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Modality and structure in signed and spoken languages

The realization that signed languages are true languages is one of the great discoveries of the last thirty years of linguistic research. The work of many sign language researchers has revealed deep similarities between signed and spoken languages in their structure, acquisition, and processing, as well as differences arising from the differing articulatory and perceptual constraints under which signed languages are used and learned. This book provides a crosslinguistic examination of the properties of many signed languages, including detailed case studies of American, Hong Kong, British, Mexican, and German Sign Languages. The contributions to this volume, by some of the most prominent researchers in the field, focus on a single question: to what extent is linguistic structure influenced by the modality of language? Their answers offer particular insights into the factors that shape the nature of language and contribute to our understanding of why languages are organized as they are.

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edited by

Richard P. Meier, Kearsy Cormier,
and David Quinto-Pozos

with the assistance of Adrianne Cheek, Heather Knapp,
and Christian Rathmann

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Few readers will be surprised to learn that this volume is the fruit of a conference. That conference – one of an annual series sponsored by the Texas Linguistics Society – was held at the University of Texas at Austin on February 25–27, 2000; the topic was "The effects of modality on language and linguistic theory." It was, we believe, a very successful meeting, one marked by the high quality of the papers and of the ensuing discussions. There are many people and organizations to whom we are indebted for their financial support of the conference and for their hard work toward its realization. Here there are two sets of friends and colleagues whom we especially want to thank: Adrianne Cheek, Heather Knapp, and Christian Rathmann were our co-organizers of the conference. We owe a particular debt to the interpreters who enabled effective conversation between the Deaf and hearing conferees. The skill and dedication of these interpreters – Kristen Schwall-Hoyt, Katie LaSalle, and Shirley Gerhardt – were a foundation of the conference's success.

This book brings together many of the papers from that conference. All are now much updated and much revised. The quality of the revisions is due not only to the hard work of the authors but also to the peer-review process. To every extent possible, we obtained two reviews for each chapter, one from a scholar who works on signed languages and one from a scholar who, while expert in linguistics or psycholinguistics, works primarily on spoken languages. There were two reasons for this: first we sought to make sure that the chapters would be of the highest possible quality. And, second, we sought to ensure that the chapters would be accessible to the widest possible audience of researchers in linguistics and related fields.

To obtain these reviews, we abused many of our colleagues here at the University of Texas at Austin, including Ralph Blight, Megan Crowhurst, Lisa Green, Scott Myers, Carlota Smith, Steve Wechsler, and Tony Woodbury from the Department of Linguistics and Randy Diehl, Cathy Echols, and Peter MacNeilage from the Department of Psychology. We, and our authors, also benefited from the substantive and insightful reviews provided by Diane Brentari (Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN), Karen Emmorey (The Salk Institute, La Jolla, CA), Elisabeth Engberg-Pedersen (University of Copenhagen,

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Christine Bartels, who at the outset was our acquisitions editor at Cambridge University Press, shaped our thinking about how to put this book together. We are greatly indebted to her. The Children's Research Laboratory of the Department of Psychology of the University of Texas at Austin provided the physical infrastructure for our work on this book. During the preparation of this book, David Quinto-Pozos was supported by a predoctoral fellowship from the National Institutes of Health (F31 DC00352). Last – but certainly not least – we thank the friends and spouses who have seen us through this process, in particular Madeline Sutherland-Meier and Mannie Quinto-Pozos. Their patience and support have been unstinting.

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