

Wednesday 27th August 2014

Topic of the day:
Deaf Culture and Current Research in SLL

Ulrike Zeshan: *Many Languages at Hand - The Study of Sign Multilingualism*

Ulrike Zeshan is Professor of Sign Language Linguistics at the University of Central Lancashire, Preston, Lancashire, England and Director of UCLan's International Institute for Sign Languages and Deaf Studies (iSLanDS).

She was born in Germany where she earned her Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University of Cologne.

In her research, she focuses for example on the documentation and analysis of sign languages in non-Western countries, including endangered sign languages, on large-scale comparative studies of grammatical structures across sign languages around the world and on Sign Multilingualism - the use of sign languages in multilingual settings.

Her applied research focuses on literacy teaching and peer education in developing countries, and she is involved in curriculum and materials development together with NGOs, academics, and governmental departments serving deaf communities in India and Turkey.

She is Director of the International Deaf Empowerment Foundation (iDEF), editor of the Sign Language Typology series and editor-in-chief of the Ishara Press, a social enterprise under the iDEF. She is also a member of the World Federation of the Deaf's expert group on Sign Language and Deaf Studies and is an ambassador for Deaf Parenting UK.

Research interests: Sign Language Typology, Sign Multilingualism, Sign Language Endangerment, Applied Sign Linguistics

Abstract

This presentation reports on a range of complex multilingual behaviours in sign language users in two interrelated studies, here called "cross-signing" and "sign-switching".

The "cross-signing" study investigates the ad-hoc improvised conversations of a small group of deaf sign language users from different countries and with no shared language, filmed when they met in pairs for the very first time. The participants from the UK, Jordan, Indonesia and Japan use a wide range of linguistic and communicative resources, including their own and invented signs, fingerspelling, pointing, mouthing, mime, and various representations of writing. Six dyadic conversations totalling 4 hours 41 minutes of video were recorded, and 50% of the material was annotated using the ELAN multimedia annotation programme, focusing on constructions with numeral signs. The data lead to a model based on Conversation Analysis (cf. Sidnell & Stivers 2012) that identifies typical

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interaction patterns, whereby one signer introduces new linguistic material into the conversation (INTRODUCE), another signer adopts this choice (ACCOMMODATE) and then both partners continue using the same (PERSIST). Interviews following the video recordings reveal the communicative difficulties as well as strategies for overcoming miscommunication.

It can be argued these signers construct shared multilingual-multimodal spaces for the purpose of these conversations (Bradford, Sagara & Zeshan 2012). It can be argued that they construct shared multilingual-multimodal spaces for the purpose of these conversations (Bradford, Sagara & Zeshan 2012). This notion is also supported by experimental data. The same participant dyads engaged in a linguistic elicitation game which was repeated again after five weeks. Results show a marked increase in efficiency, where signers completed the task on average 30% more quickly the second time round, relying on shared strategies.

For the “sign-switching” study, four bilingual users of Burundi Sign Language (BuSL) and Indian Sign Language (ISL) participated in the collection of both conversational and experimental data, totalling over 6 hours of video data, and linguistic background questionnaires profiling each person’s bilingual language use (Panda & Zeshan 2012). In addition to free conversations, the participants engaged in a conversational game involving maps as prompts to elicit WH-questions, negatives, fingerspelling and numerals. A range of elicitation activities targeting the same structures was used with five participants who are bilingual in Turkish Sign Language and German Sign Language, and they were also filmed engaged in free conversations and provided linguistic background information (total amount of data 15 hours of video).

An analysis of WH-questions and negation in the BuSL-ISL bilingual data shows that some of the BuSL-ISL data show a strong tendency towards complex language mixing, facilitated by parallels in the linguistic structures and lexical similarity, i.e. the same or very similar signs being available in both languages although they are not genetically related. Therefore, for a sizeable part of the data it is difficult to argue for one language to be the (predominant) Matrix Language and the other one to be the (additional) Embedded Language as argued in Myers-Scotton (2002). The German Sign Language – Turkish Sign Language bilinguals show some interesting patterns where manual signs are in one sign language and co-occurring non-manual elements are in the other sign language.

The presentation presents an overview over these various strands of work. This research has extended known bi- and multilingual phenomena to the domain of sign languages (cf. Quinto-Pozos & Adam 2013), but also includes settings not found among spoken language users in the same way (i.e. the cross-signing situation). Importantly, both studies also focus attention on the meta-linguistic skills that signers use in these bi-/multilingual interactions, and thus the research showcases the impressive linguistic skills that signers regularly use in international interactions.