The new challenge: interpreting what was never said.

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Biography

Anna-Lena Nilsson has a PhD in (Swedish) Sign Language from Stockholm University, where she coordinates and teaches in continuous professional education courses for Sign Language interpreters, and courses in sign linguistics. Her PhD-thesis is titled “Studies in Swedish Sign Language: Reference, Real Space Blending, and Interpretation.” Anna-Lena has more than 30 years experience of signed language interpreting in higher education, at international conferences, and doing community interpreting, and she is still active as an interpreter on freelance basis. She also has more than 15 years experience as an interpreter educator. Anna-Lena is involved in authorizing community interpreters in Swedish Sign Language, as part of the examination board at the public authority that authorizes them: Kammarkollegiet (The Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency). Her major research interests are currently in discourse structure and reference in signed language, and the implications for teaching interpreters.

Abstract

As signed language interpreters we usually work between one spoken language and one signed. These two types of language differ in many aspects, possibly the most noticeable being the fact that in signed languages signs can be meaningfully directed in space. According to earlier research you have to identify referents before you can use "placement", "role shift", "verb agreement", etc. Recent research on several signed languages, however, has shown that a signer does not have to identify a person or a thing before
talking about what he/she/it does. Instead, the addressee uses several types of knowledge that are common to him/her and the signer to identify the referents. In this paper we will look at an actual example of signed discourse, and discuss how we identify referents when no lexical sign has been produced to help us. Do we always have the same knowledge as the signer (or the speaker) and the addressee? If not, how can we do our job? We will discuss the types of knowledge signed language interpreters need to be equipped with in order to produce accurate interpretations as well as how to get access to this knowledge.

1. Introduction

This paper has its roots in a question I kept asking myself after working for some years as a sign language interpreter, “Why is it that key issues such as Who is doing what, to whom (and when)? are so often are misinterpreted, especially when interpreters are working from a signed language into a spoken language?”. It might of course have been the case that deaf people, when signing to each other, do not understand each other either, or maybe that there was something inherently wrong with signed languages. But that, of course, was not the case. Some other possible explanations to examine, were for example: whether sign language interpreters were not fluent enough in sign language and therefore got things wrong; or whether the differences between signed and spoken languages are so substantial that it is actually impossible to interpret simultaneously between them. Starting out believing that I would answer those questions in a PhD-thesis, I ended up describing reference and the use of signing space in Swedish Sign Language, and how this relates to knowing whom the signer is currently talking about (Nilsson, 2010).

Though the theme of the EFSLI conference this year is “SYNERGY – Moving forward together”, this paper will begin by looking back. We will look at the way signed languages have been described, as well as how language and
communication in general – including interpreting – has been described. This look at history will make it clear that, despite the title of this presentation, it is not really the challenge of “interpreting what was never said” as such that is new. The new challenge, which can indeed move us forward as a profession, is to realise that interpreting what was never said is what we actually do, and that there is a theoretical model that can help us explain how we do it.

2. Language, communication, and what interpreters do

In order to understand this new way of describing what interpreters do (including the fact that we do interpret what has not been said) we first need to take a look at a previous model, the generative approach to language (Chomsky, 1957), used to explain language and communication. According to this older approach, language is a device that generates grammatical sentences and meaning is found “within” words and signs. That is, words and signs have an inherent meaning, something that they always mean. Accordingly, then, an interpreter only has to decode the inherent meaning of a word/sign, and then recode that meaning in words/signs from another language. In keeping with this, the task of an interpreter is to interpret what somebody has said (for a critical description of this view, in relation to interpreter training, see Wilcox and Shaffer (2005)).

However, using one single word as an example, it is easy to see that this is not really the case. Let us take the word bed. Your first thoughts will probably be of beds like the one you have in your bedroom. But, they are not the only kinds of beds – there are for example flowerbeds as well. So, the meaning of bed depends on the context where the word is used. To describe how we know exactly which referent the speaker has in mind in a certain context, the concept of ‘frame’ (Fillmore, [1982] 2006) has been used. As Fillmore defines it, a frame is a system of concepts:

related in such a way that to understand any one of them you have to understand the whole structure in which it fits; when one of the things in such a
structure is introduced into a text, or into a conversation, all of the others are automatically made available. (2006: 373)

The frame concept can help explain that knowing, for example, the context of an event is a garden exhibition evokes a ‘gardening frame’, which in turn makes it easier to identify bed as a flower bed in that situation, and not a bed you sleep in. Thinking along these lines will be of importance when we consider that interpreters are expected to interpret not only the words used, but also what they mean in a certain context.

Let us now turn to a more recent model for examining language and communication, known as cognitive linguistics (for a thorough description see Geeraerts (2006); a brief introduction is also found in Nilsson (2008, 2010)). According to this model, meaning is not found “within” words or signs; meaning is constructed from linguistic input, and it is co-constructed by speaker and addressee. Looking at communication from this position, interpreters are also co-constructors of meaning, i.e. interpreters construct meaning from what is said, and then produce their version of it in another language.

Adopting this conception of language and communication, Wilcox and Shaffer propose that we move toward a new cognitive model of interpreting. In their words, “[m]eaning is not conveyed in form. Meaning is inferred from, constructed on the basis of, form” (2005:35), here ‘form’ is the linguistic form, i.e. the form of the signs or words. As meaning is not conveyed by words or signs, but is inferred from, or constructed on the basis of signs or words this will in turn, change the representation of the interpreter to, “... an active interpreter, not one with direct access to the meanings and intentions of others, but of a maker of meaning on the basis of the cues provided by others” (Wilcox and Shaffer, 2005:47). That is, as interpreters we will have to use the cues provided by others – the signs or words they produce – and these cues do not convey meaning directly, but are used by us to construct the meaning speakers wish to convey.
3. Language structure and who is doing what to whom

As sign language interpreters, we most often interpret between one signed and one spoken language. Comparing spoken and signed languages, we will find a difference in the manner who is doing what, to whom is expressed. Many spoken languages rely heavily on word order to express these relationships. Even though exactly the same words are used, there is a major difference between saying: The dog bit the postman, and saying: The postman bit the dog. Many spoken languages that do not rely on word order to express this use other grammatical markers and are still essentially sequential as words are produced one after the other in spoken languages.

In signed languages, signs are not only sequentially produced one after the other. The area in space around us, known as the ‘signing space’, is also used for linguistic purposes when signs are produced. This has been discussed in literature on various signed languages using, for example, concepts such as ‘localization’ (Ahlgren & Bergman, 1994) and ‘locus’ (Lillo-Martin & Klima, 1990, amongst others). In cognitive linguistics, this phenomenon is described by saying that signs can be ‘meaningfully directed’ (Liddell, 2003). In addition, there is a particular way of signing which has previously been described using concepts such as ‘role shift’ (Mandel, 1977), ‘role play’ (Lillo-Martin & Klima, 1990), or ‘constructed dialogue’ (Winston, 1991; Metzger, 1995). According to Liddell (2003) the signer becomes a visible ‘blended entity’ and a ‘surrogate blend’ is created. Liddell’s model, in turn, is based on Mental Space Theory (Fauconnier, 1985) and Conceptual Blending Theory (Fauconnier & Turner, 1998).

These additional possibilities in signed languages add an extra dimension to the task of interpreting between a signed and a spoken language (Padden, 2000/01), compared to that of interpreting between two spoken languages, and is central to the difference between older and newer ways of describing language. According to the earlier view, a referent must be identified before it

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1 I will assume all readers are familiar with this and not describe it further here.
can be ‘located’ or ‘placed’ in signing space, and a referent must similarly be identified before the signer can ‘take on the role’ of that person. If the signer is going to refer to something by pointing in a specific direction, the belief has been that the signer also has to identify that entity before pointing signs can be used to refer to it.\(^2\) However, there is recent research indicating that this view is not true:

Thus, contrary to the widely accepted (prescriptive) view that signers must identify every spatial element prior to making use of it, we find that this signer provides explicit identification of only some of the elements of her real space blends. The conceptual task of creating the remainder of each real space blends [sic] falls on the addressee. (Liddell and Vogt-Svendsen, 2007:193)

Below, we will look at a signed sequence from the material studied for my PhD research (Nilsson, 2010), where similar results are also found.

3.1. An example from Swedish Sign Language\(^3\)

The following example was taken from the discourse analysed for my PhD. The signer has previously discussed patients who know they are dying from cancer, and used meaningfully directed signs to indicate an area in front of her to be used for that referent. She later returns to talking about these dying persons with the signs glossed in (1), and thereby sets up a new scenario.

During this re-introduction of the dying persons, the signer’s gaze alternates between looking at the area previously used for that referent and looking at the addressee. As she touches the THEME-buoy produced with her non-dominant (left) hand (cf. the last gloss in (1)), she nods her head, then turns it to the right and looks forward/up (seen in the first photo in Figure 1). She has now “taken on a role”, in cognitive linguistics’ terms described as

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\(^2\) This is discussed in more detail in Nilsson (2008).

\(^3\) The following is based on an example analyzed in Nilsson (2008, 2010) where it is described in detail. A detailed discussion of some theory specific concepts used, such as ‘token’, ‘surrogate’, ‘THEME-buoy’, etc. can also be found there.
'having created a surrogate blend' (Liddell, 2003), where she herself “represents” such a dying person.

‘If, for example, you have a patient who is dying…’

Knowing that s/he is soon to die, this person demands to meet somebody, to talk, now. COME-HERE↑left/up is directed to the left and upward, thus creating an ‘invisible surrogate’ for the somebody whom the dying person wants to talk to, located to the left of the signer. The signer thereby creates a spatial contrast (right-left), which helps the addressee to separate out the referents. The verb DISCUSS is also produced in that direction (indicated by the superscript ↑s{somebody}), and the signer as the dying person looks up to the left, as if talking to that invisible somebody. Note however, we are never explicitly told that there is a person located up to the left, nor who that person is.

Next in the discourse, a comment is given from the narrator’s perspective (#NOW NON-1st-SING↑dying person-forward WANT, ‘That’s what s/he would want.’), seen in the third row in Figure 1. Here, the signer returns to being the narrator, and directs the pronominal pointing sign NON-1st-SING towards the area in front of her; this has previously been used for that referent. The

4Brief glossing conventions are found after the reference section, further details can be found in Nilsson (2008).
signer’s gaze is directed at the addressee and her head is tilted to the right here.

‘...who has that feeling [that she will soon die], and demands to meet somebody to talk, now. That’s what s/he would want. Then you mustn’t say ”No, wait till tomorrow”, because then it will be too late.’
During the following signs, NO WAIT TOMORROW (the first three photos in the last row), the signer then tilts her head slightly to the left, thus creating a new surrogate blend. The signer does not state explicitly ‘whose role she now takes on’, or in the terms used in cognitive linguistics, which person she now ‘blends with’. We can deduce from the context it is somebody in a position to say, “No.” to the request from the dying person. And since the current frame is one of health care, it is likely to be a member of hospital staff. In this blend as a probable hospital worker, the signer produces a sequence with ‘constructed dialogue’, using the signs NO WAIT TOMORROW (‘No, wait until tomorrow.’). The complex sequence in Figure 1 ends with a one-sign comment, where the signer returns to narrator’s perspective again (TOO-LATE).

4. How do we understand, then interpret, what was never said?

We have now seen there are indeed times when the signer does not identify a referent before ‘taking on the role’ of that referent. And we have seen that, in addition, the signer does not tell us the identity of a referent ‘located’ at a place signs are directed toward, either. The question we then have to ask ourselves is: What knowledge do we, as addressees and/or interpreters, need in order to know “who is doing what to whom”?

Liddell and Vogt-Svendsen (2007, quoted above), in a chapter where they analyze a signed conversation in Norwegian Sign Language, come to the conclusion that the speaker and the addressee need to make use of various types of common knowledge in order to build similar ‘real space blends’. That is, this common knowledge enables speaker and addressee to conceptualise (signing) space similarly, and thus talk about the same referents in the same blended locations. According to Liddell and Vogt-Svendsen, the speaker and the addressee use their shared knowledge of the world, in combination with their shared knowledge of the current discourse. In addition, they use their shared knowledge of (Norwegian) Sign Language grammar, as well as the
information they get from the meaningfully directed signs produced by the signer.

The meaning the addressee conceptualises does not have to be identical to the one the speaker has, it just has to be “good enough”. If, for example, I talk about my kitchen, some of you may have been there – and therefore have a more accurate picture of my kitchen than those of you who have not. However, you will all know something about the nature of kitchens, what they usually contain, etc., this is usually quite enough to evoke a ‘kitchen frame’ and for us to understand each other, even if you haven’t actually seen my kitchen.

5. Conclusions

Since, as we have seen, meaning is not a fixed part of a word or a sign, but something that is co-constructed by speaker and addressee in a specific context, interpreters need the kinds of knowledge Liddell and Vogt-Svendsen (2007) consider essential for speaker and addressee. First of all, this means that we need a good command of our working languages. And in addition to our linguistic skills, we also need broad general knowledge of the world.

Every assignment will depend on us having context specific knowledge; as well as knowing the specific terminology our participants use, we also need to be allowed to prepare for each assignment. This is why, in an interpreted situation, when people are going to make presentations etc., they need to be ready to give us preparation material so that we can share their world(s). This enables us to conceptualise space the way they do, and to construct the same meaning they do, which we can then readily re-produce in another language.
6. References


Glossing conventions in brief

SAY Words in small caps represent signs.

#IF Words in small caps preceded by a ‘#’ represent fingerspelling.
cl-PERSON A noun classifier.

NON-1st-SING A non-first person singular pronoun.

>left/up ‘>’ indicates that a sign is meaningfully directed.

THEME-BUOY A sign produced with the non-dominant hand.