Negotiation of mutual understanding in signed conversations: the case of backchanneling in LSFB

Alysson Lepeut
LSFB-Lab, NaLTT, University of Namur
alysson.lepeut@unamur.be

The roots of language lie in face-to-face conversation. While the question of how people successfully build mutual understanding has been widely examined in spoken languages (Bavelas et al., 2002), some issues are still uncharted territory, especially in relation to signed languages (SLs). For instance, how deaf signers build and maintain mutual understanding in SLs or the extent to which grounding mechanisms are contingent upon the contextual contingencies of talk-in-interaction (Dideriksen et al., 2019) in signed discourse are poorly understood. The current study aims to fill these gaps by examining how deaf signers from LSFB (French Belgian SL) coordinate their interaction with success through backchannels (BCs), a key conversational grounding mechanism. In total, about 1 hour of conversation involving 5 dyads from the LSFB Corpus (Meurant, 2015) were analyzed in ELAN. BCs were first identified capitalizing on previous protocols (Allwood et al., 2007; Mesch, 2016) for their forms (e.g., manual/non-manual), types (generic/specific), and functions (e.g., continuers). Simultaneity and clustering of BCs are also examined for potential interrelations. In particular, the following research questions are addressed: (i) What kinds of BCs do LSFB signers produce in free vs. task oriented conversation? (ii) Are generic BCs significantly more frequent in free conversation than specific ones? (iii) Do certain clusters of BCs combine with each other? Preliminary findings suggest that (1) manual and non-manual BCs are most often combined rather than used in isolation, (2) different types of BCs (generic/specific) carry distinctive functions, and (3) inter-individual variation plays a substantial part in the production of BCs in the sampled LSFB data. Ultimately, this study provides key insights into the ways signers build and maintain mutual understanding, thereby contributing to a more dynamic and semiotically diverse view of language (Ferrara and Hodge, 2018).

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