6 The Paradox of International Sign: The Importance of Deaf-Hearing Encounters for Deaf-Deaf Communication across Sign Language Borders

Onno Crasborn and Anja Hiddinga

Standing in the lobby of a hotel in Washington, DC, waiting to check in among a crowd of deaf people from many different countries, Anja Hiddinga’s ten-year-old deaf son became friendly with a man from Egypt. They chatted along, although the little one did not know any Egyptian Sign Language or American Sign Language (ASL), and it was not Sign Language of the Netherlands they were conversing in either. In communicating back and forth, the conversation seemed to develop quite easily. Other interactions across sign language borders in that lobby were similar, with deaf people arriving from all over the world to attend the Deaf Way II conference and festival. The week of performances, lectures, and other events that followed was impressive for many reasons but particularly because of this very circumstance, the relative ease with which deaf people from different countries seemed to interact with one another in international sign. Equally impressive is the process of interpretation to and from international sign for the benefit of multilingual deaf audiences at other international (deaf) conferences.

In contradiction to the well-known misunderstanding of many hearing people that there is only one sign language, international sign, a construct bridging different signed languages, is an enigmatic phenomenon. How can one communicate without a shared language? The actual form of international sign (IS) depends on the shared context at large, which includes not only shared experiences and shared knowledge of the surroundings but also shared knowledge of any spoken and signed languages (including English and American Sign Language, but depending on the region it may also be Sign Language of the Netherlands or British
Sign Language, to name but two languages, and shared fingerspelling alphabets). For reasons of clarity, we use the capitals IS as a shorthand to refer to international sign, but we want to refrain from using capitals when naming it in full because we use it to refer to spontaneous contact forms rather than more conventionalized forms. Of course this is not a binary distinction but rather a continuum, something we revisit later. Not a language, or a pidgin, Creole, or koine (Woll 1990; Supalla and Webb 1995; Allsop, Woll, and Brauti 1995), IS merits close scrutiny from linguists as well as from social scientists interested in the workings of communication (Hiddinga and Crasborn 2011; Green 2014). Although international sign may be a construct specific to the communication between deaf people, questions about its nature, the contexts in which it is used, the characteristics of signer and respondent, the quality of the resulting interaction, and the conditions under which it is possible and effective pertain to communication more broadly. Indeed, we claim that the questions arising in the study of international sign are germane to all human communication.

In this chapter, we build on an argument we developed in a previous article on international sign (Hiddinga and Crasborn 2011). There we characterized international sign as a form of visual communication between deaf people who do not have a shared sign language and we focused on its functional properties (enabling social relations) instead of structural features such as morphology or syntax. Here we use a similar starting point and hope to raise a number of interesting questions as we go along. Our argument is of a theoretical nature and draws on secondary literature rather than empirical material. However, our own practical experiences, as regular visitors at deaf conferences and as colleagues, friends, certified sign language interpreter (Crasborn), and family member (Hiddinga) of deaf people in the Netherlands, are constitutive to our questions. Given the enigmatic and variable nature of IS, we are curious about its role in the characterization of deaf people’s relationships to and with each other. In line with our earlier inquiries, we want to investigate if and to what extent the possibility of communication in IS is a result of the communicative flexibility and creativity of deaf signers and therefore also a core feature of deaf communities. In this chapter, we focus on shared characteristics in communication of deaf people and explore the relation between the local and the global with respect to communication. What is the relation between the local communicative settings where communication between and with hearing people is often the norm, and communication between deaf people across community and across language boundaries? To what extent is the use of IS enabled by such variety in settings and modes of communication? To what extent is this construct and the implied skill in practicing it characteristic of the shared experience of being deaf?

These are complex questions requiring empirical research. This is not what we aim at here. Rather, we raise a challenging hypothesis for such work by discussing what is known from the literature in a new way. We first sketch a picture of some characteristics of communicative practices deaf people are involved in, focusing particularly on deaf-hearing interactions. Subsequently we try to motivate our

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1 We are aware of the many discussions around notions such as deaf community, deaf world, and d/Deaf. See Friedner (2010) for a discussion of classificatory terminology in relation to deaf people.
hypothesis taking the situation of deaf people in settings where the majority of people are hearing nonsigners as a frame of reference.

**Deaf-Hearing Interaction: What Do We Know?**

While hearing people can go through life without ever interacting with a deaf person, the reverse is unimaginable. Although we expect substantial variation from individual to individual, it may well be that the majority of interactions deaf people have in life are with hearing people. Parents are typically hearing, neighbors will be hearing, and playmates in the family and in the initial vicinity will be as well. For adults, most work settings will predominantly feature hearing colleagues, staff in shops, bars, and public transport will be hearing, et cetera.

Although deaf people may choose to avoid actual interactions with hearing people, it is likely that the majority of interactions in an average day are still with hearing people, even though the duration of these interactions may be very brief in comparison with deaf-deaf interactions. The use of speaking and speechreading (a shared spoken language), pointing to the immediate visual context, gesture, and pantomime will all be combined to achieve a specific communicative goal. In addition to this rich repertory of strategies, the flexibility in actually using these strategies is shared deaf-deaf and deaf-hearing interactions. These phenomena are well known and have been described in the literature (e.g., Boyes Braem et al. 1987; Rosenstock 2008).

Our hypothesis is that these deaf-hearing encounters feature the exact same communication strategies that deaf people use in first-time encounters with deaf people from other sign language backgrounds and that these encounters thus constitute a founding feature for one of the core elements in the experience of being deaf.

For forty years, since the groundbreaking work of Tervoort (1953) and Stokoe (1960), sign language researchers have studied foremost the linguistic properties of these languages analogous to those in spoken languages. More recently, the differences in sign languages and the sociolinguistic conditions in which they are used have gained attention. While it has always been clear to sign linguists that sign language is not a universal language, little attention has been paid to explicit comparison of their different lexicons and grammars. Rather, with the two decades of research on American Sign Language (ASL) predating research in most other parts of the world, many studies on European sign languages in the 1980s and 1990s were implicitly aimed at establishing that these languages showed similar degrees of complexity and similar grammatical phenomena to those found in ASL.

The growing number of different sign languages that are studied (cf. the regional surveys in Brentari 2010) together with explicit typological comparisons of sign languages (Zeshan 2004a, 2004b) made clear that there are also other contexts in which sign languages are used in addition to the national deaf communities in Western countries. For example, a number of shared signing communities have been documented (see Zeshan and De Vos 2012 for an edited collection on such communities). In such small, local communities, there is a relatively high incidence of deafness (although deaf people are still a small minority), but more hearing people can sign than in typical national deaf communities or a city context. Both linguistic anthropologists and linguists have argued that (village) sign languages evolve from gesture (Le Guen 2012). Studies of home signers have made claims
to the same effect (Goldin-Meadow 2003, 2012). Home signers are deaf people who have not grown up with exposure to an existing sign language and within their hearing environment have developed an elaborate gesture system through interaction with hearing people. In such contexts, interactions between signers and hearing nonsigners will differ from those of deaf signers in a country like the Netherlands, for instance. In the latter context, hearing people are not only nonsigners; they are often not even aware of sign language as a means of communication. We come back to this difference at the end of the chapter.

International Sign: What Do We Know?

Many deaf people both within the Netherlands and outside have told us that it is easier to communicate with deaf people using another sign language than it is to communicate with hearing people using another spoken language. A Dutch deaf person going on holiday to Turkey will typically have less difficulties interacting with a deaf local than with a hearing local, when no shared sign language is available to communicate with the former and no shared spoken language is available to communicate with the latter. That is, if there is no shared language, deaf-deaf communication is typically more fruitful than deaf-hearing or hearing-hearing communication. In fact, this is an understatement: deaf communication across language boundaries, often called international sign but sometimes called cross-signing to distinguish it from more conventional or planned contact language varieties that are more like Esperanto (Zeshan, Sagara, and Bradford 2013), seems to take place with remarkable success. International deaf events, which are frequently held, provide ready evidence of this. International sign interpreting is offered at many large events. While it is not always seen as equivalent to interpreting in an established (national) sign language (see Green, this volume, and Haualand, Solvang, and Breivik, this volume), it succeeds at bringing across at least parts of very complex messages in oral and signed presentations.

Very little empirical research has been performed on international sign so far. The largest study we know of dealt not so much with spontaneous international interactions but looked at the communicative setting at Gallaudet University, where deaf people from all over the world study and gradually learn more ASL (Rosenstock 2004). In fact, Rosenstock (2007) describes the international interactions at Gallaudet as the “emergence of a communication system” (from the title; italics ours). Other authors have looked at other instances of international deaf communication, which could be conceptualized as placed on a continuum from first-time interactions between deaf signers who do not share a language (which Zeshan termed “cross-signing”; see, e.g., Allsop et al. 1995; McKee and Napier 2002) to a top-down created and published variety such as Gestuno (WFD 1975; Supalla and Webb 1995).

Deaf signers we have consulted in the Netherlands differ about the amount of exercise and experience that are needed to sign across language boundaries as well as about the level of communicative success one can achieve. A current European Union (EU) project called “Signs2Cross” highlights that some training is at least beneficial (http://signs2cross.eu): it is developing localized courses for different deaf communities on how to successfully communicate with deaf people from other countries.
Elsewhere (2011), we argued that this skill of communicating across language boundaries is a core element of the experience that comes with being deaf. We came to this conclusion in comparing the world language system outlined by De Swaan (2001) for spoken languages with the situation for sign languages. For hearing speakers, English has a dominant role as a global language, with a smaller international role for one of twelve regional languages including Spanish or Hindi that enable communication between speakers of different language “families” across large geographical areas. While ASL would appear to be the most learned foreign sign language, it clearly does not fulfil the global role that English has for hearing people. The reason for this, we argued, is that the apparent success of international sign in enabling deaf-deaf interaction mitigates the need for an actual shared sign language. However, these interactions will typically be temporary, such as at conferences and other (cultural) gatherings or in chance encounters between deaf people with different sign languages. When situations of interaction are more permanent (as when moving to another country, e.g., to study at Gallaudet University, or marrying someone who uses another sign language), the local (or dominant) sign language will often be learned.

**Communication as a Skill: Mutual Intelligibility of Related Languages**

Little is known about the way in which deaf people acquire the ability to use international sign. In our experience (the first author in international academic circles, the second author in observing her deaf children and their friends for more than twenty years), deaf people, even if they are very young, are able to communicate somehow with deaf people with another sign language. This happens by trial and error, and in some cases is guided by a more experienced deaf signer as counterpart. This presupposes, of course, a mutual intention to communicate and an expectation that this could indeed work. This, and the pleasure it evokes, is what Green (2014, 460) terms *moral orientation*, arguing that it is “embedded in deaf notions and practices of sameness, and experienced as both good and right.”

Such situations are not unique to deaf people. Hearing people will likewise mobilize similar communicative intentions to make themselves understood or try to understand the other. Our point is that deaf people make use of different modalities in their communication and thus manage greater communicative repertoires. Thus, they do not only exploit the iconic nature of sign language lexicon and grammar (as observed by many earlier authors; see, e.g., Supalla and Webb 1995; McKee and Napier, 2002), but they also profit from their continuous existence in nonsigning, speaking environments. We suggest that this adds to the available communicative strategies they have at their disposal. Second, cultural, emotional, geographic, and linguistic distances are mitigated to a certain extent by the shared experience of living a deaf life among a hearing majority. This in turn may contribute to the mutual intention to make interaction work. It is thus not just the shared variety of communicative repertoires as such, but also the experience of being deaf (*deaf-same*) that constitutes the particular outside condition (cf. Gumperz 1982) in which strategies for understanding and being understood can persistently be worked out.

The skill in question consists of combining iconic elements from the native language, lexicon, and grammar from any shared languages (including shared
fingerspelling alphabets), the shared visible context such as objects one can point to, and the shared social context (“what is the relationship between us and why are we interacting here?”) in flexible ways (see also Sáfár et al., 2015). This communicative content in turn is combined with interactive strategies that are more prominent than when communicating with speakers of the native language. It is an empirical question of how exactly all the elements that are important in deaf-deaf communication (linguistic elements, signs, mouthing, everyday gestures, pantomime, facial expressions) interact with social knowledge and with cultural experiences to create successful communication in IS. There will be considerable individual differences in the use of various strategies and the way in which meaning is negotiated.

Where deaf people have international sign skills at their disposal, hearing people tend to master multiple spoken languages. It is often estimated that more than 50 percent of the world population speaks more than one language regularly, although hard data is lacking (Grosjean 2010). This high number might be expected given that there are fewer than two hundred countries and about seven thousand languages. Language endangerment often comes with the transition of a community to a larger language, leading to a period of a few generations that are bilingual. As De Swaan (2001) argues, people are likely to learn additional languages if this brings them economic success, and in many areas of the world it is vital to not just use the language of your parents but to learn additional languages. This holds for learning English in the Netherlands, but equally for learning English by Mexican immigrants in the USA, for instance. As Myers-Scotton (2006, 9) puts it, “bilingualism is a natural outcome of the socio-political forces that create groups and their boundaries.”

Where some authors focus on situations where people are bilingual in the sense of speaking more than one unrelated languages (such as English and Hindi), others have looked more at mutual intelligibility of more closely related languages. Research on communication in Scandinavia, for instance, has demonstrated that people speaking Norwegian and Swedish can understand each other’s language relatively well when used in cross-language interaction (e.g., Gooskens 2007). That is, without using a shared (third) language, speakers use their native tongue and rely on the listener’s perceptive skills to match the input to their own native language, without explicit training. This has been called semi-communication (Haugen 1966) and receptive multilingualism (Zeevaert and Ten Thije 2007). These authors have likewise emphasized the importance of being understood rather than speaking exactly like one’s interlocutor (Ten Thije 2013).

Because most sign languages have developed with minimal language contact to other sign languages, we see less family relationships than for spoken languages. For some family relationships that have been argued for on the basis of old texts, few data sources are actually available. The relationship between ASL and French Sign Language (LSF), for instance, is argued for on the basis of the comparison of present-day lexicons and the few older dictionaries that are available (e.g., Frishberg 1975). The strongest evidence for family relationships is perhaps the case of British Sign Language (BSL)—Australian Sign Language (Auslan)—New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) (McKee and Kennedy 2000). While there may be few similarities between sign languages due to family relationships, there are many correspondences and similarities in both lexicon and grammar due to other factors.
The limited time-depth of sign languages (typically going back to not more than three hundred years, compared to many thousands of years for spoken languages) in combination with iconic, pantomimic, and gestural strategies employed in the development of sign languages leads to similarities that can easily be explained. For instance, most sign languages appear to map time onto space to talk about temporal concepts. The fact that there may be cultural differences in how such a mapping takes place (e.g., De Vos 2012) leads to some variation, but all mappings appear iconic in nature, which makes them more suitable for use in cross-language interaction than fully arbitrary expressions.

From the perspective of international communication among hearing speakers and listeners, communication across language boundaries as witnessed among deaf people of various backgrounds is not so unique. What does remain unique, though, is that it appears to be possible to some extent across any language or language family boundary and that an organization like the WFD chooses international sign even at worldwide international meetings, as Green (2014) observes. In what follows, we try to relate deaf peoples’ language skills to the composition of deaf communities in terms of their communicative interactions.

Deaf-Hearing Interaction as a Foundation for the Particulars of Deaf-Deaf Communicative Creativity

Irrespective of the preferred manner of interaction with hearing people, deaf people have grown up learning how to handle such encounters. Signers will constantly need to appeal to their communication skills that go beyond the linguistic and interactive resources offered by conventionalized sign languages. How exactly this is learned we know little about: whether by formal or informal instruction at school, by parents or peers, or by mimicking the behavior of other deaf or hearing people. Variation between individuals is expected. It is clear, however, that these embodied practices are part and parcel of the experience of being deaf.

Many authors looking at deaf communities from a sociological or anthropological perspective have emphasized the similarities rather than the differences between diverse settings. The shared difference in communicative mode with the large majority of the surrounding hearing population in almost any context is an important part of that similarity. Moreover, the shared orientation to and involvement with visuality also unites deaf people, hence the focus on deaf people as “visual people,” as some scholars stress (Bahan 2008; Baynton, Gannon, and Bergey 2007; Haualand 2008). Discussing the implications of such a focus on visuality, Hilde Haualand (2008, 112) points out its potential analytical gain: “Like studies of sign language have altered the understanding of what language is, studies of communities that establish connections through vision or other channels than the audible may challenge the understanding of what a community is.” Deaf communities are usually not only dispersed within a larger hearing society, but even in a village context with a high proportion of hearing signers, they are at the same time similar to each other in this very respect. This similarity is not just located in deaf people’s visibility but also in shared experiences, histories, orientations, ways of “being in the world.” Some refer to this as DEAF-SAME (e.g., Friedner and Kusters 2014).
Various authors have emphasized the existence of a global deaf community. Breivik argued that “Deaf people are . . . potentially and actually members of a transnational and trans-local framework that overrides any local or national loyalty they may additionally possess” (Breivik 2005, 12). However, this notion should be used prudently. As Haualrand (2007, 45) shows, the international visitors of the Deaflympics in Rome in 2001 could only move effortlessly within the transnational Deaf network “without being locked to a certain nationality or one specific sign language” because “they possessed the linguistic and cultural knowledge to move effortlessly within [it].” Access to such knowledge will vary widely within and between different communities. Indeed, there is a growing unease with unifying concepts such as “the deaf community” or “deaf identity” in which differences in socioeconomic background, cultural environment, class, race, religious orientation, and gender are easily overlooked, not to mention the (often) enormous differences between deaf people in the global North as compared to those in the rest of the world (see, e.g., Monaghan et al. 2003; Kisch 2008; Friedner 2010). Any analysis of global shared experiences of deaf people should thus take into account widely differing “localities.”

Our hypothesis, that deaf-hearing encounters feature the exact same communication strategies that deaf people use in first-time encounters with deaf people from other sign language backgrounds, leads us to better understand how the seemingly miraculous cross-signing skill is possible in the first place. If it is an elaboration of embodied practices, of something that deaf people have (implicitly and explicitly) learned to do on a daily basis throughout their lives, then communicating across sign language boundaries is not such an incredible task.

The perhaps surprising conclusion is then that something that may be seen as a core feature of deaf-deaf communication is in fact made possible by the fact that deaf people spend a significant amount of time interacting with nonsigning, hearing people. Deaf people’s experience and skill in dealing with a large variety of communicative settings are not necessarily unique or unparalleled by hearing people. However, it is certainly better developed at the group level in most countries.

Concluding Remarks

With the little work that has been done both on international deaf interactions and local or national deaf-hearing interactions, our hypothesis outlined remains just that: a hypothesis in need of testing. One possible way to do this would be to compare signers from Western deaf communities such as the Netherlands with signers from shared signing communities with little interaction with hearing nonsigners: the former will have more experience in interacting with hearing nonsigners and would thus be predicted to bring more interactive skills to the table than deaf signers who are used to the average hearing person knowing how to converse with deaf people. Also, both the qualification and the quantification of different types of interactions and social relations of deaf signers is something that appears to be underexplored. The same holds for the intensity of these different contacts: insofar that the variety of topics or semantic domains of interactions are similar, what is the difference in length of the interactions and how does the emotional engagement of signers differ in both contexts? We have tried to motivate the hypothesis by highlighting the minority status of deaf people within society and the minority
status of deaf native signers within the whole community of signers. It is thus plausible that most deaf people interact more frequently with nonsigners than with other signers. Moreover, we have suggested that similar communicative strategies are used in interacting with different groups with whom a signer does not share a sign language, having to resort to more pantomimic expressions, a shared spoken language (if any), and increased use of (visible, shared) context. But most of all, we have suggested that the experience of being deaf, reaching further than just communicative strategies and extending into shared visual practices, shared history, a sense of kinship, and other practices of sameness, provides for the space in which IS works to communicate with deaf others across language borders.

REFERENCES


