

ABSTRACT 2015

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“What three little pigs and a hungry wolf can teach us about sign language grammar.”

Nicaraguan Sign Language Projects is one of several organizations that fosters the spread of Nicaragua’s indigenous signed language. Linguists for over a quarter century have asserted that Nicaraguan Sign Language is a rich, sophisticated, rule governed language at a par with all the other members of the human language club. It is a claim that continues to fall on deaf ears.

And this should come as a surprise to no one. Signed languages have been analyzed and dissected by university linguistic professors and graduate level students, leaving a trail of intellectual literature that is illuminating for university linguistic professors and graduate level students.

To date, so far as we can determine, no one on the front lines in Nicaragua’s Deaf educational system, neither interpreters nor teachers, actually believes that Nicaraguan Sign Language is all that linguists trump it up to be – at least no one but a handful of people at Nicaragua’s national association of the Deaf.

A child does not need to be able to articulate the grammar of his or her language in order to master those rules. How many hearing six year olds can define terms like *subject*, *adjective*, *verb*, *relative clause*, and so forth? And yet, we teach children these labels in grade school – indeed, we devote entire semesters to teaching grammar and syntax. How come we don’t do the same for young Deaf users of signed languages? After all, we certainly take great pains to teach these Deaf kids about the grammar and syntax of the dominant speech driven language.

The reason in Nicaragua anyway (but I suspect this applies most everywhere else) is that linguists have so far failed to justify their bold claim that the indigenous signed language is a bona fide language in the first place, or that a native signer is entitled to the same respect that is accorded to a native Spanish speaker.

We submit that in order to remedy this situation, teachers need to be taught, and teachers need to be teaching, and Deaf children need to be learning precisely why linguists proclaim Nicaraguan Sign Language to be so complex and so rich. If a grade school teacher can’t teach this, it is because that teacher doesn’t understand it. And, if the teacher doesn’t understand the claim, then that teacher doesn’t give credence to it, either. Unfortunately, the dynamic here is quite disempowering for Deaf Nicaraguans – the supposed beneficiaries of all that linguistic research in the first place.

In this presentation, we take a simple signed narrative and search that narrative for indications that the signer is adhering to a defined set of grammatical rules, and not simply gesturing and pantomiming. We use SignWriting so that the viewer can take the time to ponder the components of each sign along with the sign order as we endeavor to highlight some of the grammatical labels and rules that so quickly become evident. We argue that this is the kind of instruction that needs to be provided to all interpreters, teachers and, most importantly, young signers.