

Introduction

A conversation between deaf-blind people

There are a number of different descriptions of the communication of deaf-blind people and tactile sign language (see for instance www.fsdb.org/about.htm). But there are few linguistic studies of the tactile sign language of deaf-blind people. Apart from my own earlier studies of Swedish sign language (Mesch 1990; 1994), there are really only several studies of American sign language (Reed et al. 1995, Collins & Petronio 1998) as well. This is why I chose to extend my analysis of how deaf-blind people converse with one another in tactile sign language. In particular, I was interested in turn-taking and questions in order to see how deaf-blind people read signs and signals manually.

A transcribed sequence from the material of this study shows how two deaf-blind conversation participants converse with one another:

- 1 3aDB PEK-f-kort ALLTID PEK-adr-lång-k TECKNA TOLK GE-c-f >
2 PEK-adr-lång-k FÖRSTÅ INTE STOPPA-fh VAD ((huvud fv-uppe))
3 3bDB VAD VAD BRUKA SÄGA PEK-c VAD V-A-D JA UPPREPA PEK-c >
4 BRUKA PEK-c V-A-D =
5 3aDB = STÄMMA ((huvud ner)) PEK-adr SÄGA-TILL-f-h
6 3bDB V-A-D
7 3aDB MEN DÖVBLIND MÅNGA TYST NICKA-LÄNGE-uppr LÅT-GÅ >
8 NICKA-LÄNGE-uppr
9 3bDB PEK-c IBLAND TECKNA SÄGA-TILL VAD SÄGA >
10 KOMMA-TILL-MIG I-KVÄLL FEL ((neka)) PEK-c MENA INTE >
11 SÄGA-TILL UPPREPA LYCKAS FÖRSTÅ IBLAND FEL IBLAND
- 3aDB Du brukar meddela tolken när du inte förstår?
3bDB Vad, brukar jag säga, vad.
3aDB Bra att du säger till.
3bDB Jag säger 'vad'.
3aDB Men många dövblinda nickar tyst fast de inte förstår innehållet.
3bDB Jag tecknar ibland 'vad säger du'. Svaret blev en gång då: 'Hälsar på dig ikväll'. 'Fel', sa jag för jag menade inte så. Efter upprepningen lyckades det. Det kan bli missförstånd ibland.

(Glosses and translation into English)

- 1 3aDB INDEX-f-short ALWAYS INDEX-adr-long-co SIGN INTERPRETER >
2 GIVE-c-f INDEX-adr-long-co UNDERSTAND NOT STOP-fr WHAT
 ((head fl-up))
3 3bDB WHAT WHAT USUALLY SAY INDEX-c WHAT W-H-A-T YES >
4 REPEAT YES REPEAT INDEX-c USUALLY INDEX-c W-H-A-T =
5 3aDB = AGREE ((head down)) INDEX-adr SAY-TO-f-r
6 3bDB W-H-A-T

- 7 3aDB BUT DEAF-BLIND MANY SILENT NOD-LONG-rep LET-GO >
8 NOD-LONG-LONG-rep
9 3bDB INDEX-c SOMETIMES SIGN SAY-TO WHAT SAY >
COME-TO-ME TONIGHT WRONG ((shake head)) INDEX-c >
MEAN NOT SAY-TO REPEAT SUCCEED UNDERSTAND >
SOMETIMES WRONG SOMETIMES
- 3aDB Do you usually inform the interpreter when you don't understand?
3bDB What, I usually say, what.
3aDB It's good you say so.
3bDB I say 'what'.
3aDB But many deaf-blind people nod silently even though they don't understand the content.
3bDB Sometimes I sign 'what are you saying'. Once the answer was: 'See you tonight'. 'Wrong', I said because I didn't mean that. After repeating it, it got through. Sometimes there can be a misunderstanding.

The first few lines are a communicative speech act, a question. In line 3-4, there is a response, which is relevant to the previous line. It contains a wh-word. This deals with a reported question, with 3bDB describing what she usually does to ask for a repetition in a situation with an interpreter. In line 5, 3aDB utters a follow-up. 3bDB then continues with the subject by repeating the spelling V-A-D ('W-H-A-T'). 3aDB describes the typical passive receiver's role of deaf-blind people in line 7-8. 3bDB continues with the subject by telling about a misunderstanding in a previous conversation with another conversational partner.

How can deaf-blind people determine what are questions without access to non-manual signals like raised or knitted eyebrows? And how can they distinguish between questions that are addressed to them directly and reported questions like in the example above? A manually conveyed wh-word does not always mean that the utterance is a question directed to the conversational partner.

Tactile sign language is used primarily by deaf deaf-blind people who, for obvious reasons, would really like to keep their sign language and use it partly by holding the hands of the other conversational partner and feeling the hand movements. Sighted deaf people have a great ability to receive information simultaneously through their sense of sight. Along with the hands, which function at the same time as articulators, other parts of the body, like the eyebrows, eyes and mouth, are also involved in language production. People who have some visual ability left still use the visual-gesture conversational form despite their limited vision. These people can compensate by using the tactile conversational form, for instance, when the lighting is bad. For completely blind people, tactile sign language is the only conversational form. This is often the case for people whose vision gradually deteriorates, that is, whose field of vision slowly narrows, so that the method of reading changes little by little from the visual to the tactile form.

In my earlier studies of the sign language of deaf-blind people, I described how a deaf-blind principal informant executed or read signs in conversations using tactile sign language, both with another deaf-blind person and a sighted deaf person, as well as with an interpreter in an interpreting situation. Because their field of vision is limited or has disappeared, deaf-blind people compensate for visual signals by using tactile signals. The areas I addressed were facial signals in general, turn-taking, feedback, pointing, repetition, clause types and polysynthetic signs (Mesch 1990; 1994).

For this dissertation, I have chosen to concentrate on questions. How do deaf-blind people ask each other questions when they cannot use non-manual question signals, which are necessary in the sign language of deaf people? Because an interrogative clause without non-manual signals resembles a declarative clause, I had to begin by investigating turn-taking mechanisms in conversation to see whether deaf-blind people use tactile signals regulating conversation when they distinguish between interrogatives and declaratives.

Organization of the book

This dissertation is principally about turn-taking and questions. Chapter 1 will address the concept of ‘deaf-blind people’ and different methods of communication. In Chapter 2, I will present the material I have used in my analysis. In Chapter 3, I will give an overview of the concept “conversation” in spoken language and sign language. A conversation consists of structural units of conversation: sequences, turns, adjacency pairs and feedback.

In Chapter 4, I will give an overview of the structure of signs in Swedish Sign Language and of how the signs are made up of manual and non-manual components. In order to describe how deaf-blind people ask each other questions, I will start by describing how they use their hands for sign language communication: with two hands under another person’s hands (monologue position) or with the right hand under the left hand of another person and the left hand on the right hand of the other person (dialogue position). The structure of signs is described in both of these positions. In Chapter 5, I will describe how turn-taking is carried out in tactile conversation and how a deaf-blind receiver signals feedback to a deaf-blind signer.

Before investigating questions in the following chapters, I will first describe in Chapter 6 form and function regarding questions. In the same chapter, I will give an overview of interrogative clauses in sign language and show what partial signals are used in questions in Swedish Sign Language. The analysis that follows

is based on transcriptions and video observations of how deaf-blind people read questions without non-manual signals. In Chapters 7, 8 and 9, I will analyze yes/no questions, alternative questions and wh-questions. In Chapter 10, I will examine another group, support questions. This involves strategic features in conversation: how conversational participants support one another by requesting feedback and clarification in order for communication to work.