

## Assessing morphosyntactic skills in French Sign Language (English)

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Native signers and hearing speakers follow similar patterns of language acquisition. Past research has shown that language development is optimal if deaf children are sufficiently exposed to a signed language (Petitto & Marentette, 1991 ; Morgan, Herman, Barriere & Woll, 2008). Difficulties in either aspects of language development delays or specific language impairment (SLI) affect hearing speakers and native signers alike (Woll & Morgan, 2012; Mason, Rowley, Marshall, Atkinson, Herman, Woll & Morgan, 2010).

Isidore is a 6-year-old native signer who grew up in a native FSL environment. He has undergone speech therapy from the age of 4. While his sisters showed a normal language development, he has had difficulties to communicate from early age, and he suffers from a strong language deficit. To evaluate and quantify Isidore's deficit, testing morphosyntactic skills is required. To date, no FSL-specific test allows caretakers (speech therapist, doctor, etc.) or researchers to assess those skills. Two reasons justify the lack of test: (a) few works specialize in the linguistic description of FSL, and more specifically in such aspects as language acquisition and developmental steps; (b) to our knowledge, no assessment tool exists for FSL. In the wake of Courtin and Limousin's works (2010) on FSL assessment, and other sign-language assessment tools (Herman et al, 1999; 2004), our general goal is to develop an arsenal of tests to assess linguistic abilities in FSL.

We focus on the morphosyntactic level. We evaluate morphosyntactic structures common to sign languages and vocal languages (negation, verb inflection, linguistic tenses, causality links, etc.), as well as structures that are restricted to signed languages (use of syntactic-semantic space, grammaticalized facial expression, etc.).

Our aim is twofold. We want to: (a) obtain information on the acquisition of FSL morphosyntax; (b) confirm our intuitions about the symptoms of language delay affecting native FSL speaker. All in all, we want to see if we can diagnose language delays and SLI in FSL. Generally, morphosyntactic skills provide a reliable indication of possible delays in language development for hearing speakers (see Leonard, 1998 for a review). From our perspective, it is essential to create and implement the same kind of tool for sign language.

Our experiment is in progress. It consists of a grammaticality judgement test (Boudreault & Mayberry, 2006), for both receptive and expressive skills. We evaluate deaf children with a language delay, and compare them to children who do not suffer from such deficits. We test receptive skills with an image-choice task (subjects are asked to choose the correct image among distractors, matching with FSL morphosyntactic structure). We test expressive skills via the description of an image, with several levels of syntactic complexity. Hopefully, our results will contribute to a better understanding of acquisition and the use of FSL structures. More precisely, our results will help determine whether the observed language disorders are modality-specific.

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