Success rates of conversational repair strategies by cross-signers

The study reported here involves communication between deaf sign language users with highly divergent linguistic backgrounds who have no signed or written language in common. Unlike the semi-conventionalised contact language International Sign (e.g. Supalla & Webb 1995), we look at the earliest, least conventionalised stages of improvised communication, called "cross-signing" (Zeshan 2015).

Sign language users may face communicative problems that arise from the absence of a conventional language and are thus specifically associated with cross-signing. To resolve this communicative problem, signers capitalise on conversational repair. Other-initiated Repair (OIR), the main focus of this paper, comprises a three-turn structure including the problem source turn (T-1), the initiation of repair (T0) and the turn offering a problem solution (T+1) (Dingemanse et al. 2014). At T0, cross-signers frequently responded by repeating the sign that is the problem source, thus initiating restrictive repair. In the absence of linguistic convention, the signers then used a wide range of semiotic resources to resolve reference at T+1, including logical inference, iconic depiction, and paraphrase.

The data set consists of the first encounters between three dyads of signers of Nepali SL, Jordanian SL and Indonesian SL (totaling 4 hours 40 minutes of signed video data of which currently 1 hour has been annotated). They engaged in free conversation, in which [42] Other-Initiated Repair (OIR) sequences have been identified.

The current analyses are based on the the number of embedded repair sequences variety of tools available at T+1 as well as. First of all, the signers showed differing abilities with regard to repair strategies individually (e.g. the Jordanian signer experienced quite lengthy repair sequences, whereas the Indonesian signer had sequences of four attempts and the Nepali signer experienced sequences of three, as revealed in the table below), and the tools preferred by each might have played a role in their tendencies toward successful repair or otherwise. The main focus here is on the first attempt at repair (which may have been immediately successful or may have constituted the beginning of a longer sequence) and whether these were successful, with an emphasis on how the tools and strategies they used may have contributed to the re-establishment of conversation or continued trouble. Their use of examples (3 out of 4 instances), paraphrases (2 out of 2 instances), iconicity (5 out of 5 instances) and combinations thereof (5 out of 5 instances) often allowed them to repair trouble within a single turn. Literacy/speech-based strategies were found to be effective about half the time (7 out of 13 instances), depending on complexity of the concept conveyed (e.g. lexical items such as country names were easier to repair with these strategies compared with grammatical items). In some cases, mere lexical repetition seemed to buy signers time to devise such strategies.

It remains to be investigated how their use of various strategies may correlate with individual background factors such as age of sign acquisition, fluency in multiple sign languages, and having international deaf social networks; this is not within the scope of the present paper.

References

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