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DbI's Network on Communication and Congenitally Deafblind Persons

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**Co-creating Communication
OSLO 2006 April 26th-29th**

Co-creating communication

Oslo, April 26th to 29th , 2006

Keynote speech from the Oslo Conference: Co-creating communication

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Co-creating communication Oslo, April 26th to 29th , 2006

Keynote speech

Jacques SOURIAU

The topics that will be addressed during this conference, the concepts we will refer to and the paradigms that will structure our discussions are definitely situated in space and time; they belong to very a large conversation with many participants from many places and from all times. This keynote speech aims at manifesting, at least partly, this big discussion which goes on taking place between people concerned with Deafblindness, but also among scholars, scientists and laymen. This presentation will be my view of this ongoing development; but this personal view includes other people's views and is part of this general polycentered dialogue. The way we think, and possibly disagree with each other, in the field of Deafblindness, is dynamically determined by scientific findings and daily life conceptions that interact with our experience of congenital Deafblindness. I chose to focus on three main topics: language, gestures and dialogue. I would like to shed some light on where we come from regarding these three topics. I also suggest that congenital Deafblindness contributes to understanding and analysing these central questions for human life. And as a conclusion, I will address the question of wild or feral children, in order to place the question of congenital Deafblindness in a general framework which includes many types of extreme and untypical conditions and poses ethical questions.

DB History: Science and technology

When preparing this keynote, it came to my mind that in 1992, at the European conference on staff development in services for DB people which took place in Hanover (October 3-7), Anne Nafstad and I made a presentation

on the following topic: « Video: a new tool » (SOURIAU, J. 1992). The core of the ideas we wanted to share with our colleagues was very close to what we intend to address during this present seminar in Oslo.

Here are a few parts taken out of the text:

“Traditional linguistics used to deal with an ideal speaker-listener (see Chomsky) without taking into account the practical conditions in which language is produced and understood. This purely linguistic approach did not look tenable to the researchers interested in language as a means of communication.”

“Action and communication are interrelated.”

“Enunciation refers to the fact that the situation of the two interlocutors in the space of communication must be coded in the speakers' productions.”

“Communication is multi channelled: ... when we speak, we produce, in a parallel way, movements and attitudes which contribute to displaying a communicative pattern...”

“Observation... depends dialectically on theory. It requires agreement on a common frame of reference.”

“Video can be a very useful tool for

- assessing non verbal and paraverbal communication
- describing interaction patterns (dyads or groups)
- enabling staff-supervisor or parent-professional dyads to improve their understanding of the children and the quality of interaction”.

This was followed by a presentation of examples by Anne Nafstad. As far as I remember, my presentation did not trigger any enthusiastic reaction from the audience, just a polite interest. Many of the statements here quoted are somehow naive, but no one could question now the tremendous developments which took place among the scholars and professionals in communication related to these topics, especially in the field of Deafblindness, through the

collaborative dialogue between a technology (video-taping) and theoretical investigations in various fields of research.

The role of the technology was also emphasized in 1998 by Per Linell who wrote, in “Approaching Dialogue. Talk, interaction and contexts in dialogical perspectives” p XII: “the absence of the necessary technology, such as tape-recorders, was another reason why scholars of earlier times were handicapped in their attempts to understand spoken discourses” (LINELL, P. 1998).

So it is not by chance that the field of communication with CDB people now meets the field of research on dialogical practices.

Factors of change

Of course, many of the conceptual frameworks we use at this moment in the field of communication with CDB people are not totally new. They can be tracked down over the past decades and centuries; but without a proper technological device (video-taping) and also a sustained engagement of families and professionals in supporting communication with CDB people, many of these concepts would not have really developed because of a lack of empirical evidence, as well as a lack of trust and interest among most scholars. The ongoing co-creative communication between CDB people and their partners led to theoretical developments which were unpredictable.

Co-creating communication with persons with congenital Deafblindness requires also the collaboration between many scientific fields and subfields. It is both a challenge and a privilege to be obliged to investigate such a variety of topics as: medicine, neurology, linguistics, psycholinguistics, psychology of perception, developmental psychology, semiotics, cognitive semiotics etc.

The life of languages

Languages are not stable in their internal structure and the definition of language itself is historically controversial. Through presenting the following ideas on the life of languages, I would like to secure the conceptual and practical freedom we need in order to meet the needs of congenitally deafblind people regarding communication, language and thinking. Language use and language studies change historically within unstable borders. This lack of stability reflects the dynamics of the human social mind; it also provides us with better opportunities for understanding how communication and language can develop in specific sensory conditions.

Plasticity and variability

Evolutions

All languages evolve and change in cycles. These changes are realized under the pressure of two antagonistic principles (HAGÈGE, C. 2006):

- a principle of economy and facilitation: i.e. using a minimum of resources (for instance, at this moment, in Chinese, words are monosyllabic; or in all languages, close class words are much shorter than the other ones because they are extremely frequently used).
- a principle of expressivity: any language should be able to serve with a maximum of details the communicative purposes (e.g.: in Chinese, tones are part of the phonology in order to compensate

for the words being monosyllabic).(cf.: Zipf and tonal languages - tonogenesis). The way this balance between economy and expressivity is achieved at this moment in Chinese differs from a remote past and also from the future.

BAKHTINE (BAKHTINE 1929) mentions also that words use is an indicator of social changes (for instance, 20 years ago, for my baker, “traditional” bread would have been bread baked in a wood fire oven. By contrast, last week, I was offered, by my baker, the choice between “traditional” bread and wood fire bread, “traditional” now meaning baked in an electric oven.

Diversity and Universals

Languages are both extremely diverse but also show similarities (universal features) in their internal structure and use. It is a very difficult task for linguists to address this contradiction between diversity and universality (BLANCHE-BENVENISTE, C. (2000)).

Here are some thoughts about these two apparently contradictory aspects:

Diversity: 6 to 7000 languages are still alive¹. Some languages have 35 consonants and other ones very few. Some are monosyllabic (Chinese) and other ones (Inuit) have 20 syllables words. Some have no conjugation, and others have a very detailed one.

It seems that languages can differ without limits.

Universality: For Chomsky, languages have universal formal properties that reflect human intellectual capacities. According to this view, language is the best approach to human cognition, and linguistics belongs to cognitive sciences. For Pinker, Universal grammar is just like the general layout of bodies that is common to all kinds of animals.

In the history of the social and scientific recognition of sign languages, we meet very precisely this tension between the specificity of visual-gestural languages and their structural similarity to other languages (phonology and arbitrariness for instance).

In the field of congenital Deafblindness, these questions remain somehow unsolved because of the social vulnerability of the members of this community (among many other factors, they are few, scattered, and cannot easily develop transgenerational changes).

Diachrony and synchrony

Language is an unstable object, transient, that scientists try to grasp and that somehow escapes their hands. Language can be studied either as an external object by ignoring all the variations that take place through historical changes and actual dialogical uses (synchrony) , or as a complex and dynamic activity which is both social and individual and undergoes historical changes (diachrony).

Saussure chose to stick to a synchronic approach (“langue” instead of “parole”) as being easier to study (following Descartes who thought that only corpses can be dissected) and this structural approach dominated linguistics studies for many years (and also other fields like structuralist anthropology). However, when it comes to meaning in language, Saussure suggested that “semiotics should be a science of social psychology” (quoted by Ivana MARKOVA).

BAKHTINE (BAKHTINE, M. 1929) criticises this structuralistic approach. For him, synchrony is a fiction, speakers and listeners treat the sign as changing and novel in each new situation. They rely on the flexibility and adaptativity of the sign. Linguistics is often based on written traces, not on living dialogues. Linguistics is based on a “isolated – frozen – monologised enunciation”.

However, studying languages on both their synchronic and diachronic sides is a challenge. Interestingly, as CUXAC mentions it, this is possible in sign languages through studying isolates, micro-communities or emerging communities of deaf persons.

Congenitally deafblind language is mainly a language in the making and it is difficult for professionals and families not to prevent potential typical deafblind developments by imposing preconceptions, codes and rules imported from other types of languages.

Norms, science and life

When addressing the question of communication and language in congenitally deafblind people, we are in danger of being influenced in our thinking and also in our practical activities by preconceptions or reductionist views which are pervasive in the scientific world as well as in common sense thinking. The history of language studies could be seen as a sequence of normative conceptions that ignore large parts of language activities. I suggest the following list.

Extinct languages as a norm

The first grammars of European living languages (French, English and Spanish as opposed to extinct dead languages considered as the norm – Hebrew, Greek and Latin) were described at the same time as the discovery of America (1492 1st Spanish grammar). Immediately, Far East and Indian American grammars were described and the concept of General Grammar appeared (concept used by Port Royal in the XVIIth century). Until that time, only Latin, Greek and Hebrew were considered as the only grammars, the other languages were seen as dialects. Port Royal points out the fact that all languages have an equal status and are built on the same structural principles that have to be discovered (*La Grammaire Générale*). It is an anticipation of the Chomskyan vision of language.

The new described languages were seen either as lacking something or as having something too many compared with “proper” languages (Hebrew, Greek and Latin). For instance, Eskimo languages were seen as having too many words for the weather and not enough for Christian virtues.

Written language as a norm

Our vision of language as a synchronic object comes from the fact that we all have seen texts (Cf. PER LINELL written language bias). Texts are produced for a large community which requires formatting and stabilisation – the first written texts are a transcription of narratives or poems previously transmitted orally across generations. They are supposed to be read by many now and in the future. The famous sentence “*Verba Volant, Scripta Manent*”/”The words fly away, writings remain” is often misunderstood. “Writings remain” is perceived as more positive than “words fly away”. According to Alberto Manguel, it is the other way round; “words fly away” is the positive, active part of this antinomy because it focuses on the living contextual exchange as opposed to “writings remain” which focuses on the absence of dynamics².

Structural linguistics as a norm

When describing languages, specialists of non European languages see that the complexity of the languages they study can be easily sacrificed to the theoretical and taxonomical requirements of classical structural synchronic linguistics (BLANCHE-BENVENISTE, C. 2000).

Oral speech as a norm

It took a long time until sign languages were recognized and studied as real languages. And even now, many aspects of these languages (iconicity for instance) are not freely addressed (CUXAC, C. 2001) because they could destroy a recognition which required such a long fight.

Visual signing as a norm

Within the sign languages, the visual form is the dominant one. A tactile sign language is easily seen as an adaptation of the visual version, which is a problem in the case of congenital Deafblindness, especially during the first steps of development³.

Gestures:

The question of gestures is a crucial one in the congenital deafblind world. A lot is still to be understood in the way gestures are used by human beings (hearing, deaf or deafblind) for thinking and communicating. We will address three aspects of gestures:

- 1- How they are related to speech (McNEILL 1992)
- 2- in signs (CUXAC, C. 2001)
- 3- Blend and mental spaces (McNEILL, D. (ed.) (2000)

1- How they are related to speech

According to McNEILL, (1992), gestures are not an option, but an indispensable element of language and thought:

- “Gestures are an integral part of language as much as are words, phrases and sentences – gesture and language are one system”.
- “We can conceive of thought as fundamentally an inner discourse in which gestures play an intrinsic part.”

McNEILL supports the categorisation of gestures by Condon: gestures can be positioned on a kind of continuum where the obligatory presence of speech declines and linguistic properties and social conventions increase.

- Gesticulation (accompanies speech analogically)
- Language like gestures (when a gesture completes a spoken sentence)
- Pantomime
- Emblems (Italianate gestures)
- Sign languages

Besides, gestures are (McNEILL, 2000):

- Idiosyncratic (non standard of good form)
- Global (the meaning of the parts is determined by the meaning of the whole – no phonology)
- Synthetic (e.g.: no analytic linearization of actor – action – etc.)

More important, Mc NEILL suggests the hypothesis of a G. Point (Growth Point) where utterances originate in the mind. G. Point is neither word nor image. It gives rise to speech and gesture through their collaboration and manifests itself in their synchrony. An expression is the result of unpacking a thought through two coordinated paths: language and gesture. It is neither L to G nor G to L. It is both global and segmented and both idiosyncratic and linguistically patterned.

2- in signs (CUXAC, 2001)

CUXAC focuses on three features of sign languages:

- Sign Languages not only ‘say’ but simultaneously ‘show’: their linguistic ‘spread’ is therefore greater than oral languages (OLs)⁴.
- The quadridimensional nature of Sign Languages gives them a remarkable stability. They are less subject to diachronic change than Oral Languages and show striking similarities between each other.
- In addition to standard signs, sign languages use global-synthetic gestures that CUXAC calls “structures of large iconicity”. They take the form of transfers of an image into a part of the totality of the body:
 - Transferts de taille et/ou de forme (TF) = Size and form transfers: gestures show the form or the size of elements of the utterance.
 - Transferts situationnels (TS) = situation transfers: gestures show the relations between elements.
 - Transferts personnels (TP) = person transfers: dialogical roles are manifested by the whole body of the speaker.

These structures of large iconicity can be combined and form a grammar similar to cinema. Very often, standard signs introduce topics and Units or large iconicity expresses the comments (not in 100% of cases).

In other words, sign languages cannot be reduced to sequences of standard signs. In many cases, utterances in sign languages could not be understood using only standard signs. The Units of large iconicity proposed by CUXAC have to be related to gestures in spoken languages as presented by McNEILL. We could hypothesize a G. Point unpacking two complementary types of gestures: standard signs (= the equivalent of spoken words) and units of large iconicity (the equivalent of gestures accompanying spoken words).

The ways gestures are produced in oral languages and sign languages illustrate both the variability and the structural similarity of languages. They also manifest the creativity of the communities of speakers. This should encourage people in contact with congenitally deafblind people to be open to their potential creativity.

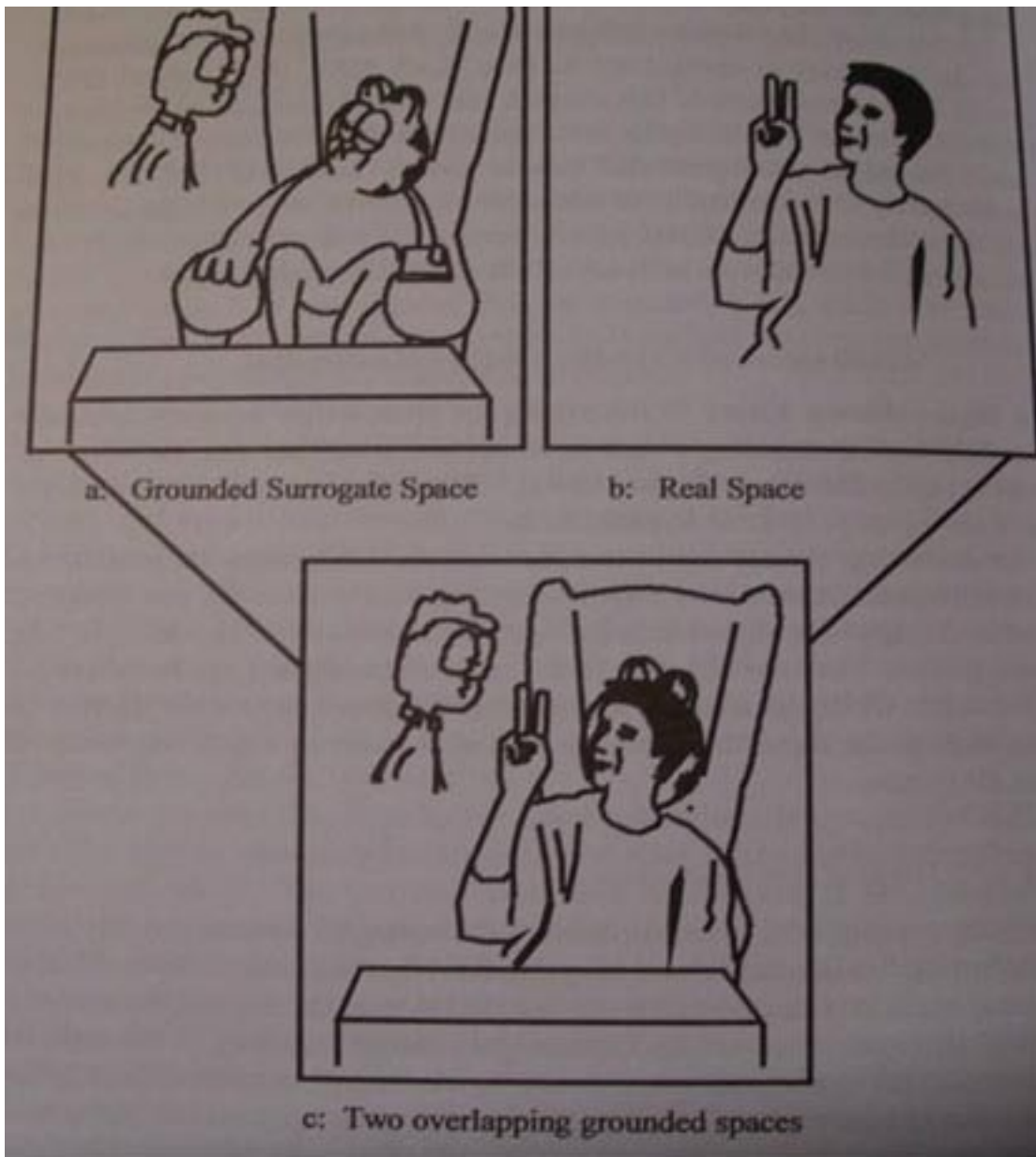
3- Blends and mental spaces⁵

LIDDELL, S.K. (2000)

Another aspect of gestures in sign languages is that they are produced in a space which is not only the

physical place where a conversation takes place, but also the space that utterances refer to. LIDDELL (2000) suggests that the space where a story takes place (grounded surrogate space) and the space where the conversation takes place (the real space) are blended, so that a new space is created where the enunciation is organised. All the gestures that refer to the elements of the story are directed to specific locations in this space as if the characters and objects of the story were present.

Obviously, these mental spaces are visually organised. In the case of congenital Deafblindness, the gestural references to the imported “surrogate space” (as LIDDELL names it) can be much less visible.



Context – dialogicality - meaning

We will now question a vision of communication where several separated elements come together: language, a 1st person, a 2nd person, a context, memories, dialogical competencies etc. Studies on the dynamics of dialogue suggest on the contrary that these elements are co-constitutive of communication and meaning making and that dialogue is at the heart of human thinking and social exchanges (MARKOVÁ, I. 2003).

For BAKHTINE (1929), people are dialogical (responsive) as opposed to objects that are monological. FOGEL and al (2002) demonstrate that there is a non verbal form of dialogical self that first appears in early infancy. Children are able to take on different “I” position in their relationship to objects and persons, for instance touching a rattle with a hand and the face with the other, comparing these two experiences that have similarities and differences. These observations support the idea that the human mind is dialogically constituted.

PER LINELL (1998) suggests differentiating 3 concepts:

- Dialogicality which is a characteristic of human cognition and communication.
- Dialogism which is an epistemology of human and social sciences⁶.
- Dialogue which is a specific type of interaction.

This idea of the dialogicality of mind is perfectly illustrated by three examples from people who are deafblind:

- Pierre has CHARGE syndrome. He uses oral language rather than sign language. When he has to think about something important, he has conversations with a virtual friend that he calls Paul. If somebody interrupts the conversation, Pierre shifts easily to the conversation with the real person.
- X is an old lady⁷ who became deafblind in her old age. For a long time she could not have conversation with real others because of her Deafblindness and of her difficulty with her tactile sense. So she made up two companions she had conversations with, taking on the different roles so that the conversations could go on. When the professionals found a way to re-establish a system of communication (using big wooden letters), she was perfectly able to come back to “normal” conversations.
- Marie is a little girl with CHARGE syndrome with very little coded language. She has two favourite small puppets. During an assessment session, after being suggested to draw something on a paper, she kept her puppets, one in each hand, and drew something with the right hand, placing the puppet of the left hand in the position of looking at the right hand drawing. And then, she reversed the positions. She kind of transferred to the puppets the roles of two partners in a conversation.

These examples show that dialogicality is essential to thinking. Internal dialogue is not an easy task when language skills are still too fragile and/or when real partners are missing for too long a time. The last example also shows that dialogicality is not dependant of language and can be performed using objects representing two “I”, like the hands in the example presented by A. FOGEL in young children.

Conclusion

Congenital Deafblindness demonstrates both the specificities and the universals of the dialogical expressivity of the human mind. Inviting congenitally deafblind people to take part in our dialogical minds requires an empathy which is not only based on good will and positive feelings, but also on a

permanent and thorough research in many fields of science. Congenitally deafblind people are the first experts in this research. I hope that this conference will contribute to making explicit this unique experience of life so that it can be offered to all the people who share the congenitally deafblind people's lives as a contribution to the understanding of humanity.

Notes

¹ Languages die. Some scientists think that in 20 years, 80% of all languages will have disappeared. In the past, there were 1000 Indian languages in North America. So it is extremely urgent to describe and store the languages that will obviously disappear.

² When "Scripta manent", language is reduced to the form of a frozen "corpus", in other words, a "corpse".

³ It is less a problem for people with acquired deafblindness, although the specific features of the sign languages used by deaf people becoming blind are not totally identified and understood, especially with regards to the deictic and iconic strategies.

⁴ This statement is based on a vision that does not take into account the role of gestures in oral languages as suggested by McNEILL.

⁵ About mental spaces, see FAUCONNIER G. & TURNER M. (2002) *The Way We Think*. Basic Books, New York.

⁶ Dialogism (Vico, Humboldt, Marburg neo-kantians, Ricoeur) says that self consciousness is acquired through other consciousness. It is opposed to monologism (Plato, Descartes, Saussure, Chomsky, Behaviourists) which sees self consciousness and thinking as an individual process.

⁷ This case was presented by Megan MANN during the Deafblind International Conference in Presov Slovakia in 2005.

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