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ANALYSIS OF NATURAL DISCOURSE OF DEAF
ADULTS IN THE NETHERLANDS:
OBSERVATIONS ON DUTCH SIGN LANGUAGE

Trude M. Schermer

Sign language in the Netherlands. When we started our research in the summer of 1981 the situation in the Netherlands resembled very closely the situation that has been described for other countries like Norway, Switzerland, Italy and Belgium:

- 1 A strong opposition against signs and the possibility of sign language made the majority of the deaf educators and even the deaf themselves think that the communication system among the deaf can be characterized as a spoken language supported by signs.
- 2 There are at least five dialects and no standardized sign language.
- 3 No research had been done with respect to the communication system in use among deaf adults.

In order to explore the nature of that communication system we conducted the study described below by videotaping the signing of prelingually deaf adults from the region of Amsterdam and the Hague.

Eleven informants took part in this study. They were asked to sign in pairs in two different situations. In the first setting, six informants were asked to read a written Dutch story and to convey its content to the other member of the pair. In the second setting, pairs of informants were asked to communicate freely about any topic, thus yielding natural discourse data. In both settings the hearing experimenter controlled the video-camera. However, the informants didn't know they were being filmed. The videotapes were translated by a deaf informant and transcribed and analyzed by myself. In order to transcribe the videotapes systematically we used a form based on discourse notation-systems developed by Bencie Woll and Ruth Kjaer Sørensen (1979).

Results. The results showed a marked difference between the manner of communication of the informants in the first setting, the "structure"

setting, and in the second, the "natural discourse" setting.

The main characteristics of the communication system in the structured setting can be summarized as follows:

- almost continuous simultaneous occurrence of speech (with or without voice) and signs
- primarily Dutch word order
- no consistent use of the signing space
- little use of classifiers
- little use of facial expression
- hardly any use of signs with an oral component; i.e. signs that require facial expression (e.g. the sign for 'to be present' that requires a specific lip movement).

Thus, the structured setting elicited a type of communication system that was very closely related to spoken Dutch. We will call this type of communication system a "signed Dutch" variety. I will not go into the nature of this signed Dutch variety; rather I want to discuss some aspects of the spontaneously signed variety we have come across in the natural discourse setting. The latter situation resembled as closely as possible the actual situation in the deaf community, and this was confirmed by all our informants.

I have listed below seven salient characteristics of the spontaneously signed variety, the different aspects of which I will discuss briefly.

1. ordering of the constituents

Dutch word order was not being followed. In general we can say that the topic of the sentence was expressed first, that the comment followed the topic, and that new information preceded old information.

2. Use of signing space

We have found fairly consistent use (very similar to that in other sign languages) of the signing space to mark relationships between the various constituents. Agents and recipients are set up in the signing space and the action is carried out by classifiers functioning as directional verbs.

3. Use of classifiers

In our data the following handshapes functioned most frequently as classifiers: