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Sign language interpreters' use of haptic signs in interpreted meetings with deafblind persons

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Abstract

This article presents a study of how sign language interpreters use haptic signs in interpreter-mediated meetings with deafblind persons. The analysis illustrates how this kind of interpreting is organized and how interactional space is reconfigured through embodied haptic signs. The material is from an authentic meeting among five deafblind board members of a Norwegian association for the deafblind. Despite their inability to see and hear one another clearly or not at all, the dialogue among them flows. Based on an analysis of video-recordings from the meeting, this article provides insight into the interpreters' actions as well as their interaction with each other and their deafblind interlocutors. In particular, the article draws attention to how the interpreters alternate their actions between mediating spoken utterances, describing the meeting context and producing different kinds of haptic signs. Haptic signs are conventional signals produced on a deafblind person's body providing contextualizing information about the environment where the interaction is taking place. They also work to convey other participants' nonverbal expressions, such as turn-taking, minimal-response signals and emotional expressions. As such, haptic signs provide information that the deafblind can use to frame their interaction as well as to enable them to regulate their own self-presentation. In this context, haptic signs produced by the interpreters supports involvement in the ongoing meeting, selecting effective signals and timing the production and adjustment of the signals from the feedback given by the deafblind interlocutors. An interpreter's actions are based on a situated, moment-by-moment evaluation of the participation framework in which all the participants, both the interpreters and the deafblind persons, operate.

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Keywords: Haptic signs; Embodied interaction; Tactile sign language; Interpreting; Deafblind; Turn-taking

1. Introduction

This article presents a study of an authentic meeting between five deafblind board members of a Norwegian Association for the Deafblind. Despite the members' inability to see and hear one another, their dialogue and meeting are effective. The interaction in the meeting is facilitated by seven sign language interpreters who work to interpret the meeting and its interactional context. In particular, this study focuses on the interpreters' use of haptic signs, that is, different kinds of signals that are produced on the deafblind person's body that provide information about the interactional environment as well as the other participants' turn-taking signals and emotional expressions, such as laughter and confusion (Lahtinen, 2008). The current analysis focuses on the sequential order of the interaction and the way the interpreters successfully deploy haptic signs to provide information to their deafblind interlocutors about their environment and the other participants' emotional expressions.

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1.1. Deafblindness: a combined sensory loss

A person can be defined as deafblind when s/he has a combined visual and auditory disability. In Norway, it has been estimated that approximately 0.1‰ of the population is deafblind (Raanes, 2006). While some of the deafblind are both completely deaf and blind, others have retained some hearing and/or some vision. The deafblind can be further divided into two main groups with regards the time when the sensory reduction occurred as well as their preferred way of communication: first, those who were born with the disability (congenital deafblindness); and second, those who have become deafblind as adults (acquired deafblindness). Most deafblind belong to the second group, and this group can again be divided into those who are primarily deaf, those who are primarily blind and those who were born with normal sight and hearing and have developed both visual and auditory disability in their adult life. Based on the type and degree of their sensory loss, persons with a combined sensory loss use a variety of communication methods. Some deafblind people find it most efficient to communicate through tactile sign language, while others prefer the codified national sign language. In the latter case, use of national sign language often requires that the speaker adjusts the size and the location of signs towards the deafblind person's sight. Some communicate through spoken language as they can hear rather well, especially if the speaker adjusts their voice and/or the receiver uses a technical hearing aid. As a result, interpreter-mediated group discussions among deafblind persons can thus involve several different kinds of communication methods and require several interpreters.

1.2. Tactile sign language and haptic signs

Communication by touch is characteristic of deafblind communication. In the Nordic countries, a distinction is made between haptic sign and tactile sign language. Tactile and haptic are two terms for “touch”, derived from the Latin word “tactilis” and the Greek term “haptikos”, respectively. Tactile sign language refers to the traditional use of sign language in deafblind communication and its use goes back to the first meetings between deafblind people in schools and families. Tactile communication has been studied since the early works of Birdwhistell (1952, 1970), which focused on the bodily and kinesthetic modality of human communication, and later studies have been conducted from material in French, Swedish, Norwegian, British and American tactile sign languages (Mesch, 1998; Collins, 2004; Raanes, 2006; Petronio and Dively, 2006; Schwartz, 2009; Edwards, 2014). Haptic signs, on the other hand, are a relatively new system of tactile signals, which provide both environmental and interactional information to deafblind people. The system has been developed in the deafblind societies in the Nordic countries over the last 20 years. The signals were originally created by Trine Næss, a deafblind woman from Norway, who was experiencing progressive visual sensory loss. Together with her sign language interpreters she started to experiment with different techniques of embodied signals that would provide her information about the context, the ongoing conversation and the emotional expressions of the others involved (Næss, 2002). Unfortunately, Næss passed away before her work was published, but three of her interpreters have continued her work, resulting in a handbook for haptic communication (Bjorge et al., 2013; Bjørge and Rehder, 2015). Other important contributors to the development of haptic signs in the Nordic countries include, for example, Riitta Lahtinen and Russ Palmer, whose work has been presented in a number of workshops in the Nordic countries. Lahtinen has also published a case study of how she and Palmer use haptic signs in their communication (Lahtinen, 2003).

Today, the use of haptic signs has become an integral part of interpreting for the deafblind in the Nordic countries (Lahtinen et al., 2010; Skåren, 2011), and there are approximately 200 conventional signs for directions, emotions, feedback signals and activities (Bjorge et al., 2013). To illustrate this sign system, Fig. 1 below presents the signs for

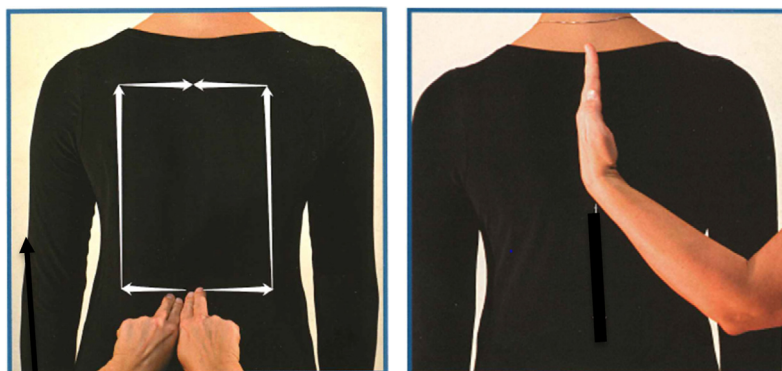


Fig. 1. Haptic signs for room and direction – straight ahead (reproduced with permission from Bjorge et al., 2013: 78, 122).

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