Development of turn-taking in deaf children: comparing triadic and dyadic conversations

Presentation language: ENGLISH

Preferred format: POSTER

NB the instruction on Easy chair does not allow you to specify!

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Abstract

The few studies that exist on adult turn-taking systems in sign languages, for example for American Sign Language (Baker 1977), British Sign Language (Coates & Sutton-Spence 2001) and Brazilian Sign Language (McCleary & Leite 2013) have described eye gaze behavior, the modality-specific attention-getting strategies, and the role of overlap (see Baker & van Bogaerde 2012 for an overview). The analysis of multi-party conversations indicate that eye gaze is crucial in regulating the turns, that implicit strategies are common, and that overlap occurs primarily for establishing collaborative floor (Coates & Sutton-Spence 2001), that is for giving simultaneous feedback about the topic.

Acquisition work has focused on dyadic situations. Over the period 2 to 6 years deaf children increasingly see the beginning of utterances - more than 95% at age 6;0 (Prinz & Prinz 1985, Baker & Van den Bogaerde 2012). Deaf adults tend to ensure visual attention from the deaf child and the child is learning to give visual attention. The adult strategies change from being mainly implicit with young children to an increase of explicit attention strategies. At 2;0 overlap is mainly interruption, not related to the topic. This decreases and the functions such as feedback, clarification and confirmation through repetition increase clearly in the children particularly after age four, reflecting a shift in the adults too. In dyadic settings the children are apparently learning the collaborative floor from the age of four years onwards, but they have not yet fully acquired the adult pattern, even by age six.

In this study the focus will be on the more complex situation of a multi-party interaction in order to obtain a more detailed picture of the acquisition of turn-taking skills. Specifically a triadic situation between a deaf mother and her two deaf children at age five years will be analyzed and compared to the same mother with the two children individually in a dyadic situation. The two children are twins so that the chance of age differences resulting in different language levels that might affect the findings is reduced. The analysis of the turn-taking mechanisms used in these situations covers the visual attention behavior of the mother and of the children, the type of attention strategies used, and the function of overlap.

The results indicate that in the triadic situation the children use more explicit strategies in order to obtain a turn. They are in fact competing with each other for the turn as well as with the mother. The mother checks for visual attention before she signs but often does this with one of the twins rather than both. The other child has to react to the implicit signal of signing beginning and give
visual attention. The function of overlap for the children and the mother in the dyadic situation contains signed back-channeling. In the triadic situation the children more often attempt to take a turn, and have far less back-channeling. The turn-taking is not smooth in the triadic situation but demonstrates more aspects of the children’s turn-taking abilities.

REFERENCES


