

How a story is told in Italian and Italian Sign Language (LIS): a comparison of deictical, anaphoric and gestural strategies.

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The present study derives from a research FIRB project which was designed to implement a e-learning environment for young and adult deaf learners.

The underlying assumption of the section of this project, devoted to comparing Italian and LIS, is that the language units, that are specific to this system, will be different to transfer in spoken Italian. In general we deal with a more theoretical and semiotic issue, i.e. comparison of cognitive and linguistic similarities and differences between verbal and sign languages. Distinguishing the different modalities is a crucial step toward a recognition of those elements allowing for the transition from one modality to the other and in the acquisition process of other semiotic systems. Distinctive features in their production along with explicit and implicit interferences from LIS to written Italian shall provide the necessary information for guidelines geared to cope with specific processing drawbacks typical of LIS deaf signers (Antinoro Pizzuto *et al.*, 2010).

To test this hypothesis we asked six subjects (three women and three men with an age range from 29 to 52) to watch twice the Pear Story created by Chafe from University of California Berkeley (Chafe, 1980) and then tell it to other people. This story is simple and short it requires on the narrators to resort to a variety of communicative strategies.

The choice to run the experiment by showing the Pear Story video was taken by our group as it allows to elicit the linguistic, paralinguistic and extralinguistic features of spoken Italian and LIS we were looking for (Antinoro Pizzuto, 2009). Originally designed to account for linguistic and cognitive aspects of narrative strategies adopted by speakers of different cultures, the Pear Story presents characteristics which make it fit to our purpose.

The features are:

- overall prevalence of visual input and the absence of a sound or dialogue except the noise of the background which allow for contextualizing the story in the rural setting where it takes place.
- in spite of its simplicity the story relies on the ability to “translate” deictic and anaphorical traits that speakers need to express when telling the story to someone else.
- Many points of the movie could lead hearing speaker to use gestures, gaze and body language to expressing the concept in his mind.

The oral narratives in spoken Italian were transcribed with the system created by Jefferson (Jefferson, 1984) which allows to account for pauses, recasts, hesitations, false starts and other linguistic manifestations. The narratives in LIS were transcribed with the system devised by Sutton (Sutton, 1999) not widely known among researches, this transcription system is fit for sign face-to-face interaction and texts in written LIS (Di Renzo *et al.*, 2006).

Hesitation, pitch of voice, drawls and most of all gestures, gaze and body language the subjects adopted in their oral narratives were focused in our study (Capirci, Cristilli e Graziano, 2009; Fele, 2007). An interesting observation we were able to draw is that when subjects were asked to tell the Pear Story using LIS, the used gaze, shoulder posture and facial expressions make their narratives more précis and to the point (Antinoro Pizzuto, 2009).

In the Italian Sign Language, in fact, we have constitutive unity that can be classified in two great categories: "simple unity", comparable to "words" of the verbal languages, and "complex forms" constituted by: signer's gaze, facial expression, body posture, arms and hands configuration, positioning and movement, each contributing in a specific, well defined manner, to specify aspects of the complex meaning simultaneously encoded (Cuxac, 2000; Di Renzo & al. 2009; Pizzuto, 2007; Antinoro Pizzuto *et al.*, 2008); the study shows how deixis overall appears through these complex forms in Sign Languages.

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