Input and interaction in deaf families

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Citation for published version (APA):
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This thesis describes the sign and spoken language input offered by four deaf mothers to three deaf and three hearing children and relates this input to the language acquisition of the children between the ages of one and three years. These deaf mothers offer their children language in a way that reflects the hearing status of the children. The deaf children are mainly offered Sign Language of the Netherlands (SLN), and very little Dutch; the hearing children are offered SLN and Dutch, but also to a large degree a mixed mode, consisting of simultaneously signed and spoken lexical elements. This mixed mode is also sometimes present in the input to the deaf children, but to a much lesser extent.

The deaf children are acquiring SLN, but their acquisition of Dutch has not really got underway; they produce just some (proto)words. The fact that spoken language is only partly accessible to deaf children of course also plays a role here. The hearing children produce SLN, Dutch and also a mixed mode. The accessibility of the language offered and produced is explored, showing that these young children have good access to the sign language but the deaf children a more limited visual access to the spoken language. The three language modes used in the input and output are described in detail on three levels: lexical, functional and structural, for the six mother-child dyads. There is considerable influence of the input to be seen in the output of the children both quantitatively and qualitatively but there are also interesting exceptions. The hearing status of the children is also shown to influence the input in different ways.

This study has theoretical implications for the role of input in language acquisition but also practical implications for parents and teachers of deaf children.