

A Language via Two Others: Learning English through LIS

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Abstract

The complex intercultural activity of teaching/learning to read and write in a foreign language clearly involves a reciprocal cultural exchange. While trying to get students to efficiently learn the language in question, namely English, the teacher adapts to her pupils' culture and communication mode: in this case LIS or Italian Sign Language.

This paper attempts to demonstrate the complex process of developing a corpus for analysis of selected foreign language classroom exchanges. Here our emphasis is on face-to-face communication: what is imparted to the students by the teacher in Italian, how this information is transmitted or filtered by the LIS interpreter, what information the students eventually receive and how they react to it. A particular example of classroom activity has been filmed, transcribed and analysed from the points of view of successful communication, on the one hand, and failure or breakdown of exchange, on the other.

1. Introduction

A natural Sign Language, the dominant code in which face-to-face communication between Deaf people and other signers takes place, can be put on a par with an oral mode of communication (Yule, 1985; Ochse, 2004); however, in order to achieve literacy, the Deaf are obliged to learn another language with both a spoken and a written variant (usually the majority language of his/her area or country). Hence the "bilingual-bicultural" label which is often attached to Deaf signers (Swanwick, 1998; Prinz, 2002). Clearly the Deaf, who need a written language "to take part in the culture of the society in which they live" (Andersson, 1994) have a harder task than their hearing counterparts to learn the written language whose spoken equivalent they cannot hear. This may result in varying levels of second language literacy.

The subjects in our present study are Deaf Italian adults who have chosen to study English as a foreign language for personal interest and, if they are regular university students, to satisfy a credit requirement for their degree courses. A special project has been started for Deaf adults at the local university allowing them to follow experimental all-Deaf English classes with an emphasis on only written English (i.e. reading and writing) and assisted by a LIS interpreter.

From a certain point of view Italian and English are very similar since they have both a spoken and a written component. In the present situation Italian, the LIS-signer's second language, is likely to be the stronger written language because of more familiarity with it. On the other hand, English, like all foreign languages, is probably used only in classroom interactions and on some occasions in the external "linguistic landscape"¹.

¹ cf. Elana Shohamy: paper, entitled "Linguistic Landscapes, Multilingualism and Multiculturalism: A Jewish-Arab Comparative Study", presented at an international conference on Trilingualism, Tralee (Eire) on Sept. 4th 2003.

2. Method: data collection and presentation

In accordance with linguistic anthropological research methods (Duranti, 1997), a corpus of communicative events involving classroom discourse have been filmed. Meaningful excerpts from these ethnographic records (more than 25 hours of videotaped activity) have been selected and transcribed with the help of a native LIS (Lingua dei Segni Italiana) signer and linguistic expert.

In the present paper one of these excerpts, involving the teacher's communication in Italian (Column A), a translation of the latter into English (Column B), the interpreter's rendering into LIS or Italian of the teacher's or students' contributions (Column D) and the response or reactions of the class (Column C), has been analysed (See Table 1 below). A comparison between Columns A/B and D, i.e. the teacher's original or translated verbal communication followed by the LIS interpreter's rendering of the latter, can give evidence of success or failure in comprehension, language contact/interference and leakage.

As far as the transcription of the verbal and visual texts is concerned, for clarity we have opted for the simultaneous representation in four parallel columns of "utterances" or "speech events" instead of the "musical-score" format².

The lesson deals with the possessive form and, as is recommendable in Deaf didactics, has been enriched visually by projecting different slides on the screen.

The first slide portrays a secretary in an office. Names, like *the secretary*, *Miss Smith* and *Mary* have previously been written on the board, in addition to various things that could be associated with her in the photograph (e.g. PC, laptop, portable computer, office, desk).

The second slide represents a woman holding a baby in her arms. Once again, different names, such

² Lucas (2002) quotes Ehlich ((1993): " the musical-score allows the sequence of events to unfold from left to right on a horizontal line ..." (44).

as *the baby*, *the mother* and *Joan*, have been written on the board.

The process is repeated with two more slides. Then the class are shown a few written examples of meaningful possessive phrases of the proper noun or common noun possessor + thing/person possessed (e.g. *Miss Smith's computer*, *Joan's baby*, *the baby's mother*).

3. Analysis

We have opted for an utterance/utterance analysis in the printed column format (column A vs D) to see if single communicative acts have been successful or not. The teacher explains that she has chosen a particular position so that she can point out things to the class on the screen. Then, to introduce the first possessor, she indicates *the secretary*, but feels the need to call on the class because she realises that their concentration is slipping. Before this interruption the interpreter has transmitted very little verbal information (GIRL), but probably sees the visual aid as an adequate alternative to a lengthy description. An image – the laptop computer – has attracted the students' attention and an animated signed conversation ensues. Since only one videocamera has been used, we have to follow the signing through the interpreter's words. Initially she tells the teacher that the lesson has been interrupted by the students' conversation, but then goes into the student mode, interpreting directly what different students are signing. One student is particularly enthusiastic about the laptop and reminisces about one with two other girls. But then she apologizes bimodally to the teacher (sign + lip-pattern). She identifies the object as "everybody's dream".

When the students' conversation subsides, the teacher resumes her presentation and repeats who she was describing before the interruption ("the secretary"). To render the idea "This girl is a secretary", the interpreter concisely transmits the information in a question-answer form: GIRL_{pl} – WORK – WHAT_q, followed by the brief answer SECRETARY and the fingerspelling of the Italian equivalent. Showing adequate interest in the students' previous conversation the teacher makes reference to it and asks a question about the meaning of the acronym PC. In the interpreter's rendering she fingerspells C-O-M-P-I-U-T-E-R with an additional I, and then confuses the order of the letters PC, but quickly corrects herself.

Reference is then made to a number of phrases written as examples on the board (*the secretary's computer*, *Mary's desk*, *Miss Smith's office*) and containing different names for the same person (i.e. first name, common noun, title and surname). The interpreter "rewords" the message as follows: MESSAGE-MESSAGE-SAME-FIRST; EXAMPLE-SAME-BEFORE; WOMAN-NAME_{pl}; NAME-SURNAME-NAME-SURNAME.

At this point a student goes back to the previous discussion about the laptop and asks if it also has a CD compartment.

In the second slide, where a child and a mother are introduced, a student reads the word *child* on the board phonetically. The interpreter fingerspells the word *bambino* but then signs and mouths BOY-GIRL to show the ambivalence of the English word *child*.

After *child* and *mother*, the interpreter feels the needs to list the following person nouns *Joan* (3rd) and *baby* (4th).

An interesting example of hybridisation occurs with GIOVANNA (common sign name for Giovanni followed by the fingerspelling A-N-N-A).

The choice of the word *bambino* by the teacher for both *child* and *baby* clearly confuses the students who ask for elucidation. The interpreter does not repeat this to the teacher but immediately starts explaining that *child* (*bambino*) can be either male or female. No mention is made of the word *baby*.

After this presentation of the two slides (containing examples of possessor and possessed), the teacher asks the class to write some sentences in their exercise books, one with a proper noun and one with a common noun.

She interprets "proper noun" as NAME-NAME-PERSON-MY and "common noun" as NAME-NAME-SAME.

A stretch of interpreting follows which corresponds to silence on the teacher's part.

4. Results

The following phenomena were found in the classroom interaction represented in Table 1:

a) Bimodal communication (sign + mouthing) of everyday utterances such as YES or SORRY.

b) Interpreter's initiative on two occasions, probably because she feared her previous interpretation had not been clear.

c) The use of facial expression, especially in questions like *q*READY, *q*WHAT, *q*UNDERSTAND, *q*ALSO CD-COMPUTER.

d) Indication of persons or things by gestures (*p*) or gaze.

e) Particular LIS syntax in some questions or statements like READY_q; MEANING-WHAT_q; GIRL-WORK-WHAT_q. SECRETARY.

f) Use of fingerspelling in which Italian words are spelt with the LIS alphabet, e.g. L-A, I-L, B-A-M-B-I-N-O.

g) Expression of plural form in LIS by repeating the sign with additional body posture, e.g. SENTENCE-SENTENCE; NAME-SURNAME-NAME-SURNAME; NAME-NAME.

h) Body posture and sign: portable computer (the action of carrying accompanies the laptop bag); abbreviation (short) for Personal Computer.

5. Conclusion

If the teaching had taken place directly in LIS, i.e. without the presence of the interpreter, we could have spoken of a single linguistic filter, but in this case the presence of Italian as everybody's common language created a double linguistic and cultural filter. This increased the risk of misinterpreting

information and sometimes led to the understanding of different meanings from the ones that were intended.

A	B	C	D
mi metto davanti, così posso indicare le cose	I'LL STAND IN FRONT SO I CAN POINT OUT THINGS		(pl) MUST - STAND
abbiamo una ragazza che possiamo chiamare la segretaria	WE HAVE A GIRL WHO WE CAN CALL THE SECRETARY		+GAZE READYq - HAVE - GIRL
guardate Anna (.....)	LOOK AT ANNA (.....)	(students signing to one another) (invisible to camera)	(interrupts) GIRL (waves hands for attention) sì, stanno parlando. Allora stanno ... Sì, in effetti, è molto bella questa foto col computer con la ragazza, dice Va ad Ar e An. Ti ricordi? E' bello. A ... parlo del computer portatile molto carino. Scusa scusa (s+s). Stavo osservando. Giusto. Sogni di tutti. Vero. Sogno. Sì, sì (s+s)
è tuo sogno. Questa ragazza è la segretaria	IT'S YOUR DREAM. THIS GIRL IS THE SECRETARY		WELL () – YOUR DREAM (pl) LIKE A LOT. GIRLpl WORK WHATq. SECRETARY. L-A S-E-G-R-E-T-A-R-I-A
e lei ha questa cosa che piace a Va: un computer oppure semplicemente con due lettere PC	AND SHE HAS THIS THING WHICH Va LIKES. A COMPUTER OR SIMPLY TWO LETTERS, PC.		THERE'S – LIKES – Va'S SIGN NAME – LIKES A LOT – PORTABLE COMPUTER OR C-O-M-P-I-U-T-E-R (sic) OR PRONOUNCE SHORT C-P. NO P-C. SHORT P-C
qualcuno di voi sa cosa vuol dire questo PC? Sì	DOES ANYONE KNOW WHAT PC MEANS? YES.	(students signing to one another)	MEANING WHATq Sì, personal computer
e qua come vedete ho fatto una cosa simile. Ho chiamato la ragazza con questo nome e le ho dato anche un cognome e ho fatto vari esempi simile a quelli che abbiamo già fatto prima	AND HERE, AS YOU CAN SEE, I HAVE DONE SOMETHING SIMILAR. I HAVE CALLED THE GIRL WITH THIS NAME AND I HAVE ALSO GIVEN HER A SURNAME AND I HAVE MADE EXAMPLES LIKE THE ONES WE HAVE ALREADY MADE		pl SEE SENTENCE SENTENCE. SAME FIRST SAME WOMAN pl NAME pl NAME SURNAME NAME SURNAME. I GIVE SHOW EXAMPLE ALWAYS SAME BEFORE SAME
e ho fatto possedere anche altre cose come un ufficio, una scrivania	AND I MADE HER POSSESS OTHER THINGS SUCH AS AN OFFICE, A DESK		THEN - I - PUT (pl) OFFICE-DESK _____ THEN □
		□ ALSO CD - COMPUTER	Anche cd del computer?

si	YES		YES - YES (emphatically)
child che vuol dire bambino o bambina (pointing at the word "child" on the board)	CHILD MEANING BOY OR GIRL	[kilɛd] ph	(pl) MEAN – CHILD – (fs) B-A-M-B-I-N-O - BOY-GIRL (s+s) – BOTH - SAME
poi mother si	THEN MOTHER YES	☐ (student speaking) mamma	THEN (pl) MOTHER (pl)
poi Joan, è come Giovanna	THEN JOAN, LIKE GIOVANNA		3rd – J-O (fs) - SAME – GIOVANNI A-N-N-A (s+fs)
e poi baby che è un bambino (pointing at "the mother's baby" on the board)	AND THEN BABY THAT IS A CHILD		4th – B-A-M-B-I-N-O (fs) – MEAN - SMALL CHILD(ph) - BABY
		UNDERSTAND – NOT – REPEAT ☐	
			☐ MOM(pl) OWN – CHILD – MEAN – OWN – B-A-M-B-I-N-O (fs) OR-GIRL-BOY – BOTH – SAME (nods)
volete scrivermi almeno due frasi	WILL YOU WRITE AT LEAST TWO SENTENCES FOR ME		() NOW – PLEASE – YOU – YOU – MUST WRITE – TWO – SENTENCE - (pl) SENTENCE - WITH
con un nome proprio	ONE WITH A PROPER NOUN		NAME - PERSON - MY
e con un nome comune	AND ONE WITH A COMMON NOUN		(pl) SECOND - SENTENCE – PUT – NAME – NAME – SAME –
scrivetele sui vostri quaderni	WRITE IN YOUR EXERCISE BOOKS		YOU. OK ()
si? avanti	OK? GO AHEAD.		TO YOU
adesso voi dovete scrivermi delle frasi nello stesso modo usando queste informazioni	NOW YOU MUST WRITE A FEW SENTENCES IN THE SAME WAY USING THIS INFORMATION		SO – YOU – MUST WRITE – SENTENCES – TWO – DIFFERENT – SENTENCE PROPER NOUN (s+s) (mouthing "comune")
			PERSON (pl) – HAVE – POSSESS (pl)
			GIVE – WORDS – YOU – SEE – MEMORIZE – ELABORATE – BUILD – SENTENCE - SENTENCE
			BUT –NAMES - TWO – - DIFFERENT
			ONE – SENTENCE – NOUN - PERSONAL
potete per esempio	FOR EXAMPLE YOU CAN		SECOND (pl) –

dire “la mamma del bambino”	SAY: THE BABY’S MOTHER		SENTENCE – L-A (fs) MOTHER - OF (pl) - BABY
oppure il bambino della mamma o il bambino di Giovanna	OR THE MOTHER’S CHILD, OR JOAN’S CHILD		OR I-L (fs) BABY – HAVE – OF – GIOVANNI A-N-N-A
			MEANING USE – PROPER NOUN – COMMON NOUN
			UNDERSTOOD

Table 1: Transcription of a filmed extract of classroom interaction (University of Turin, 16th March 2002).

see	conventional orthography representing spoken Italian
SEE	translation into English of spoken Italian
SEE.....	English gloss of a LIS sign
I-SEE-YOU	single LIS sign glossed by more than one English word
S-A-W	when a word is fingerspelled, individual letters are separated by a hyphen
q	question
()	pause (shorter than two seconds)
()	off-topic, overlapping signing amongst learners
s	signing
(s+s)	lip-patterning and signing simultaneously
(s+fs)	signing followed by fingerspelling
ph	phonetic pronunciation
	use of body posture
	overlap
+GAZE/-GAZE ³	looking at or averting gaze from an addressee or object. Sometimes used as a form of placement.

Table 2: Transcription conventions (adapted and developed from Napier 2002)

³ cf. Van Herreweghe (pp. 79-80).

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