Elicitation Methods in the DGS (German Sign Language) Corpus Project

Rie Nishio, Sung-Eun Hong, Susanne König, Reiner Konrad, Gabriele Langer, Thomas Hanke, Christian Rathmann
University of Hamburg, Institute of German Sign Language and Communication of the Deaf

The DGS Corpus Project of the Academy of Sciences in Hamburg is a long-term project with two major aims: (i) to establish an extensive corpus of DGS and (ii) to develop a comprehensive dictionary of DGS-German based on the analysis of the corpus data. In the first stage of the project, data of about 300 informants is collected at 12 sites throughout Germany. The corpus is designed to reflect everyday language of users of German Sign Language. The sample of informants is aimed to be balanced for sociolinguistic factors such as region, gender and age. Signers are always filmed in pairs and come for one elicitation session lasting for about 7 hours (including breaks). The target size of the corpus is about 350-400 hours of filmed material resulting in approximately 2.25 million tokens.

The purpose of the corpus is to document the use of DGS and to provide material of and on Deaf culture and life. It will be a resource that can be used for a variety of research questions, which is why it needs to consist of a large variety of discourse modes and grammatical structures as well as various subject areas. As one of the project aims is to compile a general dictionary of DGS, the corpus should also provide enough material on the lexicon of DGS and its use.

In order to elicit the sign language data we developed different kinds of tasks which are presented to the informants on a monitor.

1. Name signs
Show us your sign name and explain where it comes from:
- no fingergesturing required
- Target: deaf culture
documentation of sign names

2. Jokes
Tell the joke you have prepared by your dialogue partner:
- prepared signing
- Target: deaf jokes

3. Experience of Deaf individuals
Share your experience from Deaf schools, residential schools, Deaf retirement homes, Deaf sports clubs, associations of the Deaf etc.
- no instruction movie and stimulus
- Target: documentation of deaf culture

4. Retelling of picture story
Watch the picture story and retell it.
- Stimulus: picture story consisting of 17 scenes created for our purpose
- Target: use of space for directionality and plurality

5. Calendar Task
Arrange two meetings of two hours each with your dialogue partner by using the shown calendar.
- Stimulus: a one-week planner with festival appointments
- Target: dialogue (planning and negotiations), days of the week, time terms, activities etc.

6. Discussion
What is your opinion on this issue?
Discuss with your dialogue partner.

7. Free conversation
The moderator will leave the room for 15 minutes. Please feel free to chat with your dialogue partner. The camera will continue recording.
- No stimulus
- Target: signing in an "unobserved" setting

8. Elicitation of isolated signs
What sign do you use for the following items?
Please give also a short example sentence with the sign.

9. Retelling of picture stories
"Vater und Sohn"
Watch the picture story and retell it.

10. Warning and prohibition signs
Try to find out with your dialogue partner what the warning and prohibition signs mean.

11. What did you do when it happened?
You will see pictures of historical or emotional events. Tell your dialogue partner what you did when it happened.

12. Subject areas
Watch the pictures and tell your dialogue partner everything which comes to your mind by looking at them.
- Stimulus: various photo- graphs and drawings of subject areas for stimulating the informants' associations
- Target: signs on 25 subject areas to cover the basic vocabulary of DGS, conversation

13. Description of procedures
Describe one of the following activities to your dialogue partner by giving step-by-step instructions:
- Stimulus: a set of various activities
- Target: step-by-step description and explanation of a sequence of actions, phrases to structure a text

14. Regional specialties
Talk with your dialogue partner about the specialties of the region you live in. Are there any typical local specialties, sites, landscapes, products, customs etc.?
- Target: signs for names of places, famous festivals

15. Movie retelling, "Signs"
Watch the movie and retell it.
- Stimulus: video of a one-week stay of a deaf family in Germany (Wanner, 1998)
- Target: data for cross-linguistic research

16. New vs. old signs
Do you know signs which are used only by older Deaf people or younger Deaf people?
- Optional task
- Target: sociolinguistic variation; meta-linguistic research

17. Deaf events
Have you been to a Deaf event?
- Stimulus: visual materials (e.g. posters and pictures) from various Deaf events
- Target: documenting Deaf culture
- Personal narratives; conversations

18. Route description
Describe the correct route on the city map to your dialogue partner.
- Stimulus: two maps of the same place with different landmarks
- Target: orientation, navigation
- E.g. locations

All tasks were tested in a pilot phase to examine their feasibility and reliability. In the first round each task was tested with Deaf colleagues and students. In the second round the complete session was tested simulating the real elicitation setting. One of the two final-test sessions was conducted with Deaf informants who were not involved in research context.

1. Pre-tests
1. Do the informants feel comfortable with the task?
2. Do the informants understand the instruction movies? Is all necessary information given?
3. Do the informants understand the stimulus material? Do they see what we want them to see?
4. How much time does it take the informants to complete each task?
5. How much signed output do the informants produce in each task?
6. Does the signed output produce the expected kind of language output (reliability)?

2. Final-tests
1. How long does each task take, now embedded in the whole session?
2. How long does the whole elicitation session take?
3. Do the informants understand the stimulus material? Do they see what we want them to see?
4. Do the informants understand the instruction movies? Is all necessary information given?

References:
The Pear Stories. Cognitive, Cultural and Linguistic Aspects of Narrative Production.

The research leading to these results has received funding from the German Academies of Science Programme.