

FOREWORD

Crosslinguistic perspectives

The papers in this volume are a selection of the presentations given at the seventh international conference on Theoretical Issues in Sign Language Research. This meeting, known as TISLR, was held for the first time in its history in Europe – in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, from July 22nd to July 27th, 2000. The topic chosen for the meeting and for this volume is cross-linguistic aspects of sign language research. This choice reflects the status quo in the sign linguistics field, as was emphasized by the first guest speaker, Professor Bencie Woll from City University London (see Woll this volume). The time is ripe for this topic since many more sign languages around the world are now being studied compared to 15 years ago when the first TISLR conference was held in Rochester (1986); see the resulting volumes edited by Fischer & Siple (1990). It is now possible to make comparisons and work on typological issues. At the conference many different sign languages were discussed. In the 60 papers and 75 poster presentations in the course of the five days of the meeting there were data presented from 48 different sign languages. They came from all 5 continents: 11 different sign languages from Asia, 8 from the Americas, 2 from Australasia, 5 from Africa and 22 from Europe. The papers in this volume also cover all continents with 17 sign languages being discussed in 19 papers as well as Swedish and Finnish tactile sign languages used by the deaf-blind.

Relatively little attention has been paid to the variation between sign languages. There has been comparison of lexicon but little on phonological, grammatical and pragmatic differences. It is of importance to discover where sign languages are similar and where they can vary. The particular aim of the TISLR 2000 conference was to open up new linguistic perspectives and hopefully to stimulate collaborative work between different sign language groups for the future. The conference provided ample opportunity for researchers to discuss and there was also one room reserved for researchers to work with informants from different languages. This has already borne fruit. In the paper by Pyers (this volume) the author has been able to extend her exploration of the ASL sign THINK as a verb expressing false belief to other sign languages and determine that such a verb exists in these other languages, supporting her thesis that this fact has its origin in Deaf culture. Some papers start out with a comparison of different sign languages in order to determine if common principles are at work. Nyst & Baker (this volume) for example compare the phonology of name signs across several languages. Johnston (this volume) compares the lexicon of three historically related languages and one non-related language, and comes to the provoking conclusion that the lexicon of BSL, NZSL and Auslan does not provide evidence for considering them as different languages. By contrast, Hurlbut (this volume) compares the lexicon of different dialects of Malaysian Sign Language, arriving at the conclusion that there are at least three different sign languages in Malaysia rather than one. At the meeting the results of the European Science Foundation network Intersign were reported. This network has explicitly addressed the challenges of sharing data across sign languages in terms of transcription and databases. This debate has resulted in publications on this topic (Bergman, Boyes Braem, Hanke & Pizzuto 2000). A number of different sign languages are now being included in the large typology project World Atlas of

Languages (WALS) at the Leipzig Max Planck Institute and crosslinguistic projects are being started in several places. It is to be hoped that this trend will continue to give us more insight into the typology of sign languages.

Aside from the explicitly comparative investigations, other papers in the present volume focus on details of individual sign languages. The contributions have been organized in five different sections: general, lexicon and phonology, morphosyntax, pragmatics, and psycholinguistics. Papers on acquisition have been included in the appropriate section according to the aspect of acquisition they deal with. The two papers in the general section were given as invited addresses and are broader in their scope, addressing the field of sign linguistics as a whole: on the one hand the development of approaches within the field of sign linguistics (Woll this volume) and on the other the role of the Deaf researcher (Ladd, this volume).

Deaf participation

At TISLR 2000 there were many sign languages represented, as mentioned above. There were also Deaf researchers from several different countries. However, it must be said that there are still too few Deaf researchers over all and even fewer, who attend such an international conference. Dr. Paddy Ladd from the University of Bristol addressed the sociolinguistic issue of the importance of native signers conducting research (Ladd, this volume).

Previous TISLR meetings have been held in the United States or Canada where automatically ASL has been one of the conference languages alongside spoken English. Deaf participants from other countries have had to provide their own interpreter from ASL or English into their own sign language. Since TISLR 2000 was held in the Netherlands, the conference languages were Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT) and English, so that again Deaf participants from elsewhere had to provide their own interpreters. This situation led to much discussion as to which languages should be the conference languages in the future and as to whether more interpreter services can be centrally provided. Deaf participants felt that this issue must be fully debated and wrote a manifesto for the sign linguistic community (Rathman, Mathur & Boudreault 2000).

The TISLR meeting was attended by a number of Deaf teachers and researchers from the Netherlands and had a considerable national impact through media coverage reinforcing the full status of sign languages as the native languages of Deaf people. This positive influence in the country that holds the meeting must not be forgotten in future planning of these meetings.

Acknowledgments

Since this volume is the result of the TISLR 2000 conference, thanks are due not only to those who have contributed towards the production of this volume but also to those who supported the organization of the conference. The TISLR 2000 meeting was attended by more than 250 participants – these included students of sign linguistics from the University of Amsterdam and from the interpreter and teacher training from the Hogeschool van Utrecht who also assisted with the organization. Members of the Deaf community in the

Netherlands were involved in the organization of the meeting from the beginning and also attended the meeting. The Foundation for Welfare of Deaf People (Stichting Welzijn Doven) in Amsterdam collaborated with the organization providing facilities for the opening reception. The meeting had a number of different sponsors. The University of Amsterdam provided much support in terms of work hours and finance from several sources: Central Administration, Committee for Resources for Handicapped and the Emancipation Committee and Research School for Functional Study of Language and Language Use (IFOTT). The University of Leiden provided work hours. The Hogeschool van Utrecht provided work hours but also equipment and finance. Stichting Nederlands Gebarencentrum (Dutch Sign Centre) provided work hours and finance. The Dutch Institute for Scientific Research (NWO), the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts & Sciences (KNAW) and the Dutch Institute for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Child gave grants. The City Council of Amsterdam provided a reception as did John Benjamins Publishing Company. Thanks are due to all these organizations for their support.

The interpreting service the conference provided in Sign Language of the Netherlands and the coordination of the interpreters from other sign languages worked smoothly thanks to the intensive preparation on the part of the interpreter committee: Mindy Brown, Joni Oyserman and Beppie van den Bogaerde. The organizing committee was responsible for matters such as the social programme, general information, transport etc. It consisted of Johan Wesemann, Harry Knoors, Carla de Jonge, Marijke Scheffener and Anne Baker (chair). The scientific committee had the awesome task of putting the academic programme together. Heleen Bos, Beppie van den Bogaerde, Onno Crasborn and Trude Schermer (chair) were the local members and they were supported by international colleagues Brita Bergman, Penny Boyes-Braem, Ronnie Wilbur and Bencie Woll. Trude Schermer, Beppie van den Bogaerde and Anne Baker (chair) formed the main committee. The editors of this volume thank all of these people for their hard work.

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