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Kinematic modulations of iconicity in child-directed communication in Italian Sign Language

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Abstract

Linguistic strategies humans use for communication are designed to meet the informational needs of their addressees. Speakers not only adapt their speech but also increase the rate of iconic gestures to enhance the clarity of a message for children. Although sign languages allow signers to take advantage of iconicity far more than what is possible in speech, little is known about whether signers use iconicity as a strategy in child-directed communication. In the present study, we used automatic video pose estimation to analyze descriptions aimed at a child (12yo) vs. an adult produced by 7 deaf adult signers of Italian Sign Language. Overall, signers used iconic constructions more than lexical signs and with comparable frequency in descriptions for both age groups. However, iconic constructions were longer in duration for children. Thus, the present study presents the first evidence that, unlike speakers, signers do not modulate quantitative but only qualitative aspects of iconicity for children.