Encyclopedia of
LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

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explanation for the differential success of children from differing cultural and linguistic backgrounds. While diversity in terms of culture, social class, race, ethnicity, and language generally characterize the populations that are the focus of family literacy research, it is unclear whether educators and researchers have grappled with the full significance of this diversity. Some scholars have expressed concern that issues related to diversity have contributed to the construction of binaries that explain the effects of home literacy environments on language and literacy development. The terms *strengths* and *deficits* are generally used to reference the most frequently cited binary within family literacy scholarship. In short, families are presented as either possessing literacy and language strengths or lacking literate or linguistic abilities.

Quantitative studies tend to treat difference as a methodological variable that correlates with specific literacy practices and eventual school progress. These predictive and causal research studies documented the degree to which children met accepted benchmarks of school progress—passing tests, advancing through grade levels, moving through defined scope and sequences, meeting standardized benchmarks, and mastering sets of information. Not only do these methods define success in terms of school-sanctioned expectations, but they also invoke linear and assumedly universal trajectories that are shared by all normally progressing students. These studies are clearly aligned with institutional norms and expectations and strive to help all children master the skills and abilities that are valued within school contexts and accepted as evidence of language and literacy development and learning. Because these approaches focus on providing children with scientifically identified experiences that correlate with school success, they are sometimes described as deficit approaches based on their focus on addressing the deficiencies that children are assumed to bring to language and literacy learning.

In contrast, strength-based approaches focus on the language abilities and literacy practices that exist in diverse households. These studies are less interested in ensuring that children meet static and assumedly universal benchmarks for achievement. Instead, they argue that rich and sophisticated language and literacy practices exist in all homes and that it is the responsibility of schools and teachers to recognize and nurture those skills in support of the children's language and literacy development. These researchers highlight the interests and abilities of families, arguing that it is the educators' responsibility to understand the families they serve and to recognize their strengths. In addition, strength-based perspectives argue that educators in diverse communities may pursue particular goals unique to their local communities. These goals are understood as changing and evolving and may or may not reflect specific school expectations. Educators working from strength-based perspectives argue that family literacy programs must identify their purposes through ongoing discussion and negotiation with families; the perspectives of family members are key to designing programs that are both effective and durable. As Patricia Edwards explains, collaborations between home and school engage families and students in lived experiences that are not a preparation for democratic involvement but are themselves transformative and educative.

These debates relate to the nature of literacy and goals of language and literacy learning and suggest divergent approaches to supporting families and their children. Approaches grounded in causal studies that are designed to identify home literacy and language practices that correlate with later school success have informed the development of family literacy programs designed to train parents to provide their children with the types of experiences that have been identified as enhancing literacy learning in schools. In particular, these programs provide parents with explicit instruction in storybook reading, talking with their children, home writing activities, and games and activities to help children learn basic reading and writing skills. Parents are often provided with books and materials that they can use at home with their children.

In contrast, approaches that highlight the strengths and abilities of families focus on helping teachers to develop relationships with families in order to learn about families and identify funds of knowledge that can inform classroom learning. These programs advocate that teachers act as ethnographers to learn about language and literacy practices in local communities. Funds-of-knowledge approaches are based on the premise that people are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them knowledge. Teachers engage in interviews, observations, and analyses of artifacts to identify the strengths that students and their families bring to classrooms. Norma Gonzalez and her colleagues have provided examples of how practitioners, within the limits of their very real structural constraints, can realistically carry out emancipatory and liberatory pedagogies. While the methods for learning about families are generalizable, the instructional practices based on families' funds of knowledge are always local.

The tensions that have characterized conceptions of language and literacy research and practice in home environments are revealing and present possibilities for future research and practice. Deficit and strengths approaches share a commitment to helping all children succeed in school. As some educators and researchers have argued, there is also value in compromise.

Specifically, educators must recognize and consider the literacy demands that children will encounter in school if children are to be successful while also recognizing the possibilities that are offered by encouraging educators to consider the language and literacy practices that characterize home language and literacy environments. As Allan Luke maintained, educators must set aside issues of truth for the moment and form a provisional political coalition that addresses the possibilities presented by both deficit-based and strength-based approaches.

Catherine Compton-Lilly
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See Also: Cross-Cultural Factors in Communicative Development; Dialect Usage and Language Development; Effects of Head Start Early Intervention on Language Development; Effects of Schooling on Language Development; Literacy Instruction Methods; Reading, Development of; Socioeconomic Factors.

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Home Sign

Deaf children who are born to deaf parents and exposed to sign language from birth learn that language as naturally as hearing children learn the spoken language to which they are exposed. Children who lack the ability to hear thus do not have deficits in language learning and can exercise their language-learning skills if exposed to usable linguistic input. However, 90 percent of deaf children in the world are born to hearing parents who are unlikely to know a sign language and typically want their child to learn spoken language. Although these deaf children have intact language-learning skills, they have no linguistic input to apply their skills to. Under these circumstances, deaf children use gestures—called home signs—to communicate with the hearing individuals in their worlds. Home sign systems thus arise under two conditions—when a child's hearing losses are so profound that the child is unable to learn spoken language, even when given hearing aids and intensive instruction, and when the child's hearing parents do not expose the child to sign language.

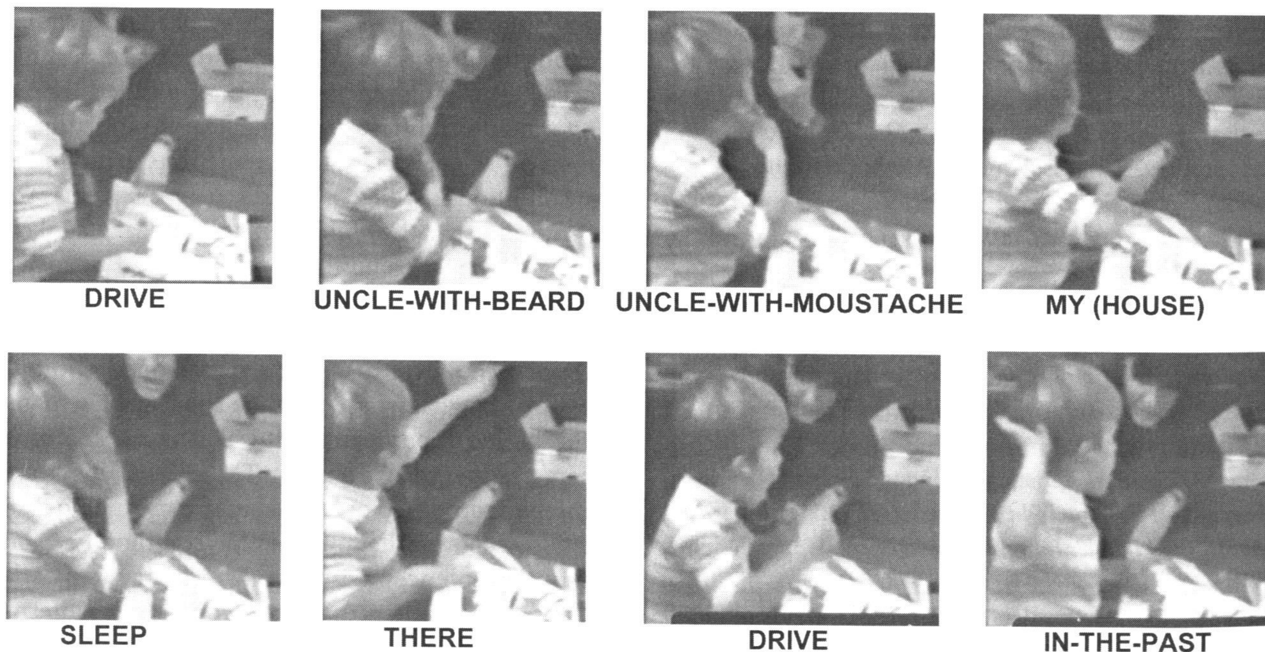
Despite the fact that they are fashioned without access to a language model, home signs display many of the basic properties of natural languages. Home signers' gestures form a lexicon. These lexical items are themselves composed of parts akin to a morphological system. Moreover, the lexical items combine to form structured sentences akin to a syntactic system. The gestures in the sentences follow word-order patterns and can be chunked into constituents. In addition, home signs contain lexical markers that modulate the meanings of sentences (negation and questions) as well as grammatical categories (nouns and verbs, subjects and objects). Finally, home sign is used not only

to make requests of others but also to comment on the present and nonpresent (including the hypothetical) world and to "talk" to oneself—that is, to serve the functions that all languages, signed or spoken, serve. Home sign thus differs from the gestures that hearing children produce as they learn language, which are typically single pointing gestures or an occasional iconic gesture. Hearing children rarely combine their gestures into strings and thus do not produce the gesture sentences that characterize home sign.

Home signers are not exposed to codified language input and, in this sense, differ from children whose hearing parents use baby signs with them. Baby signs were developed to give parents a way to communicate with their hearing children before they are ready to talk. But, home signers are exposed to the spontaneous gestures that hearing people produce when they talk, which could, in principle, serve as a model for their gestures. However, co-speech gestures, as they are known, differ from home sign not only in function but also in form. In terms of function, co-speech gesture works along with speech to communicate; home sign assumes the full burden of communication. In terms of form, co-speech gesture relies on mimetic and analog representation to convey information; home sign (like sign language) relies on segmented forms that are systematically combined to form larger wholes. The co-speech gestures that home signers see are thus different from the gestures that they themselves produce.

Two important characteristics of home sign follow from these facts: (1) the linguistic properties found in home sign cannot be traced to the gestures that the home signers' hearing parents produce when they talk, and (2) home sign systems are not shared in the way that conventional communication systems are shared. The deaf child's hearing parents produce co-speech gestures, which form an integrated system with the speech they accompany and thus are not free to take on the properties of the child's home signs. As a result, although parents respond to their child's home signs, they do not adopt them. Home sign is thus a produced but not a received system and, in this sense, differs from conventional sign languages and even from village sign languages (sign systems that evolve within a community containing more than one deaf individual).

Figure 1 A home signer gesturing about the time his uncle came to visit



The home signer first produces a "drive" gesture to indicate that they drove to the airport to pick up the uncle (indicated through two gestures, "beard" and "moustache"). He then gestures that they brought the uncle to his house (indicated by a point at his chest, "my") and that the uncle stayed in the house ("sleep" "there"). After a pause, the home signer indicates that the event happened a while ago ("drive" "in-the-past").

Home signs may, however, hold a special place in the analysis of sign languages. It is likely that many, if not all, current-day sign languages have their roots in home sign. Home signs have much in common even if they are developed in very different circumstances around the globe.

These shared properties reflect either the linguistic capacities that all human beings share or constraints imposed by the manual modality itself. Understanding the differences between modern-day sign languages and home sign provides insight into pressures that move languages away from their original starting points. Home sign thus offers a glimpse into the most fundamental properties of language and provides an anchor point against which to examine the trajectories sign languages (and perhaps all languages) take as they evolve.

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See Also: Baby Sign Systems; Gestures in Communicative Development (Overview); Language Development in Deaf Children; Pointing; Sign Language Acquisition; Symbolic "Gesture Names."

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Humor

Humor is relevant in language development for several reasons. Humor is communicative in nature as humor is almost always shared. Humor can serve as an introduction to pragmatics as humor has both a literal and intended meaning. Children's sense of humor reflects their level of language development as one can only understand jokes in relation to mastered concepts. It is thus not surprising that children with communication and language disorders often show humor deficits. Finally, humor may be useful in encouraging language development.

Incongruity Theories

Several cognitive models of humor espouse that humor is the product of noticing and appreciating incongruities, that is, things that are unexpected, unusual, or out of the ordinary. These theories suggest children's humor develops alongside their cognitive abilities. From a language point of view, as children's language abilities develop, their appreciation for jokes involving language abilities also develops. In 1979, P. E. McGhee theorized that from 2 years, toddlers produce mislabeling jokes, such as calling an apple a banana, once they have expanded their vocabularies. He also theorized that, from 3 years, children appreciate jokes involving incongruous attributes, that is, jokes involving playing with concepts, such as suggesting wheels are square. These types of jokes could thus be expressed when children can verbalize their understanding of concepts.

Research supports this theory to some extent. A case study found one child produced mislabeling jokes from 15 months (e.g., calling a hummingbird a *duck*). Interestingly, these jokes were made on average 50 days after the words inherent to the jokes were first used. The child also produced jokes based on conceptual incongruity from 18 months (e.g., saying a horse says "baa"). Parents of children between 0 and 4 years report children make conceptual incongruity jokes from 2 years and mislabeling jokes from 3 years,