

From gesture to language: How did a new (sign) language emerge in Nicaragua?

F.C. Donders Center for Cognitive Neuroimaging & Max Planck Institute
for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen
Aslı Özyürek

In the last 25 years, a new language has emerged in Nicaragua created by deaf Nicaraguans who lack exposure to a developed language model. This language today carries fundamental hallmarks of language such as discreteness and combinatorial properties as well as hierarchical features. In this talk I will report findings of a study that has investigated how motion event representations in co-speech gestures of Nicaraguan Spanish speakers surrounding the deaf community have been transformed into linguistic expressions of a sign language by three cohorts of deaf signers. I will argue that children's analytical and learning abilities have a crucial role in emergence of linguistic properties in this community and also discuss the findings in the context of recently reported other emerging sign languages and homesign systems.