

THE ROLE OF MOUTHINGS IN SIGN LANGUAGE OF THE NETHERLANDS: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PRODUCTION OF SIGN LANGUAGE DICTIONARIES

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ABSTRACT

Native deaf users of Sign Language of the Netherlands (SLN) use mouth movements that are related to spoken words. For SLN, these mouth movements have been described as spoken (language) components (Schermer 1983, 1990) and will be referred to in this volume as 'mouthings'. In this paper, some of the types and functions of mouthings in SLN both with isolated signs and in context are discussed. Subsequently, some of the questions and problems we have experienced in our work on dictionaries of SLN are presented. Specifically, issues are discussed that are related to the production of QuickTime movies of citation forms of SLN signs, such as the extent to which a picture or a movie of a signed citation form should show a mouthing. Sometimes a sign is produced with extensive mouthing when produced in isolation. When the same sign is produced in context however, it may not show any mouthing at all, very limited mouthing or it shows an oral component (or mouth gesture) that is not related to a spoken language.

INTRODUCTION

Research into the Sign Language of the Netherlands (SLN) began around 1980. Native deaf signers in the Netherlands used a type of sign language that, at first sight, seemed very different from a sign language such as American Sign Language (ASL). One of the obvious differences between SLN and ASL was the abundant presence of mouthing in SLN even by native Deaf signers from Deaf families. Part of this mouthing was clearly related to spoken Dutch, although it looked different from the sign-supported Dutch systems that were being used between hearing and deaf people in schools for the Deaf. For mouthing that is related to the spoken Dutch, the term "spoken (language) components" was used (Schermer 1983). Mouthing that is not related to spoken language was defined as "an oral component". In the 1998 workshop in Leiden, it was agreed that we would use the term "mouthings" when referring to spoken language components and "mouth gestures" for what we had previously been calling "oral components", so these terms will be used in this paper.

In the early 1980's, it was highly unusual for researchers to focus on mouthings in a sign language. The interest in this phenomenon came primarily from European researchers. One of the reasons is probably the fact that mouthings did occur in the majority of sign languages in Europe, such as those in Norway, Germany, Italy, Switzerland and the Netherlands. Another reason is that American researchers were not interested in mouthing

in ASL at that time, partly because they thought that mouthing did not play a role in ASL, partly because their research was focused on how different ASL was from any spoken language.

It has been suggested by several researchers (cf. for example, Padden 1994, Boyes Braem 1990) that in sign languages where mouthing plays a role, fingerspelling is less frequently used among signers than in sign languages such as ASL, where fingerspelling plays an important role. This might be an interesting line of research to pursue further.

OCCURRENCE, TYPE AND FUNCTION OF MOUTHINGS IN SLN

The data that are presented in the following sections come from research that was carried out in the 1980's and has been published in Schermer (1990). The main results of those studies will be presented here and will then be discussed in relation to the production of sign language dictionaries.

Method: Informants, Materials and Analyses

Six informants (three females and three males) took part in the study: three from the Groningen area and three from the Amsterdam area. They are all active members of the Deaf community. All signers are either deaf from birth or have become deaf before the age of three years. Their ages range between 21 and 45 years.

The data consist of video recordings of the informants in different situations:

- Retelling two written Dutch stories in SLN (Special Queen and Goldilocks);
- Rendering the content of a picture book (The Snowman by Raymond Briggs);
- Signing in a spontaneous language situation.

The video recordings were transcribed and translated by a native deaf informant. The majority of the signs were transcribed using the KOMVA transcription system, which is based on Stokoe's notation system (Stroombergen & Schermer 1988). Whenever signs were not so notated, they were transcribed using Dutch glosses. The deaf informant described phonemically what was visible on the lips of the informants. If the lip movements referred to (partial) Dutch lexical items, they were analysed as being mouthings. If the lip movements did not refer to Dutch, they were analysed as mouth gestures.

Occurrence of Mouthings

After having transcribed and translated all video recordings, the material was analysed in the following manner: All tokens were counted per situation per informant. A token is defined in our material as either (1) a sign without mouthings, (2) mouthings without a manual part and (3) a sign combined with mouthings.

