



COMMUNICATION NETWORK UPDATE SERIES

Number 5

DbI's Network on Communication and Congenitally Deafblind Persons

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**DbI seminar on transcription
of meaning negotiation**

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NUD, December 9th to 12th , 2003

Paper from the seminar: The relation between potential and realized meaning

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Published by the Nordic Staff Training Centre for Deafblind Services (NUD)

for DbI's Network on Communication and Congenitally Deafblind Persons 2004

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DbI seminar on transcription of meaning negotiation NUD, December 9th to 12th , 2003

Purpose of the seminar

During the last meeting in the WGC it was suggested that the December meeting would be preceded by a seminar addressing how one may transcribe video-sequences in which meaning negotiation is taking place. The purpose of this transcription should be to transform the video material into texts that could be used for detailed analysis of meaning negotiation. The purpose of this analysis would be to gain knowledge about the prerequisites for understanding the utterances of, and conversations with, persons with cdb.

So far (at least until the NUD conference in October), it is mainly Flemming Ask Larsen who has started to address transcription and meaning analysis of cdb utterances systematically - some of it in collaboration with Anne Nafstad. It was therefore decided that the seminar in December 2003 should take as point of departure the suggestions for transcription and analysis that is included in his thesis, plus eventual recent

elaborations and their collaborative work.

During this seminar we will introduce and exemplify principles in transcription and analysis, in order for the group to discuss, whether or not these examples can be used as a starting point for further work with regard to

- Clinically relevant research,
- A larger international seminar or course,
- Curricula in e.g. an eventual European Master/ staff development programmes.

The working group has the possibility to meet again at a second seminar in April (21. – 25.) at NUD where it will be possible for us to continue the collaborative work on how the future development of tools for transcription may be organised. This leaves time in between the seminars to think things through, and maybe get the process started.

Paper from the seminar:

The relation between potential and realized meaning

by Anne Varran Nafstad & Flemming Ask Larsen 2004

We presume that the construction of meaning, and the cognitive as well as the dialogical prerequisites for this construction, are central themes when working clinically with cdb people. The prevailing ethics regarding clinical practice implies that we must strive to diminish the gap between the *hidden meaning potential* of the utterances of cdb persons and the part of this potential that is *realisable as actual meaning construction* in the interaction with the surrounding world.

In order for us to bridge that gap, it is necessary to develop new knowledge of the “proximal zone of (language) development” (Vygotsky 1976:285f) that is actualised in conversations with cdb persons; hence no obvious cultural norm may guide a “significant other” in his “scaffolding”. In other words, we need to seek out the cognitive processes that underlie language development.

We presume that by focusing on the dynamics of the processes (one being the semiosis, another the negotiation (Ask Larsen 2003)) of meaning construction we will, by implication, be focusing on what we hereby term the *linguality* of these people with cdb. *Linguality* (Danish: *sproglighed*; German: *Sprachlichkeit*) we define as the capacity of communicating complex meaning structures in the sense of focused, coherent, and elaborate scenarios (cf. Brandt 2004 and 1994) by way of different communicative and semiotic *functions*, as opposed to *linguistic skill*, which is bound up to the mastering of a specific cultural language *form*. What the clinical practice gains from operating with this new term, is a better ability to distinguish testing a child’s level of acquired language *skill* from describing his level of communicative/ proto-linguistic/lingual creativity and *potential*.

Being lingual means using gestures (in a sense-modality unspecified sense) to negotiate meaning in a here and now setting, and engaging in the stabilisation of shared symbolic signs from these gestural negotiations.

Human-universal gestures → negotiation of proto-signs → negotiated (culture-specific) signs

For this negotiation to be possible the basic cognitive capacities of the children must – in spite of the sense impairments – consist of more or less the same components as those of other humans.

There are three basic components of human communication and linguality that we have to take into consideration: firstly, a basic inborn strive, or directedness, toward human interaction in a specific *dialogically structured* manner (Bråten 1998, Rommetveit 1974, Sacks 1992, Sacks et. al. 1974, Trevarthen 1999, 1999b, 1994, 1990); secondly, the dependence of *cognitive semantic schematics* (Brandt 2004, 19994, Langacker 1990, Talmy 2000, Østergaard 1998) when making sense of the world and others; and thirdly, a developing schematics for *communicative* and *sign functions* (Jacobson 1981, Levinson 1983, Searle 1969).

This perspective makes way for inclusion of a variety of language forms, including hitherto unknown and undocumented forms, such as “deafblindish”. When we focus on the process of meaning creation, it follows that we have to apprehend a cognitive semiotic and including conception of the *dynamics of the sign*, and thereby escape the traditional excluding and formal linguistic notion of the *language system*.

We believe that a clinical strategy based on an including and dynamic semiotic conception of the processes of meaning construction is liable to *capture and realize more* of the meaning potential, than a

clinical practice based on a traditional linguistic notion of the language system.

One of the reasons for this belief is that, when we focus on the cognitive semiotic dynamics of communication (the collaborate construction of meaning in a dialogically shared mental space), we focus on abstract structures that transcend the physical form, and thus we include the communicative potential of “strange” forms such as “deafblindish”.

This inclusion of these “strange” empirics from the cdb communication will in turn shed light on aspects of human communication, which are difficult to grasp in the analysis of “normal” human communication. This new empirical field within the study of human communication will most likely enrich our understanding of hitherto hidden details in the dynamics of this communication, and help us to a better understanding and modelling of human communication. The study of cdb persons’ linguality is what generates these new empirics.

The traditional linguistic notion of language requires an excluding selection of empirical data. You select a number of well-defined language systems, and define language as the sum of the included languages.

Introducing the term linguality influences the notion of cognitive skill. A long tradition within the study of language acquisition presumes a close relation between linguistic skill and level of cognitive development (from Piaget to Vygotsky). In the extreme version of this tradition, the development of language can be seen as a measurement for the cognitive development. This implies that the level of conventionality in linguistic form and usage will reveal the level of thinking capacity. Immature language is thus a symptom of immature thinking, and lack of conventional language will mean lack of thinking. As cdb children rarely show any competence in a linguistic examination, the conclusion in such an investigation will be that they have limited cognitive capacities.

From the practical and clinical experience with cdb children we know, however, that the cdb children are not necessarily as stupid as their linguistic skills might indicate. We often suspect that they have a notably good cognitive capacity, and that they are better at “thinking” than they are at “speaking” in a conventional recognisable manner.

When you change the clinical focus from promoting language acquisition to supporting participation in communication, you change the goal from *normalisation* to *inclusion* of the child.

On this ground, we would like to include in a Vygotskian understanding of anticipation of the *proximal zone of development* not only to anticipate what linguistic skill might be *developed* in the future, but also what communication that might be *realised* from the *un-realised meaning potential* of the utterances of cdb persons here and now.

In doing so one must focus on the gap between what the cdb person is capable of thinking, and what he is capable of expressing. One must anticipate what meaning might be realised from the presented expression, regardless of its formal incompleteness.

The Vygotskian *anticipative* method of *seeing the possible in the actual* embraces the danger of over-interpretation. When dealing with normal children, the cultural anchorage is very strong and provides the adult interlocutor with a wide range of waypoints for his interpretation of the child’s utterances. Eye contact, visual directedness, facial expressions, distal gestural orientation, etc, that support the situational contextual cues, are culturally recognisable support for this interpretation. When the utterances are as “strange” and un-cultural as the utterances of cdb children, the Vygotskian anticipative method requires an *analytic praxis* in order to compensate the lack of culturally recognisable cues.

We define the role of the adult interlocutor in conversation with cdb persons as one of mediating between what is expressed and what is meant, between what is presented and what is imagined, between what is said and what is thought. This mediation must be anticipative before it is interpretive, it must be based on an analytic approach to the “strange” utterance, focusing on the meaning potential in terms of

sign function and content of mental space, rather than on the first intuition of the adult interlocutor.

In order to anticipate and realise hidden meaning potential in utterances that do not provide a culturally recognisable relation between the activity of the child and the cultural norm, we must develop an adequate theory of the dynamic processes underlying meaning negotiation – a theory that transcends the culturally recognisability of the form of the utterance and concentrates on the underlying meaning or thought. Where Vygotsky operates on intuitive interpretation based on normal cues in the context we need a theoretical framework to compensate the asymmetries of the “oddness” of the expressions.

Cognitive semiotics provides theory and tools developed in order to analyse exactly these dynamic processes in the construction of meaning. Using these tools and theories in the clinical practice enables us to (re-) establish communicative settings with anticipative adult interlocutors. These anticipative settings will be better equipped to bridge the gap between what is realised and what is potential meaning due to the theoretically informed focus on the dynamics of the negotiation. In such a setting, we may address the question of how deafblind people think, which is a necessary and basic element of addressing the question of how they express their thoughts.

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