

DISCUSSION: ARE THE LINGUISTIC MILESTONES IN SIGNED AND SPOKEN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION SIMILAR OR DIFFERENT?

Chair: Laura Ann Petitto

Discussants: Paula F. Marentette, Richard P. Meier, Elissa L. Newport

THE TIMING OF LINGUISTIC MILESTONES IN SIGN AND SPOKEN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION. Laura Ann Petitto & Paula F. Marentette, Psychology Department, McGill University, Montréal, Québec, Canada H3A-1B1

A growing controversy has emerged in child language wherein it is claimed that the onset of signing children's first signs and two-sign combinations occurs *earlier* than speaking children's first words/combinations (hence, the "sign advantage"). We review all existing data on early sign language acquisition, including data drawn from our own studies. While we wholly agree that the existence of a sign advantage would provide critical insight into the timing mechanisms that underlie acquisition, direct comparisons between speaking and signing children's early linguistic milestones reveal that there is *no* sign advantage. We will suggest that the *non*-existence of a sign advantage is equally critical to our understanding of the maturational timing mechanism(s) that guide human language acquisition, and we will discuss the basis for the discrepancy between our conclusions and those in the literature.

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