The Emergence and Acquisition of Nicaraguan Sign Language

In the summer of 2002, I participated in a research project that explores the creation of a language that has appeared over the last 30 years. The cohort of deaf Nicaraguans entering school in the late 1970s began developing the first community-wide sign language known in Nicaragua. A second cohort of children, entering school ten years later, learned this system from their older peers. Differences today between first-cohort adults, second-cohort adolescents and third-cohort children reveal how this process of transmission and acquisition shapes a new language. Our research examined differences between the cohorts in signed word order and in their use of other grammatical devices. We examined the use of spatial devices to discuss the location and orientation of objects. We documented these developments by videotaping deaf Nicaraguans participating in sentence elicitation, signed narrative, and communication tasks such as giving directions or describing the location of hidden objects to a deaf partner.

As an intern, I analyzed signed responses for verb phrase structure and spatial content, entered data, and maintained a database of deaf participants. This work included learning to digitize and edit video data and stimuli. I also participated in preparing reports in Spanish describing our work to Nicaraguan educators, participants, and parents.

The project had three phases: preparation, field component, and documentation and analysis. In the preparation stage, we created consent forms, information pamphlets for parents and educators and stimuli for vocabulary elicitation and reciprocal verb construction elicitation. In the field component, we visited schools for special education as well as the association for deaf adults (ANSNIC). We participated in local Nicaraguan events, particularly those that involved the deaf community, including national telethon and national holiday celebrations. Traveling around Nicaragua gave us the opportunity to interact with the deaf community in the countryside. In the documentation and analysis stage, we transcribed Spanish narratives for a study on gestured influences on sign language. We entered data and updated our database with new participants' information, which required digitizing and editing video data.

In comparing the gestures that accompany spoken Spanish to the first three cohorts of signer, we are finding that the system is changing from a holistic one to one in which discrete elements are joined together in segments. For example, where an earlier adult signer will sign "roll down" with a single gesture that includes both a rolling and downward movement, a recent younger signer will produce two segments, "roll" followed by "down." This indicates that the language is developing structure as the children learn it. In this way, the children are creating a new language.

Being part of this research was fascinating. I was involved in various activities, which gave me...
the opportunity to learn about the creation, the structure, and the development of this new language. I also learned much about how research on language is conducted. The most rewarding role for me in this process was serving as a liaison between the project and the parents and institutional officials with whom we worked. In this role, I explained what the research was about and communicated any concerns or questions that the Nicaraguans had to the director of the project. This gave me exposure to the cultural implication of international fieldwork and exposure to a local perspective. Working with professor Ann Senghas and her research team was a meaningful learning experience in the laboratory and in the field. In other words, it was an unforgettable summer.