
The Functions of Mirroring in Linguistic Feedback: a Case-study of Polish Sign Language

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The term ‘mirroring’ refers to the behavior in which one member of the face-to-face interaction imitates (matches) gestures, speech patterns, or attitude of another (eg. Bavelas et al., 1986). Based on the material coming from the Polish Sign Language (PJM) Corpus (Kuder et al., 2022) we want to answer the following research questions: (1) How is mirroring realized in PJM? (2) What is the role of mirroring in natural signed communication?

For the purposes of the study we choose a sample from the PJM Corpus that contains 12 texts (6 retellings and 6 dialogues) coming from 7 dyads. The sample lasts for 235 minutes and contains 12.296 sign tokens. In this dataset we distinguish all cases of mirroring, which we divide into those realised manually and non-manually. In the second annotation round, the functions of all identified cases are interpreted. Those functions include: sentiment matching; matching comments; content matching and prosody matching.

The obtained results suggest that the most common function of the non-manual mirroring in PJM is matching the emotional load of the utterance, not the topic of the conversation. Prosody (tempo and rhythm) of the signing can be mirrored by rhythmically nodding (or shaking) one’s head. The content of the utterance can be mirrored not only manually, but also non-manually (eg. puffing one’s cheeks can match an utterance about a large and round object). Mirroring used in sign language discourse has one unique feature that stems from its modality: mouthing can be used to mirror the manual sign used by the other signer.

All identified cases of copying manual lexical signs originally produced by the interlocutor serve two main aims. On the one hand they are used for the purpose of mirroring, but can also be used for making paraphrases of what was signed (a phenomenon known as reflecting).

We conclude that feedback in PJM is broader than mere backchannelling and that behavioral matching is a modality-independent phenomenon allowing the conversation participants to build rapport and togetherness.

References: • Bavelas, J. B., A. Black, C.R. Lemery & J. Mullett (1986). “I show how you feel”: Motor mimicry as a communicative act. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 50, 322–329. • Kuder, A., J. Wójcicka, P. Mostowski & P. Rutkowski (2022). Open Repository of the Polish Sign Language Corpus: Publication Project of the Polish Sign Language Corpus. In E. Efthimiou et al, *Proceedings of the 10th Workshop on the Representation and Processing of Sign Languages: Multilingual Sign Language Resources*, France: ELRA, 118–123.