**Watching language grow in the manual modality: Nominals, Predicates, and Handshapes**

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All languages, both spoken and signed, make a formal distinction between two types of terms in a proposition––terms that identify what is to be talked about (nominals) and terms that say something about this topic (predicates). I explore conditions that could lead to this property by charting its development in Nicaraguan Sign Language (NSL), a newly emerging language, focusing on how handshape is used in nominals vs. predicates in three Nicaraguan groups: (1) homesigners who are not part of the Deaf community and use their own gestures to communicate; (2) NSL cohort 1 signers who fashioned the first stage of NSL; (3) NSL cohort 2 signers who learned NSL from cohort 1. The findings suggest that a community of users may be essential to arrive at a stable nominal lexicon, but not to establish a productive morphological marker in predicates.