
The resilient properties of interaction: evidence for the interaction engine from sign language and homesign

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Everyday conversation forms the core ecological niche for new languages to emerge. Levinson (2006) suggests that humans are born with a special interactive ability that precedes language and that makes language possible. In line with this “interaction engine” hypothesis, we observe similarities in the conversational infrastructure for everyday social interaction across languages and modalities (Stivers et al. 2009; de Vos et al. 2015; Dingemanse & Enfield 2015), but to what extent are these present from the early stages of language communities onwards?

Homesigners are deaf individuals who have grown up in the absence of conventional language input whether spoken or signed. The homesign systems they co-create with their hearing relatives and friends form a natural testcase to further understand the human endowment for linguistic communication. Prior work on homesign systems has identified several ways in which homesign may exhibit language-like characteristics, but the pragmatic competence that supports mutual understanding in these interactions has not been studied until recently.

I present data from the newly created Balinese homesign corpus, capturing spontaneous interactions between Balinese homesigners and their regular communication partners. Our conversation analyses identify several robust features of these interactions including the ability to produce timely and contingent responses, to signal mutual understanding, and to anticipate and resolve communicative trouble when it arises (Safar & de Vos 2022). An important question moving forward will be to determine to what extent pragmatic competence is shaped by social experience, and conversely, how the emergence of new sign languages is supported by the social interactions homesigners engage in.

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