Linking conversational moves through pointing actions in signed language interaction

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Interlocutors participating in conversation collaborate with each other to coordinate their actions and talk. Research on spoken language conversations has shown that speakers can use interactionally-driven bodily gestures to regulate their interaction, in addition to speech. These gestures, which minimally take the form of the fingers(s) or palm(s) being oriented towards an interlocutor, are used for a variety of discourse functions. Four main functions relate to the delivery of information, citing previous contributions, seeking responses, and managing turns (see Bavelas et al., 1992, 1994; and also Mondada, 2007). Such interactive gestures therefore enable speakers to index aspects of the discourse itself and contribute to the coordination of the emerging conversation.

In the current study, pointing actions which serve interactive functions are examined in signed language conversations. Studies of pointing in signed languages have largely focused on referential functions, as signers frequently point to reference themselves and others, as well as visible and invisible referents (Liddell, 2003; Engberg-Pedersen, 2003; Johnston, 2013; Cormier Schembri, & Woll, 2013). However, the potential interactive functions of pointing actions have received less focus. To address this research gap, all finger-pointing actions observed in a corpus of more than three hours of Norwegian Sign Language multiparty conversations (between two and five participants) were identified. All tokens of pointing actions serving interactive functions were then re-visited. Preliminary work on these tokens suggests that many function similarly to what has been described for spoken language conversations (e.g., for turn management and seeking responses). However, other types of functions were also observed (e.g., giving feedback).

Of interest to the current analysis is how signers use these different types of interactional pointing actions to relate previous discourse to upcoming conversational moves. One example in the data involves a signer pointing to his interlocutor (who is currently signing) and her signing space. Once he gets his interlocutor's attention, he repeats this pointing action and in doing so he self-selects for a turn while relating his upcoming comment to what his interlocutor had just been saying.

A micro-analysis of these types of pointing actions reveal not only their role in turn-taking, but also how they are used to physically index previous discourse, and how other concurrent indexical actions such as eye-gaze may be crucial for successful management of these intentions. These particular interactional points function to bind sequences of conversational moves to each other, sometimes across participants, and guide their trajectory. Such functions of pointing have not been previously discussed in the signed language literature, but it is argued here that they further underscore the highly indexical nature of face to face signed language interaction. In particular, the ability of signers to point at the signing space and each other form a rich potential for regulating interactional goals.

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