means of communication, associated with institutionalised oppression (children were historically forbidden to use natural sign language in school). Over the past 20 years, however, the Deaf community has become very supportive of others with disabilities who use sign. It was recognised from the outset that there was a continuum of use between "pure" sign language, and the kind of sign + lip patterns or speech that was often used as a *lingua franca* between fluent and non-fluent users of sign language (Ladd & Edwards, 1982). This meant that, in practice, it has always been possible to find something like KWS within the Deaf community, where it is usually described as signed supported speech.

Moreover, some systems designed as KWS explicitly teach features of the sign language. For example, the development of the Makaton Vocabulary (Grove & Walker, 1990; Walker, 1976), a widely used KWS approach in the UK and elsewhere, was influenced by social workers with the Deaf and awareness of sign linguistics. The system observes certain syntactic and morphological rules: for example, directionality in signs such as GIVE, modifications of manner to verbs like WALK (e.g.