“From gesture to language”

Abstract: Because they can be created spontaneously with little outside influence, new sign languages are natural laboratories for understanding the emergence of linguistic properties. Unlike established sign languages like American Sign Language, or British Sign Language (each are at least 200 years old), new sign languages are only one to three generations old, yet they are fully communicative and already exhibit linguistic structure. We find that signers of one new sign language, Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language, have consistent word order, and lexical categories by the second generation. However, the phonological or formational properties of the new sign language are still developing. How do such languages begin life, in their earliest years? I will describe studies our research group has carried out with hearing non-signers' novel use of gestures and gesture strings. Rudimentary word order can be found in their gesture strings and some very basic gesture types are consistently used. Our work offers a different view of how linguistic structure can emerge in a short time, in contrast to some claims offered about the course of language evolution.