

Use of signing space in simultaneous sign language interpretation: Marking discourse structure with the body

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A fundamental difference between signed and spoken languages is that in signed languages the signer uses the three dimensional space in front of him/her (signing space) and his/her own body for reference and cohesion. According to recent studies of signed languages (e.g. Liddell, 2003; Liddell, Vogt-Svendsen & Bergman, 2007; Nilsson, 2010; Dudis, 2011) such linguistic tools make use of the conceptual blending process (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002).

Optimal use of signing space is dependent on the signer's knowledge of what s/he is going to talk about. In a simultaneous interpreting situation, both the content and the structure of the discourse become known to the interpreter only gradually. Thus, it is difficult for an interpreter working simultaneously into a signed language to know how to best structure the discourse, as there is no way s/he can know exactly what the speaker will say next. To date, there are only a few studies regarding use of signing space in simultaneously interpreted signed language.

In the present study, Swedish Sign Language (SSL) interpreters have been filmed when interpreting from spoken Swedish into SSL. Both interpreters whose first language is SSL (L1 interpreters) and those who are second language learners of SSL (L2 interpreters) have been recorded. Their signed language production is studied using a model based in Conceptual Blending Theory, and mainly analyzing use of Real Space Blending (Liddell, 2003), focusing on how they use signing space and their body to mark the discourse structure. Does the interpreting situation make interpreters use fewer of the linguistic tools available, or use them differently than in spontaneously produced SSL (as described in e.g. Nilsson, 2010)?

The unexpected findings of a preliminary analysis indicate striking differences both in how and how much the recorded L1 and L2 interpreters use their body, especially regarding the use of movements of the upper body. In this presentation, I will show how the L1 interpreters structure the discourse content using buoys and tokens (Liddell, 2003) in a highly visual interplay with body movements. Buoys and tokens are combined with e.g. sideways movements and rotations of the upper body, thereby marking the structure of the discourse. The L1 interpreters move their upper body in a manner that gives a relaxed and natural impression, frequently e.g. raising their shoulders as part of sign production. Despite finding out the discourse content only gradually, and while already rendering their interpretation of what has been said so far, they manage to produce signed discourse that is strikingly similar to spontaneously produced SSL discourse. In comparison, as we will see, the L2 interpreters generally move their upper body less, and they use fewer buoys and tokens. Their use of directions in signing space to indicate e.g. contrast and/or comparisons is more stereotypical, and their body movements do not reflect the structure of the discourse to the same extent.

References

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