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**DbI's Network on Communication and Congenitally Deafblind Persons**

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**CONGENITALLY DEAFBLIND PERSONS  
AND THE EMERGENCE OF SOCIAL AND  
COMMUNICATIVE  
INTERACTION**

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# CONGENITALLY DEAFBLIND PERSONS AND THE EMERGENCE OF SOCIAL AND COMMUNICATIVE INTERACTION

## PHASE III: THE FORMATION OF MEANING

Reflections on the Third Paris Conference,  
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The purpose of this paper is to address the question of how meaning is formed in communicative development, the way this question is actualised in encounters with persons with congenital deafblindness. It seems to make sense to start by focusing spontaneous gestural configurations that emerge from interactional experiences, and try to follow these gestures through the exchanges that transform them into signs. In this paper we will attend to gestures that originate as Bodily Emotional Traces of interaction experience (BETs). We suggest that gestures that originate as BETs have high meaning potential; and gestures can become signs when they are taken over by the partner (frequently by way of imitation).

If the child (C) makes a gesture (G), and that gesture is a BET and the adult (A) makes as his responding utterance (G1) a similar gesture, is it not possible that C recognizes G1 as similar to G?

Now, consider the possibility that G is charged with the reminiscences of past experience (it is a BET); maybe G is a schematised component of a scenario of joyful play. Consider that A imitates G of C as G1, not in the form of copying, but in the form of taking over, identifying with the G of C. Might it not be that C in his turn identifies with G1 of A? And what does it mean for C to identify with the gesture of A? Will it not mean that he also projects to A the same kind of reminiscences that the similar gesture, his gesture, is

charged with? Will it not be so, that when C encounters his kind of gesture, performed by A, that C will project whatever reminiscences that gesture is charged with for him, to A? Is that not how C comes to believe that he himself and his partner have intersubjective minds? Or, does it not make sense to think like that.<sup>1</sup>

Imitation, projection, meaning and mind  
We maintain the idea that the system of being imitated and imitating cogs or connects persons together into interpersonal relations of potential temporary intersubjectivity. This cogging or binding together does not happen only in sequences of immediate social interaction, but also in sequences of communicative interaction. Communicative interaction requires reciprocal projection of minds and of contents in minds.  
We discovered when we worked clinically and exploratively with the system of being imitated and imitating on the level of immediate social interactive play that we could get into passionate improvisational playful contact with almost "anyone". We did not need any attachment or common language or culture or biographical knowledge to do that. We could play with strangers. However, we had to take care not to glide into the space of attachment. For example if you want to get into contact with an ordinary toddler in the tram, what do you do? You should only imitate him, his movements and facial expressions. In this way he can identify with you, since you behave in a way he can perceive and predict. But if you start to talk to him, or to the mother, or if you smile to the mother he becomes confused. When confused he might start to frown and fuss and turn back to his mother. In that moment you break the spell of reciprocal identification; you are the stranger, a potential danger. The fun is over once you glide away from the space of social interactive play into

the space of attachment. That glide must not be out of the control of the child. On the other hand, as a playmate, you may progressively be considered predictable. The child might reach towards you to be lifted up to initiate a hug indicating you are included in his space of passion; you are accepted as another attachment person.

We discover dynamics similar to that mentioned above when we work clinically with the formation of meaning in communicative interaction: When we work with spontaneous gestures originating as BETS, we should take care not to project to those emergent gestural utterances very specific or precise meaning. The challenge seems to be to give the child the experience that he has a mind, like we have, and whatever reminiscences and images are “in there” are in principle similar to the kind of reminiscences and images that are in our mind. So we are not, to begin with, so interested in what the child has to say, and we are not so interested in what we have to say to the child. Human communication, on this fundamental level does not require yet that something specific is said and understood.

Before we move on to look at the BETS and their surrounding conceptual framework in more detail, we will connect back to earlier phases of our contemporary explorations into communication and congenital deafblindness. The purpose is to try linking the issues explored together into a coherent story.

Looking back to the explorations into sequences of social interactive play

During the first phase of the study we collected videotaped sequences of sustained dyadic interaction. We used so called best-case scenarios or “good examples”. We were interested in analysing these examples to find out what it was that triggered the interest of the deafblind person in his partner, what it was that maintained the exchanges so that a sustained sequence of mutual involvement emerged. We found that the reciprocal system of being imitated and imitating was at the core of these exchanges, in particular the part

of the system that has to do with the experience of being imitated. Sustained sequences tended to form into rituals and have an overlay of musical improvisation, often reminding of some kind of jam session. Variations in rhythm and mood are prominent, and a structure of repetition and variation is progressively emerging, which in turn forms the skeleton of the ritual.

We may observe from video recordings made during the formation of dyadic rituals of explorative play that there are certain moments during the interactive sequence where the deafblind person appears to be reflecting; the tempo may go down, he may become still and attentive for a moment, or turn away and then come back and initiate a repetition of a recent sequence. He may touch where he felt touched. What we observe is a temporary disruption in the flow of interaction. This little space, this little sequence within the sequence is a space of reflection, where continuous interaction time is disrupted as experiential time. Experiential time takes place during breaks (hesitations) when the child reflects upon what happened and looks forward to what might be.

When one experiences the interaction, one has to stop the flow temporarily. So it makes sense to distinguish between interaction and the subjective experience of interaction. The BET is pointing back to the subjective experience of the interaction that takes place during experimental time; the BET is born in the brackets between repeated sequences of interaction flow. It takes time for the BET to grow into a clear gestural configuration; the configuration crystallizes out of receptivity. So, in principle, a BET can stay if it grows into a clear gestural configuration; or it can be aborted, disappear from the repertoire of potential gestures.

All gestural configurations that survive the initial phase of formation can in principle progressively be transformed into signs. But not all are. Again, only some will stay, the rest will go away.

The challenge for us, as helpers and partners is, in

case of congenital deafblindness to help as many BETs as possible to survive the transformational phases they have to move through to be charged with potential meaning and go on functioning as signs. So how can we do that? If a gesture that points to a BET from an interaction experience has potential meaning, then it should be possible to explore that potential. To do that the partner could reflect that spontaneous gesture as a potential utterance by imitating it (its form and the sketch of its potential content). Then we are back to the reciprocal projection of intersubjective reflective minds (and contents of projective minds) happening in sequences of negotiation. So we have now a triadic interaction: 2 partners and a "THAT" that is referred to by both partners as a potential conversational topic. What is required to expand further is that the partner knows the biography of the referential gesture; otherwise he will not know the BET that is pointed at.

Looking back to the focus on triadic and potentially communicative sequences of interaction During the second phase of this study we started to attend to triadic sequences within which we could observe the emergence of communicative interaction. The challenge during this phase was to know how the spontaneous gesture that is presented by the deafblind person can take on the function of a third element in the form of a sign. The challenge for the partner is to make the person with CDB discover that he can transmit his idea to our mind by way of his gesture. In that case, his spontaneous gesture has taken on the function of a sign. If the person with CDB feels that his partner is making a similar gesture as he makes himself, this may evoke the image in him that his partner shares the image, or the BET pointed at by that gesture.

G. H. Mead (1934) worked this logic out a long time ago, theoretically. What we do is to transform this logic to a theoretically informed communicative practice. We go on trying to strip human communicative practice down to its naked rule.

The concept of negotiation highlights the collaborative, unpredictable, co-creative and progressive processes of dialogical meaning-making. Both partners strive by way of these reciprocal negotiations towards temporary intersubjectivity, in the form of temporary synchronization of mental spaces. This is a very fundamental process in human communication, and without it there can be no shared understanding.

The nature of a third element in the dialogue The nature of the third element we are presently attending to, is an utterance shaped by the BET, which in turn points to some reminiscence (a memory of "something" in the mind) addressed to a partner with the intention of sharing it.

A spontaneous utterance of a person with congenital deafblindness could be touching a location within arms length (for instance the top of his own head, or touching a place on a table where something has been). So when he touches his head, we must consider that maybe what he touches on his head is the location of a BET. Maybe the touching is not touching. Maybe it is potential pointing. Maybe his reminiscences are projected out in the interactional spaces of their origin, so one can point at something which is no longer there, one points at the location of the trace of what was there, the location pointed at is a blend between the table and the memory of what was there (cf. Lidell). So if the person with congenital deafblindness touches a location on his hand, maybe he is not touching his hand. Maybe his hand is representing something in the world, say the surface of a stone, as touched. Maybe the touch of a location in his palm is the potential pointing to the trace of the impression of touching the stone. Maybe the expression is an expression of an impression, literally speaking. From now on we will be moving progressively deeper into processes relating to meaning and the formation of meaning in ontogeny and in human communication, language and thinking in general.

### Narrative structure

Since Colwyn Trevarthen pointed it out to us in the second Paris Conference, we became more aware that in good examples of dyadic interaction there is already a clear narrative structure. The spontaneous bodily expression of a feeling has a typical narrative structure, with a progressive crescendo of intensity, and a steeper curve of ebbing out. Shakespeare used this structure metaphorically, in the ballet “The tempest” where the storm is the metaphor for an intense feeling building up. It makes sense to say “a storm is building up inside”. The narrative structure pre-organizes meaning, and it is very basic, in ontogeny, in literature, in drama, culture (and probably also in phylogeny). It is very prominent in natural sign languages of the deaf where cultural knowledge and meaning has to be passed on from person to person and generation to generation because there is no written form. The narrative structure maps to the dynamics of nature.

It makes no sense to believe that congenital deafblindness calls for an exception with regard to the power of the narrative structure to pre-organize meaning. The point is that the most basic grammar is the grammar of the story, which opens possibilities for language development in congenitally deafblind people. You can understand that grammar without knowing the language of the culture, because the grammar of the narrative is universally embodied, it maps on to the structure of bodily-emotional experience, it is understandable by persons with congenital deafblindness who have no understanding of language, in the sense of the linguistic practice of the culture.

We will continue to address other cognitive processes that pre-organize meaning making, such as metonymization, metaphorization, and in particular blending processes. We believe very strongly, and are collecting empirical evidence that a focus on these processes will promote the inclusion of person with congenital deafblindness into the mind making and meaning-making, and thereby most fundamental functions of human commu-

nication. Things, events and experiences would vanish if we could not rely on a storing system (the narrative) that gives the possibility to handle the experience of our lives and to share it with other people, not merely in the form of a system of reflexes (which only allow an adaptation to the world), but in the form of a possibility to think and share this thinking (Paul Ricoeur).

### Contemporary investigations into meaning in the making

We have observed in all our videos (Communication Network videos I, II, and III), and in many complementary documentary videos from the field that sequences of sustained exchanges with the environment may trigger the person with congenital deafblindness to create spontaneous gestures. These gestures are typically neither social nor communicative when they emerge. They have an origin, they come from somewhere, but they do not yet have a social and communicative function, and they do not yet have a meaning. We believe that it is up to the partner to collaboratively construct the dialogical practice that progressively will charge these gestures with function and meaning over time. We want in fact, the gesture to become a sign. These signs will enable us to engage the person with congenital deafblindness in gestural discourse about ideas or “mental stuff”.

Let us go back to our observations. Gestures can appear immediately here-and-now, or they can be evoked later on in a distal situation. We have been wondering how it can be that gestures appear in a distal situation that seems on the surface, to be very different from the original one. This is how we thought it makes sense to think about it:

Something in the way the child experiences the here-and-now is connected to a trace or a set of traces from a distal scenario. Maybe the child feels that something that is happening here and now feels like, reminds of, something experienced in distal space. Maybe this feeling of similarity brings back the bodily emotional traces (the BETs) that were formed in that original scenario.

So maybe the important thing we can try to do as partners is to bring out all the traces that are hidden in the body of our deafblind subject. We have to give him access to situations where that can happen. More generally we must give access to situations where BETs can be formed, to situations where BETs can be revived, and to situations where BETs can be transformed into signs (by way of their inclusion into dialogical practice, and interpersonal negotiation).

What can partners do with these traces, apart from giving access to situations that can bring them out, trigger them, and evoke them? This is what we think: The deafblind person needs to meet somebody who can imagine the same connections between experiences, and between aspects of experiences, who can join him/her in the making of a story that organizes the relationship between events. This person must be able to provide him with a bodily expression that he can recognize as an expression that maps mentally, bodily, emotionally on to the structure of his bodily emotional traces.

(Footnotes)

1 It is interesting to underline that so far two logical levels are active in the making of the sign:

1- How gestures point at BETs (the meaning making)

2- How such a subjective experience of life can be shared: other people and I have minds because we display for each other gestures which are related to each-other and which are both same and different.



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