Official Opening of DCAL
The DCAL Research Centre was officially opened on the 17th March 2006. Over 100 people attended a seminar session and an opening ceremony which included a speech from the UCL Provost, Professor Malcolm Grant. Photographs from the launch events are available on our website http://www.dcal.ucl.ac.uk/images/16th/ and http://www.dcal.ucl.ac.uk/images/17th/

The DCAL research groups have been active since January 2006 and contributions from each team follow.

Face to face communication
Fiona Kyle was appointed to the post-doctoral research post on the project 'Developing a test of speech-reading for deaf children' in April. Fiona's previous work has shown that speech-reading is a skill that can predict how well a deaf child learns to read, and this is one of the main reasons for exploring this further. With Ruth Campbell and Tara Mohammed, who are leading this project, we have already shown that Deaf adults with good BSL skills are also better speech readers than those with poor signing skills. One skill need not be omitted to make the other work better. We now need to know how to get the best of both the speaking and signing world available to Deaf children.

Linked with this, in the Imaging the Deaf Brain project, we have been exploring which brain regions 'light up' when watching speech, and also when watching mouth actions that are used with sign language. All our volunteers in the brain scanner were Deaf native signers of BSL. The Deaf brain can distinguish mouth actions and hand actions - even when both types of action mean the same thing. This finding may be important in testing patterns of language in signers who have had a head injury (including stroke).

Developmental projects
Research projects in this strand focus on the development of language and thinking. The group includes Tyron Woolfe and Wolfgang Mann as postdoctoral researchers, with Gary Morgan and Bencie Woll as research directors. We are investigating how children learn to use sign language from the first year onwards, how the development of language, thinking and communication may be affected by poor access to meaningful communication at home and also exploring developmental impairments in language learning where development is slowed down because of genetic or neurological damage.

Our work has a theoretical starting point, and explores how deafness and environmental factors provide windows onto
broad issues such as the resilience of human psychological processes. We are committed to relating our findings to the users of research, especially schools and therapists working with deaf children.

Language processing
One of our objectives is the development and testing of experimental models to be used in parallel studies of BSL and English, with a first series of studies concerning iconicity in lexical signs. Dave Vinson and Robin Thompson are the two researchers in this group, working with Gabriella Vigliocco.

We have planned in detail two series of experiments, both concerning iconicity in lexical signs. These will begin in the autumn.

Atypical Language
Jo Atkinson started at DCAL in January, and her paper (DCAL’s first), The Perceptual Characteristics of Voice-Hallucinations in Deaf People: Insights into the Nature of Subvocal Thought and Sensory Feedback Loops was published in Schizophrenia Bulletin March 1, 2006. Two researchers affiliated with the Atypical Language group have been working on studies of signers with Usher syndrome: Valentina Arena, a PhD student of Bencie Woll, has been researching the relationship between vision and the size of sign space; and Cheryl Capek (Imaging the Deaf Brain Project) has been developing our fMRI study of how signers with Usher syndrome perceive fingerspelling tactiley. We have also been developing work on developmental sign language impairments, with a paper by Gary Morgan, Ros Herman and Bencie Woll: “Language impairments in sign language: breakthroughs and puzzles”, about to appear in the International Journal for Language and Communication Disorders.

Cross-group Research Activities
An on-line system has been set up for volunteers to register their interest in participating in DCAL work. Work on the collection of normative data about BSL is well underway led by Kearsy Cormier and Adam Schembri.

We have been testing and piloting the use of an online questionnaire software package for use in delivery of the online version of the norming test. A DVD version will also be available so that participants complete the questionnaire on paper at home.

To find out more about DCAL visit www.dcal.ucl.ac.uk