

Turn-organisation in mediated phone interaction using Video Relay Service (VRS)

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Received 31 March 2011; received in revised form 28 May 2012; accepted 3 June 2012

Abstract

Technical development has created new arenas of communication for people. One such arena is the Video Relay Service (VRS). The VRS facilitates interaction between people who use visual/gestual sign language on a video phone, and people who use verbal/auditive language on the telephone/mobile phone. The interaction is mediated by a sign language interpreter. The interpreter is the only person in the setting who is directly linked to the others, and all participants are physically separated from each other. The interpreter plays a key role in the interaction, administrating and co-ordinating the talk. In order to do so, the interpreter uses a range of different techniques and strategies. It is the purpose of the current article to describe, analyse and discuss the turn-organisation of the VRS. The article demonstrates how the interpreter is a power figure, who may sanction or not sanction an utterance. The interpreter also manages the turn-taking machinery by means of visible and audible techniques, as well as rendition strategies. The interpreter is not only a mediator, but a co-creator of the interaction; a part that relates dynamically, and makes the participants relate dynamically, to the specific setting of the service.

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Keywords: Sign language interpreting; Turn-organisation; Turn-taking; Computer-mediated communication; Language and technology; Video Relay Service (VRS)

1. Introduction

Social interaction is essential for all human beings. In interaction, people and actions are “talked into being” (Heritage, 1984) and the actors are “not simply embedded within context, but actively involved in the process of building context through intricate collaborative articulation of the events they are engaged in” (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1992:97). However, for deaf people, the possibilities to interact are sometimes limited. This has particularly been the case concerning the use of telephones. Technical innovations and the growth of the Internet have opened up new means for people to get in touch. This also goes for long-distance interaction for deaf people (Götherström, 2004; Keating et al., 2007; Saladin and Hansmann, 2008). From the perspective of interpreters this means that new arenas of work with new requirements are opened up. One such arena is the Video Relay Service (VRS). The task of interpreters in the VRS is to facilitate interaction between a signing person on a video phone, and another person who is using a telephone/mobile phone. In this context, the interpreter is obliged not only to interpret a message, but also to co-ordinate what is said by PPs. This job is crucial, since in comparison to ordinary talk, there are limitations in what modalities are accessible for the PPs. In a physical encounter, everyone involved normally have visual access to each other, which enhances the negotiation of taking turns and of arriving at a common understanding of what is going on. In contrast, in the VRS, the interpreter is the only person who has direct contact with both

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primary participants² (hereafter PP) and, consequently, when one PP says something in the interaction, it is only the interpreter who can make a coding and subsequently interpret this to the other PP. The lag-time (i.e. the time the interpreter needs to pass on a message from the source language to the target language) is specifically noticeable for the hearing PP, who does not have access to the video phone screen shot and thus cannot see that the interpreter is signing. Hence, the administration of turn-taking evolves as an important task for the interpreter in this specific context.

The purpose of this article is to describe, analyse and discuss how patterns of turn-taking are administrated in Bildtelefoni.net (the Swedish Video Relay Service), with a particular focus on techniques and strategies used by the interpreter to manage the interaction.

2. The Video Relay Service (VRS)

The VRS as a service for deaf people is available in many countries and has grown enormously lately, particularly in Europe and in the United States. The VRS developed in the United States and became a regular service there in the year 2000 (Brunson, 2011; Keating et al., 2007). In Europe, Sweden began with a pilot project in 1996, and a regular service via the Internet (The Swedish Post and Telecom Agency, 2010) was established in the country in 2006. In other words, the VRS has quite recently become a medium for communication between deaf and hearing people.

The service facilitates interaction between people who use visual/gestural sign language, and people who use verbal/auditive language. The interaction is mediated by a sign language interpreter, who works in a studio and receives calls from the Internet with a web camera (video phone), and calls from land-line or mobile telephones. The interpreter listens via a headset to the person who speaks on the telephone, and watches the signing person on a computer screen. The interpreter is visible on the computer screen, and can be heard on the phone (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1.

2.1. The premises of the VRS

Mediated interaction in the VRS is a situated practise in a specific setting, and it is subjected to special frames and procedures. The modalities of PPs in the VRS differ perceptually and this is manifested in the use of different technical equipments, such as a web-camera, a computer, and a telephone. Also, there is the additional function of the interpreter in the interaction. While the technique of the VRS provides an opportunity to communicate at a distance, it also generates a new situation with highly specific requirements. Interaction in the VRS may be considered to be institutional (Drew and Heritage, 1992). Institutionalised interaction is often asymmetric as regards the distribution of rights and obligations of participants. The practise of the VRS is in many respects challenging for the interpreter, as well as for the people who use the service. Firstly, all participants are separated from each other, sharing cyber-space, rather than physical space (Brunson, 2011; Keating and Mirus, 2003), which clearly affects the interpretation-situation (Brunson, 2011; Wadensjö, 1999). Secondly, different language modalities are used, i.e. spoken language and sign language. Like other languages, sign language is culturally bounded (Fredäng, 2003; Midness, 2006; Napier et al., 2006; Roy, 2000) and differs from auditive/verbal language in modal ways of expression, as well as in language conventions and habits (Fredäng, 2003; Ladd, 2003; Midness, 2006; Padden and Humphries, 2005). The way the spoken language is performed in this setting may be considered in terms of “audible” (Bavelas et al., 2002:567), since the contact with the telephone does not provide

² The primary participants in this study are the parties who are linked to the VRS interpreter, i.e. the person using a telephone/mobile phone, and the person using a video phone. The term “primary participant” (PP) is used since the PPs are supposed to talk to each other *through* the sign language interpreter.

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