

AN INTERACTIONAL APPROACH TO THE ANALYSIS OF ARGENTINE SIGN LANGUAGE

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RESUMEN Argentine Sign Language or LSA is the primary means of interactive communication between the members of the deaf community. As every other sign language LSA lacks, up to the moment, a written register, all the communication being thus conversational. An important step in the analysis of a sign language must undertake the description of the interaction structure. Our main purpose is thus to present an analysis from an interactional perspective that may give a better account of this particular kind of interaction: deaf/deaf (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1978). Such a view allows us also to examine sign language and its differences and similarities with interaction in spoken languages. On the other hand, it enables the deaf to better comprehend the use of their own sign language. Thus, the unit of analysis has been the interaction. The material under study consisted of 30 hours of video-recordings gathered throughout the seven years of research under different experimental conditions -prepared and spontaneous sessions-, and in different settings -home, association. Three different registers have been observed: public, private and intimate. The main difference between them consisted in the use of space between the participants of the interaction, the non-manual features and in the production of certain adjacent pairs characteristic of each register. We have chosen to analyze the intimate register, that is to say, an interaction carried out by intimate friends or couples in different settings -association, home, for example-, and the different sign acts the deaf perform in order to show the differences and similarities with interaction in spoken languages.

Argentine Sign Language or LSA is the primary means of interactive communication between members of the deaf minority in Argentina. LSA constitutes, therefore, the cohesive force that gathered and maintained deaf people together, thus generating within the group participation and commitment -that is, interacting through

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sign language. However, we believe that minorities in general, and deaf minority in particular, have not only been conformed due to internal characteristics of the group, but also by the negative attitudes that society at large has through history manifested on their behalf in response to such common characteristics (Behares and Massone, 1996). Deafness and sign language are the common characteristics shared by the group, but are as well considered by society as the illness to cure and the symptom of such illness that needs to be eradicated. Therefore, both positive attitudes -such as social solidarity, self identity, limited participation in the life of society, a common commitment, etc.-, and negative attitudes - discrimination based on the shared characteristics of the group-, manifested by society conform minorities (Ullua, Puccio and Massone, 1996).

The deaf minority exhibits a sociolinguistic profile that is interesting to make explicit in order to be able to understand the different interactions possible in their everyday communication. We mean by sociolinguistic profile the interactions that take place between deaf people taking into account the perspective that considers these interactions as speech situations (Hymes, 1972). We would like to emphasize the fact that we understand these speech situations from a pragmatic perspective (Verschueren and Bertuccelli, 1987) that leads us to frame them in pragmatic discourse analysis (Menéndez, 1995). This analysis shows interaction in terms of exchanges of discourse strategies that are produced in the interaction and constitute the speech interaction.

The deaf minority is embedded economically and socially in the mainstream society of Argentina. Massone has defined the deaf minority as an urban, nomad, illiterate group (Massone, 1993). Due to the location of deaf schools in the important cities of Argentina and especially in its capital city, deaf people migrate in order to live near the school. However, deaf people are in close contact all through the country, their activities as group gathers them together. Social activities and sports are the most important events within the group. Only recently religious and cultural events have also been taking place. As schools are eminently oral the gathering places for developing these activities have been the deaf associations.

Deaf associations constitute hierarchical institutions conformed by an Executive Committee plus deaf members. The members of such Committee are usually the deaf leaders who are very much respected within the whole community. The president of each deaf association is highly respected by every member. Such structure gives rise to institutional interactions that will be briefly described.

It is important to state that all education in our country has been and is purely oral and conducted entirely in spoken Spanish. Only recently -1983-, signed Spanish has been introduced in few schools and viewed as the tool to teach Spanish, however neither with a systematic nor through a planned methodology. However, in spite of the pressures of the oral educational system most deaf people become skilled signers. The process whereby this happens is similar to that in other industrialized societies and involves socialization of young deaf children, primarily by their peers at school. It is our observation that most adult men in the community have little skill in lip reading and speaking and could be classed as virtually monolingual signers in LSA. Women, on the other hand, tend to integrate with mainstream society to a somewhat greater degree than men. This is probably because they are responsible for dealing with schools and with the economic community through stores, banks, etc.

Most deaf are in Argentina virtually monolingual in LSA or at least subordinate bilinguals (Massone, 1993). The language contact situations in Argentine deaf community depend thus on the participant characteristics and on the varieties of language available to those participants. The following is a partial outline of the contact situations in Argentine deaf community:

- deaf bilingual/ deaf bilingual
- deaf bilingual/ deaf LSA monolingual
- deaf LSA monolingual/ deaf LSA monolingual
- deaf LSA monolingual/ hearing bilingual
- deaf bilingual/ hearing bilingual/
- deaf bilingual/ hearing Spanish monolingual
- deaf bilingual/ hearing Spanish signer
- deaf bilingual/ hard of hearing Spanish signer
- deaf monolingual/ hard of hearing Spanish signer
- deaf bilingual/hard of hearing Spanish monolingual.

However, most social interaction of deaf individuals in Argentine society is with other deaf individuals. Most deaf people's lives are centered completely in their interaction with other deaf people in clubs, sporting groups, and less formal social groupings. Interaction with hearing people is unusual, except with hearing members of their nuclear families (Massone and Johnson, 1991). This observation extends to marriage patterns as well. Most deaf people marry other deaf people.

Furthermore, deaf education and the nature of jobs available for the deaf contribute to and, in a sense, guarantee the social and economic marginalization of deaf people in society at large. The jobs held by most deaf people could be categorized as unskilled labor. There are also many deaf people being included in jobs at some branch of the governmental bureaucracy, however, included in unskilled jobs such as counting money, sorting mail and other items. Such institutions do not tend to integrate deaf and hearing in common activities. The kinds of jobs that the educational system prepares deaf people for are specifically the kinds of jobs that will segregate them.

Thus, the nature of Argentine deaf society is much like that of the deaf societies in other industrial cities around the world. It is a group that has and uses its own sign language, maintains its own social interaction patterns, and exists within but largely separated from the mainstream society of hearing, Spanish speaking Argentines. Therefore, the encounters between deaf people take place within their nuclear families (Massone and Johnson, 1991), within the deaf associations, and at work.

The social reality of the different participants involved in communication within a given group as well as the objective structure of the social relationships need to be taken into consideration when analyzing or describing the rules which conform the elaboration of discourses and their internal cohesion in order to perform a correct pragmatic analysis. The situation is even more difficult to describe when the researcher is interested in explaining such complex phenomenon as communication within a group of people which not only conform a minority, but which interacts through a language which is not spoken, and which is not the researcher's native language. These characteristics obviously must be taken into consideration when designing the methodology for collecting the data which need to have ecological validity. Therefore,

the researcher needs in the first place to have acquired within the minority some kind of prestige and recognition in order to be able to collect those data which will precisely give account of the interaction structure.

We consider that an important step in the analysis of a sign language must undertake the description of the interaction structure. Our main purpose is thus to present an analysis from an interactional perspective that may give a better account of this particular kind of interaction : deaf/deaf. Such a view allows us to examine sign language and its differences and similarities with interaction in spoken languages. On the other hand, it enables the deaf to better comprehend the use of their own sign language. Thus, the unit of analysis has been the interaction, that is to say, every interchange that consists in a series of events which as a whole conform a text which is produced collectively in a given context. An interaction it is also an action that affects the relationships that each participant establishes in face to face interaction.

We propose to analyze the interaction in terms of discourse strategies because we consider that this perspective could settle the discussion about the naturalness of Argentine Sign Language that continues to be held among teachers and even among some linguists in our countries. A discourse strategy is considered as a plan that a speaker -or signer- uses in order to achieve a goal. Such plan is intentional and is based upon the relevance that could be obtained through the interaction (Sperber and Wilson, 1986). The strategies are thus particular ways of combining resources to obtain an effective goal. It is important to consider the way that different kind of resources may combine. These resources are mainly of two kinds but need to be reformulated in order to give account of LSA sign language. In the special case of LSA we propose the following discourse strategic constitution:

- . sign resources : that is to say, the lexical and grammatical marks which are part of the text and assign cohesion;

- . pragmatic resources : that is to say, the discourse marks which are part of the situation and belong to the realm of the subject. These resources assign coherence.

The combination of both shows how an interaction is conformed and how an interpretation can be obtained and verified. This point of view is complementary to the perspective presented by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974).

PROCEDURE

Participants

All participants were fluent signers of Argentine Sign Language and members of the Argentine deaf community. Ten deaf signers served as participants of the larger corpus under study for different aspects of LSA. Two of the participants were native signers of LSA. Furthermore, the interactions produced by these participants were also tested in a larger corpus produced by six young deaf, native and non native, from the city of Quilmes, and in discussion meetings done in the deaf associations with twenty adult deaf, native and non-native, that belonged to associations located in different cities of Argentine such as Buenos Aires, La Plata, Rosario, Mendoza, Tres de

Febrero, Lanús, Mar del Plata, Córdoba, and Chaco. It is important to remark that the greatest population of our country is concentrated in Buenos Aires, La Plata, Rosario and Córdoba.

Members of the deaf community use LSA in their everyday interactions, and only when participants in conversation are hearing or hard of hearing with some knowledge of sign language deaf people switch to signed Spanish or to Spanish. However, the communicative interactions under study were deaf/deaf.

Method

The corpus under study consisted of thirty hours of video recording. Four different adult signers for the purpose of this study also signed a special corpus. The patterns observed were further analyzed in a more extensive corpus - nearly 6 hours-video-recorded for the description of different aspects of LSA. The whole corpus was video-recorded in different experimental conditions: prepared and spontaneous, and in different settings -home, association, University. The informants were also asked for acceptable and unacceptable performances.

The analysis of all this corpus was completed with participant observation, that is to say, face to face interactions between the researchers and the deaf in cultural community events. This ethnographic perspective has proved to be extremely useful in our analysis of LSA as it allows to observe the language deaf people use in their everyday conversations. Furthermore, the deaf assistant, Emilia Machado, provided her knowledge as fluent signer of LSA, Rosana Famularo and Virginia Domínguez her knowledge of hearing bilingual participant of the community. This ethnographic perspective is only possible after the researcher has been fully recognized within the deaf group.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A series of different interactions have been analyzed in spoken languages. Instead in LSA every interaction is oral as the language lacks a written register. Through the ethnographic perspective and the analysis of the corpus we have observed that the most frequent interaction is conversation. Much have been discussed about the characteristics of conversation and it is generally identified as the interaction where relations of power seem not to be established. Some linguists have not even made a difference between this form of interaction due to the difficulty in characterizing it, or because it was not necessary to differentiate it in their analysis. Goffman's (1981) definition is the one generally accepted. He considered that conversation is casual speech in everyday settings. However, as conversation is so frequent in deaf/deaf interactions we adopted Wilson's definition (1989). Conversation is a specific act of signing in which an equal distribution of rights takes place, that is to say, no participant has the right to control the developing of discourse and an effort is being made to maintain an equality of speaker rights. Therefore, in conversation there exists a uniform orientation between participants, they do not exert control or power as in other type of

interactions. The main functions of conversations in LSA are social as well as informational. We must remember that as written language does not have a main function in deaf culture except in institutional relationships, information is transmitted orally.

LSA data showed two other conversationally tied-out modes that introduce new topic frames within conversational events, that is to say: jokes and narratives. Although both modes may differ from conversation they allow not disrupting participant status relationships, and are potentially integrative within the ongoing signing. Due to the oral characteristic of the transmission of information and of the conversational status of every interaction there exists in the deaf community deaf oral male narrators which are prestigious within the group and that when arriving to a meeting are expected to tell a joke or a narrative. Other deaf people gather around them thus initiating informal contexts that give rise to conversational interactions. Although these interactions where either jokes or narratives are given seem in part ritualized, as the oral narrator is the one expected to start the interaction, other participants have also the right to interact thus not disrupting participant status relationships. Signers are capable of recognizing a move from conversation to joke, because he/she recognizes the oral narrator as the person who will perform such interaction, because the oral narrator explicitly says the kind of event he will perform at the beginning or at the end of his interaction, and because he asks questions about implausible events. In the case of story telling either they flow naturally within conversation or one participant is expected to narrate as he/she happens to have come from a trip or knows something others do not.

We have also observed the realization of institutionalized interactions, that is to say, interactions in which the power relations between participants are asymmetrical. These particular interactions occur when deaf presidents or members of the Executive Committee of the deaf association are involved in situations that require institutional decisions. In these cases, space between participants has a larger dimension than in everyday conversation and the one who leads the interaction is the one in charge of giving the turns and selecting the participants who are authorized to participate. This mode of interaction may become a conversation, but the participant that maintains the power position in the interaction continually reestablishes such power. As we already mentioned social events are very frequent and important within the community and it is where the institutionalized mode takes place. Space is even organized so as to allow the authorized signers to be seen by every non-authorized signer. Deaf presidents, members of the Executive Committee or important invited people take a seat at a large table located in front of every other table. The people who sit at such table are the only ones who have the right to sign or lecture. This mode is similar to the assembly, where the president is the one that establishes who can say what, when and for how long. Therefore, in this mode of interaction participants have heterogeneous performances.

Through the analysis of such institutionalized mode of interaction we could determine the existence of a second formal person clearly differentiated from the second person by non-manual features. Both signs are index sign with a [1] hand configuration, however, in the case of the formal second person the body remains rigid and there is a larger physical distance between participants. These features thus indicate status relationships.

In conversational interactions we have analyzed two types of conversational registers: formal and informal and three types of interpersonal social distances: public, private and intimate. The rigidity of the body and the amplitude of the signs distinguish the formal and informal register, therefore, the space involved is larger in formal situations. The institutionalized mode just described is considered a formal register due to the participants involved and the themes selected. In the informal register the space reduces its dimension, the body of the signer is relaxed, and if the signers are seated down the body adopts a slight backward position.

In public interactions, which may or may not be institutionalized, deaf people generally are standing up and keep between them a larger physical position than hearing people in similar interactions. It is frequent that deaf people sign standing up during long periods of time, longer than hearing people -even when chairs are available. When these interactions are taking place with more than two participants deaf people gather around a physical circle. The signing space covers from above the head to the knees, and to the front up to the extension of the arm, that is to say, that the signing space covers the largest space possible.

In private interactions the physical space reduces its dimensions, deaf people may be standing up or seated down in circle or around a table. The signing space reduces its dimension, signs are produced only up to one hand over the head and up to the waist or up to the border of the table. Two-handed signs are frequently produced as one handed.

In intimate interactions the distance between participants is reduced, the signing space is so small that in many occasions only conforms the area of one hand signing. Never used signing spaces are common, such as the abdomen. Two-handed signs are never produced, the movements of the signs are quicker than in the other interactions, and segments of the signs are deleted. During the time the interaction takes place the signer may sustain the arm of the other participant while signing in order not to be interrupted. If the other participant responds the same behavior will take place. When these interactions take place in public settings the body of the signer will bend to the left in order not to be seen while signing, or the signer will put his/her back to the public, or he/she will locate near a door.

The kinds of themes as well as the participants involved determine the difference between private and intimate interactions. Intimate interactions only take place between intimate friends or couples in different settings -association, specially non public places such as bathrooms for example, bars or home. Instead private interactions may involve secrets about a third person or institutional matters, are produced more frequently in public situations and may take place between participants with not much acknowledgment of each other. Furthermore, deaf signers consider that there are no misunderstandings between participants in intimate interactions.

Participants in the intimate interaction are always well known to each other, thus we have observed the use of pragmatic resources more than grammatical ones. Although LSA has a grammar, there exists a series of non codified signs that are shared in similar situations and that are equal to those used in similar situations by hearing speakers. The procedure thus seems to be the same for speakers and signers. However, as the elements of the grammar are discrete and those of pragmatic are continuous and thus given by degrees, we suggest that the difference between speakers and signers in

intimate interactions is given by such continuous characteristic of the pragmatic resources. That is to say, deaf signers use more pragmatic resources in intimate interactions than speakers in similar situations. Although this paper does not intend to give a complete analysis of such interactions we consider that this discourse perspective will be productive when analyzing sign languages. Furthermore, we sustain the fact that the discourse strategy constitution is more complex in sign languages than in spoken ones due to the elaborate relationship between manual and non manual features and their different functions in the grammar and discourse of sign languages.

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