

If You Can See It, You Can Support It – Recognising Tactile Language

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Abstract

Providing the right conditions for people with congenital deafblindness to develop language is a complex task. It can be difficult for parents or professionals to notice expressions based on a bodily-tactile modality. To overcome these barriers the Nordic Network on Tactile Language aims to develop knowledge regarding tactile language and tactile language development. The network has published a book called *If you can see it, you can support it*. A book on tactile language (Creutz et al., 2019, English version published 2019), which contains different perspectives on tactile language as well as a model to be used as a framework and an analytic tool. This article is based on the book and describes how language in a bodily-tactile modality emerges and is expressed, and how this natural language can be recognised and supported by the non-deafblind communication partner.

Statement and Significance of Need

As early as 2009, the Nordic Welfare Centre initiated collaboration in the Nordic countries on the topic of tactile language for people with congenital deafblindness (CDB). Despite the fact that individuals with CDB are exposed to tactile sign language, only a small acquire a tactile sign language (Dammeyer & Ask Larsen, 2016).

The collaboration led to the Nordic Network on Tactile Language being formed in 2014. The purpose of the network is to identify key points in tactile language so that we can gain a better understanding of how people with CDB use bodily-tactile modality to express themselves.

A challenge many people with CDB face is the risks of misunderstanding and no recognition of their communicative agency as their communicative expressions, to an untrained eye, can be difficult to read. In the field of deafblindness we speak about the low readability of expressions. It is well known that low readability creates a risk of isolation. If more communication partners get the opportunity to recognise bodily-tactile expressions as language, we contribute to increased readability and thus minimize the risk of experiencing isolation.

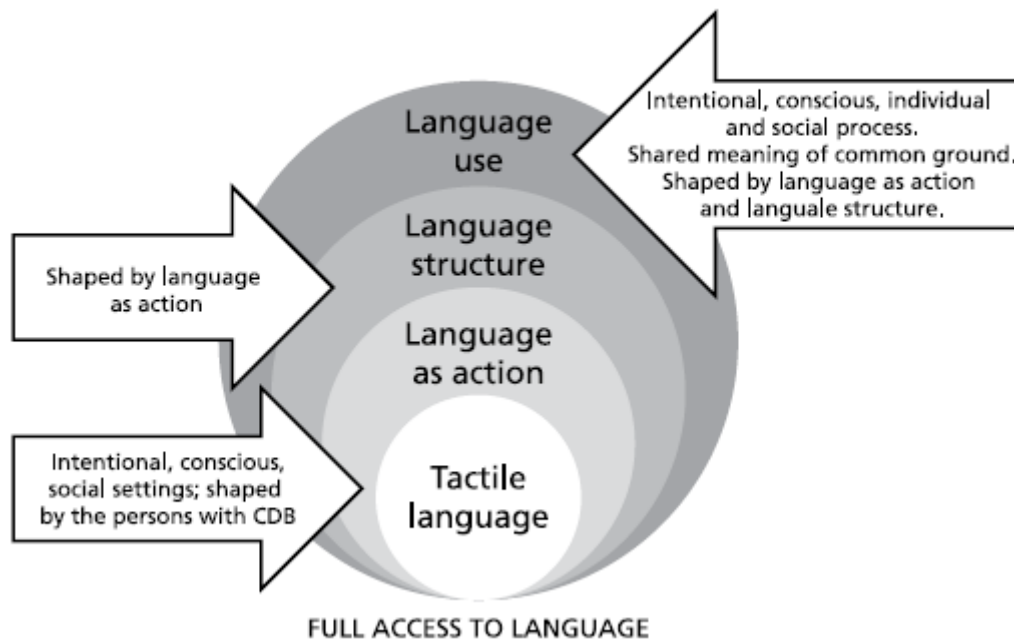
In 2019, The Nordic Network on Tactile Language published a book called *If you can see it, you can support it. A book on tactile language* (Creutz et al., 2019). The book consists of 19 chapters describing different perspectives on tactile language. The aim of the book is to increase the readability of expressions as well as to increase partner competence and contribute to the development of tactile language. This article is based on the book and highlights some of the basic concepts in understanding language development for people with CDB.

Theoretical Description

In the Nordic Network on Tactile Language, our starting point is the understanding that all people want to share their feelings, thoughts, and experiences with others. The basic assumption is that all people have an innate ability to engage in communication with others. Tactile language emerges in complex interactions between two or more communication partners as the partners are active in using different strategies to create meaning together (Nafstad & Rödbroe, 2015). People with CDB use their bodily engagement in the world as

the basis for understanding and realization. They need to sense the world before they can act in it. Their bodily engagement in the world will shape the structure of their language since it will be based on a bodily-tactile modality (Forsgren et al, 2018). Their actions and linguistic structure will affect how they use language and create meaning in interactions with others (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Full Access to Language



(Credit: Ivanova, N. Powerpoint presentation. Copenhagen 2022).

According to the Nordic Network on Tactile Language, tactile language is defined as:

- An early language in the making.
- A language used by people with CDB,
- An authentic, natural language, from within.
- A language based on the bodily engagement in the world.
- A language that involves the tactile, kinesthetics, and proprioceptive senses.

To support the development of tactile language together with persons with CDB we use the figurative expression “To put on the language glasses”, meaning that the communication partner must learn to perceive the person’s expressions as an utterance that has potential of language (Creutz et al., 2019; Ivanova, 2019b). When we put on our language glasses and

give bodily-tactile expressions a linguistic value, we can communicate with people with CDB in a linguistic manner.

What Can it Mean to “Put On The Language Glasses?”

- Seeing different linguistic categories that the person is using to form an utterance. (Forsgren, 2019).
- Awareness of a combination of several modalities that the person is using to form an utterance. (Brede, 2019a; Brede, 2019b; Foote, 2019; Costain, 2019; Buelund Selling, 2019; Tuomi & Lahtinen, 2019; Dammeyer & Ask Larsen, 2016).
- Awareness of how the person is using his/her signing space to form an utterance (own positions, other persons, objects, space) (Costain, 2019; Buelund Selling, 2019)
- Awareness of syntax from a bodily engagement in the world (Brede, 2019a; Brede, 2019b; Buelund Selling, 2019)

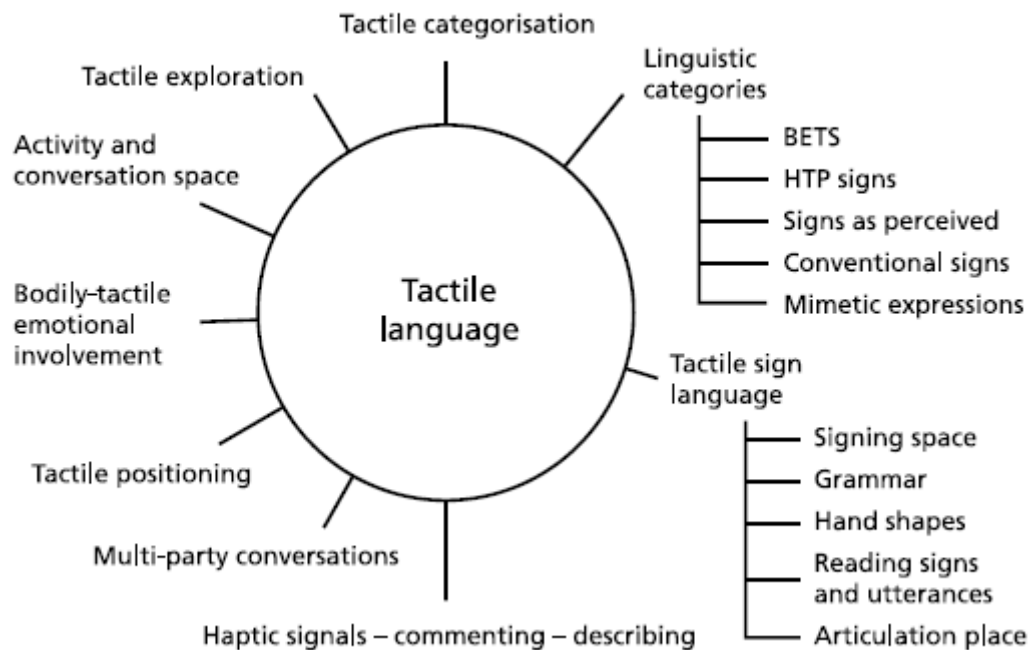
How Can We Support Tactile Language and Easily “Put On Our Language Glasses”?

The Nordic Network on Tactile Language has published a circle model in the book If you can see it, you can support it: A book on tactile language, called “The Tactile Circle Model” (Näslund & Kastrup Pedersen, 2019) (see Figure 2).

The circle model provides a framework to help us to keep track of all the different elements that are in play when we talk about a tactile language. The tactile circle model is also an analytic tool that can be used together with video analysis to find key points of tactile language, seek the potential, and understand how to support the development of this early language.

By using the circle model as an analytic model, we discovered that we could use our knowledge about the basic parameters of sign language (e.g., location, handshape, movements) to recognize structure in expressions and thereby give them linguistic value (Dammeyer et al., 2015; Ivanova, 2019b). When we add a linguistic value to expressions, we see them as part of an utterance, and we can help people with CDB to sustain and elaborate their language use.

Figure 2. The Tactile Circle Model



Conclusions and Recommendations

Throughout the years we have used the circle model in a lot of different settings of video analysis. We have investigated how language in a bodily-tactile modality emerges and expressed, and how this natural language is recognised and supported by the non-deafblind communication partner. Some of the common features found in the different analysis are:

- People with CDB sense and experience something and then they want to share it.
- Their language is multi-modal (bodily-tactile, visual, auditive).
- They combine different linguistic categories in one utterance or action (e.g., BETs (Bodily Emotional Traces), HTP (Heightened Tactile Perception)-signs, comparisons, pointing-gestures and, mimetic signs).
- Their utterance is often part of a whole scenario, and they can create their own narrative about something that happened.
- They use muscle and joint tension to emphasize the emotional experience.
- The most significant impression is expressed first.
- Even though the person with CDB uses some conventional signs, they tend to use their bodily-tactile language repertoire when something is very important to them.

Excerpt from: PROCEEDINGS 18th DbI INTERNATIONAL WORLD CONFERENCE. Lived Experiences, Evidence-Based Practices and Research. Deafblind International (DbI) 2024.

Video analysis provides us with good examples of scaffolding methods used to help develop tactile language and shared understanding. These methods are commonly known within the field of deafblindness (Souriau et al., 2008; Sundqvist et al., 2022) and include the following:

- Being sensorily accessible to the person with CDB.
- Making language sensory accessible for both parties.
- Providing time and space for breaks/pause and reflection.
- Tactile and multimodal reciprocity and imitation to let the child know that we know what he knows.
- Tactile repetition and re-cycling with variation.
- Tactile preparation: co-construction, re-co-construction, and joint processing
- Switching between conversation and activity space to wrap language around the activity.
- Using active and lively communicating hands and different hand positions to support turn-taking.
- Bodily emotional involvement to reinforce and sustain the shared experience.
- Elaborating the story by adding new elements from the shared scenario.
- Blending language modalities by introducing the cultural sign(s) or word(s) to the bodily-tactile utterance.

Experiences show that when the communication partner does their best to meet the person with CDB on their terms, putting on their language glasses and adding linguistic value to bodily-tactile expressions, language will emerge. As the book suggests, if you can see it, you can support it.

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