



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Linguistics and Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/linged



Focal social actions through which space is configured and reconfigured when orienting to a Finnish Sign Language class

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 April 2017

Received in revised form 14 October 2017

Accepted 19 October 2017

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Classroom interaction

Mediated discourse analysis

Multimodal interaction analysis

Sign Language

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on how signing students organise themselves spatially in social interactions in a university lecture hall. One may view space as a concrete location, a social construct, and a normative actor with historical trajectories. The study addresses the question, ‘What are the mediated actions through which the students and teacher (re)configure space for participating in a class?’ Following a methodological framework of Mediated Discourse Analysis and multimodal interaction analysis, I approach this question by examining the social actions occurring when entering a lecture hall. The primary data includes video recordings, photos, and participatory observations, documented by field notes. The analysis shows how the architectural specifications of a space pose restrictions on visual-embodied interactions. However, the participants configure and reconfigure the space to some extent to suit visual-embodied interaction through explicit and implicit negotiation.

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1. Introduction

Traditional academic spaces—physical environments designed for educational purposes such as lecture halls and seminar rooms—afford students and teachers resources for interaction. Such environments communicate to us *preferable actions*; for example, when listening to a lecture or participating in group work (Leijon, 2016). Entering a space is a moment that invokes recognition of norms and expectations of activities that “belong” to a place. People “recognise place as such-and-such-a-place” and act accordingly (Blommaert, Collins, & Slembrouck, 2005; Blommaert & Huang, 2009). However, one should recognise the complex dynamics *firstly*, of space as “already there,” as a normative agent about which exist presuppositions regarding actions that occur within its confines (Blommaert & Huang, 2009); and *secondly*, of space as inhabited, appropriated, configured, and reconfigured by the activities of people (Baynham, 2012; Crabtree, 2000; Cresswell, 2004). Leijon (2016) examines the interplay between space, interaction, and learning sequences in the context of higher education, and the analysis attends in particular to focal episodes in which participants use space as a resource in their meaning-making process. This article focuses on actions participants take in order to configure and recon-

figure a space to suit visual-embodied interaction involving Finnish Sign Language (FinSL).

From a viewpoint of *interaction and language use*, a space as an environment suggests or does not suggest the use of certain linguistic repertoires and modalities (Blommaert et al., 2005; Blommaert & Huang, 2009). In other words, space is a crucial actor in organising regimes of language (Blommaert et al., 2005).¹ For example, a lecture hall with a permanent furniture arrangement—such as with chairs bolted to a sloped floor—suggests a platform event for a speaker and audience (Goffman, 1983; Leijon, 2016). Moreover, such a room poses restrictions on embodied interaction, as do many traditional lecture halls in university buildings, by directing the faces and bodies of an audience towards a platform event. The speaker and space reserved for a blackboard or a white screen often present multimodal texts. These settings enable students to attend to the spoken comments of their fellows. However, engaging visually with each other as a group is either impossible or requires substantial effort. Students’ visual-embodied communication is

¹ Wei (2011) criticises such a view for placing too much emphasis “on the historical and political situatedness of linguistic and communicative performances,” and would rather see more emphasis on the way the participants create multi-lingual spaces interactionally, or translanguage space “through strategic use of the social resources, including linguistic resources” (Wei, 2011, p. 1224, 1234). This article attempts to approach mundane, social action as a starting point for analysis of the dynamics between “place as a normative actor” and the actions initiated by participants when entering a place.

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accessible only to the speaker and to those who can adjust their bodies to allow for a line of sight to the interlocutor initiating a comment. It follows that, in their physical layouts, such spaces suggest a dominance of spoken and written language modalities, marginalising visual and embodied communication—including interaction in signed languages. That dominance does not present a surprise, since very few institutions of higher education have a signing community of practice that has had sufficient time to impact permanently the architectural specifications of learning environments (see however Edwards & Harold, 2014 on Gallaudet University).

This article details a study of one of such community of practice. At the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, FinSL is a fully-fledged subject offering studies from minor to PhD degree level on sign-language linguistics, and on the culture of the Finnish signing community. The teaching of FinSL began at the university in 1992 and the Sign Language Centre was opened eighteen years later, in response to an assignment from the Finnish Ministry of Education mandating that the university be tasked with research and higher education in FinSL (Keski-Levijoki, Takkinen, & Tapio, 2012). One can describe the University of Jyväskylä and its FinSL study programme as a ‘nexus of intersection’ between long-established traditions of higher education and language use norms. Academic discourses encounter members of signing communities, members from a diversity of educational and linguistic backgrounds. However, does such an environment with a lengthy history in higher education afford FinSL users multilingual, multimodal semiotic resources? Do such academic spaces enable FinSL signers to harness the visual-embodied semiotic practices of signing communities towards active participation in academic discourses, creating opportunities for new, innovative practices to emerge?

This article examines the actions or interactions of a group of students and a teacher of a FinSL study programme in a traditional lecture hall at the start of a new academic year. Drawing on ethnographic data including video recordings, field notes, interviews and a reflective group discussion, I analyse the minutes before a university class begins, when participants enter a lecture hall. By examining the mediated actions of the students when entering the hall before class—defining mediated actions² as ‘social actions taken with mediational means or cultural tools’ (Scollon, 2001a, 2001b; Wertsch, 1998)—I aim to discover how students appropriate, configure, and reconfigure a space; and the types of action those students view as applicable to that space. One may also see such presumed actions as component parts of larger social structures. In other words, one can regard mediated actions as linked directly to larger sets of ideologies and values that surface in university teaching and learning (Scollon & Scollon, 2004).

The second reason for choosing to examine ‘entering a lecture hall’ arises from interest in a practice called a “conversation circle” (Bauman, 2012) or “the semicircular classroom seating configuration” (Bagga-Gupta, 1999), which researchers have addressed as a practical example of “a set of premises about the nature of the Deaf community and Deaf culture” (Edwards & Harold, 2014, p. 1354). The Finnish National Agency for Education’s “Viittomakieliset oppilaat perusopetuksessa” [Signing students in basic education] document, published in 2016 as a guide for Finnish teachers and educators, praises semi-circular seating explicitly, stating, “Istumajärjestys puolikaaren muodossa varmistaa sen, että oppilaat näkevät toistensa viittomisen” or, “A semicircular seating

² Mediational means or cultural tools mediate all actions; cultural tools are ‘mundane’ things with which we accomplish actions, such as language, hands to gesture with, and technologies we use to contact each other (Norris, 2012, p. 115). Cultural tools are embedded in social practices, which are appropriated in the habitus of users (Norris, 2005, p. 98).

arrangement ensures that students see each other’s signing” (The Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 10).

In the context of *visually oriented arenas* in education (Bagga-Gupta, 2004), the semicircular classroom seating configuration is considered as a practice for facilitating lines of sight, offering the potential to accomplish visual language practices (Bagga-Gupta, 1999). The activity in question was captured on video and published at the University of Jyväskylä for teaching purposes in the EU project “Signall 3—Working with the Deaf community,” during which first and second year students on the FinSL study programme strived to attract attention to this practice (Signall 3). However, the negotiation process and arranging of semicircular seating has never been examined as it occurs in situ. Also, research has not discussed situations in which sign language users *do not* arrange their seats according to the presumed “Deaf norm.” One may consider the act of rearranging or not rearranging the seats of a university lecture hall into a semicircular configuration before a sign language lesson a *focal social action* that contests groups of norms on different levels of discourse (see Section 3). I will set out therefore to examine in detail the moment at which such an arrangement is expected to occur.

2. Space: a normative actor

Recently, studies of sociolinguistics and discourse have expressed a growing interest in space and place in relation to language use, discourse, and how people organise themselves spatially in social interactions (see for example Scollon & Scollon, 2003 on geosemiotics; Cresswell, 2013 on human geography; Blommaert et al., 2005; Keating & Mirus, 2003). Sociolinguistics, discourse studies, and interactional sociolinguistics in particular are experiencing a “spatial turn” (Baynham, 2012; McIlvenny, Broth, & Haddington, 2009; Scollon & Scollon, 2003).

Following Cresswell (2004), I consider space to be more abstract than place. Place is socially produced space, a way of understanding the world. Jones (2005) has examined classroom situations in which participants interact with each other in various spaces, virtual and physical, via semiotic resources. In the classroom interaction that is the focus of this study, participants do not engage in computer-mediated communication in virtual spaces. However, I consider useful Jones’ perspective on how we constantly interact in *multiple spaces*. Jones (2005, p. 144) lists five types of space towards which people can orient themselves in classroom interaction: *one*, physical space; *two*, virtual space; *three*, relational space; *four*, screen space, and *five*, so-called third space,³ the space to which the participants refer to in examined interaction. Jones argues that since multiple spaces exist, multiple semiotic systems in which interaction can occur, it is crucial to focus on how participants orient themselves towards those systems—and on how sites of attention for joint action are created (Jones, 2005, 2010). This study attends to both physical space, the built environment, and relational space, or space created in interaction by the “state of talk” (Jones, 2005, p. 144).

The idea of a *site of engagement* in mediated discourse analysis (Scollon, 2001a, 2001b) serves as a point of departure for examining the interplay between communicative practices and discourses, so as to avoid the confusion of interpreting place solely as physical location or material environment. An action is understood as occurring within a site of engagement, a moment in real time opened for a mediated action to occur. A site of engagement opens when social practices and mediational means intersect (Scollon, 2001a,

³ Jones (2005, p. 144) defines third space as “spaces inhabited by neither participant but rather referred to in the course of interaction (bars, saunas, classrooms, shopping centers).”

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