The continuum of *Ishara*: Deaf-hearing gesture in Mumbai

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Gesture in Mumbai

• Gesture: main means of communication between deaf and hearing people in majority of world

• Why Mumbai?
  – Annelies: research in Mumbai since 2007
  – Annelies lived in Mumbai 2010-2013; Sujit is Mumbaikar
  – Observed people communicating in gesture, communicated in gesture ourselves
Research questions

– How do fluent signers (who don’t speak) and fluent speakers (who don’t sign) interact through gesture?
– What is the role of speech, mouthing, writing, typing when communicating in gesture?
– Potential and limitations of this way of communication, discourse range
– What do people say about this way of communicating? (language ideologies)
Methodology

• Combination visual anthropology and linguistic anthropology
• Field work: January – May 2014
• Six case studies of gestural interactions in public space in Mumbai (strangers and acquaintances):
  – Gestural interactions
  – Short interviews with deaf participants
  – Short interviews with hearing participants
  – Long interviews with deaf participants
Research team

• Team:
  – postdoctoral researcher (Annelies)
  – deaf research assistant (Sujit)
  – hearing interpreter
  – 3 deaf cameramen taking turns

✓ Ie manage insider-outsider position: Annelies led all shooting and interviews, but did not ask the questions herself

• 5-day training of deaf cameramen by Visual Box (a sign language media agency) to create anthropological documentary; including a pilot study
Shortened versions of three movies were showed during this presentation – you can watch them on 
The six case studies

1. Reena: deaf woman: grocery shopping + transport
2. Pradip: deaf-blind man: grocery shopping, transport to known + unknown places
3. Komal and Sanjay: deaf couple with accessory shop: schoolgirls as customers
4. Durga and his team: deaf manager of branch of Café Coffee Day (chain) with deaf staff
5. Mahesh: deaf businessman who sells boxes of pens to stationery shops
6. Sujit: transportation of research team
The data

• Transcription / translations / analysis: ongoing
• Next step: creation of a one hour ethnographic documentary (Spring/Summer 2015)
• Viewings and focus groups in India (further data on ideologies) in the Fall of 2015
Context and discourse range

• Mostly customer interactions (buying, selling, serving, inquiring) but also conversations in train

• Discourse range is broader than expected: people talk about politics, sports, family structure, …

• Important: knowledge of Indian CONTEXT
  – local Indian gestures
  – marketing conventions
  – news (politics, sports, ..)
Multimodality and communicative repertoire

- Gesturing, ISL
- Writing (words) on paper, mobile phone, calculator, hand,…
- Mouth: importance of lipreading/mouthing! (hearing people lipread too!)

✓ **Combination** of strategies (such as writing words to support gestures)
Ideologies

- Word for gesture/sign language is the same in Hindi: *Ishara*
- *Ishara* as “gift of God”, natural
- BOTH deaf and hearing people think there is a *continuum* between gesture and Indian sign language
  - Incorporation of gesture in ISL (and the other way around!)
  - deaf signing is faster, more fluent, more complex
  ✓ contrast with West where gesture is often seen as something *completely different* as sign language, as having *no grammar.*
- Both deaf and hearing people feel gestural communication has its limits and takes time, BUT that it fulfills the aims of customer interactions, small talk, joking
Ideologies

• Contrast between ideology and practice
  – Some hearing people fluent in gesture and then in the interview they say they feel limited in gestural communication
  – Most hearing people say they don’t gesture with each other (!?)
Thanks for your attention

• If you are interested in this project, check out this page with regular updates:

  • (or Google “gesture Mumbai”)

• And/or email Annelies: kusters@mmg.mpg.de
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