

KEYNOTE 1

Developmental Language Impairments in Acquiring a Sign Language

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Studies of signers with language impairments, especially those who are bilingual in a spoken language as well as a sign language, provide a unique opportunity to contrast abilities across language in two modalities – auditory/oral and visual/manual. The aim of this presentation is to examine what developmental sign language impairments can tell us about the relationship between language impairments and modality. This is not only relevant to the study of those populations that use sign language for communication but also because theories of developmental language impairments have often sought to explain these impairments in modality-specific ways – for example, that the language deficits in Specific Language Impairment or Down syndrome arise from impairments in auditory processing; and interventions and rehabilitation are often based on these explanations.

A series of individual and small group studies are presented here illustrating language impairments in sign language users, including individuals with normal hearing who use sign language. These impairments comprise Landau-Kleffner syndrome, Williams syndrome, Down syndrome, autism and SLI. I conclude by suggesting how studies of sign language impairments can not only assist our understanding of how different language impairments originate from different parts of the cognitive, linguistic and perceptual systems, but also impact on clinical practice with these populations.

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