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Discussion Paper

Elina Tapio*

The Marginalisation of Finely Tuned Semiotic Practices and Misunderstandings in Relation to (Signed) Languages and Deafness

Abstract: When people draw on the available modal resources (e.g. gestures) in specific contexts over time, those resources come to display regularities. The more a community uses and regulates those resources, the more fully and finely articulated their regularities and patterns become. Modes, organised by regular means of representation, are constantly transformed by users, depending on what the community needs. This paper discusses the way semiotic resources and practices, i.e. social actions with a history, used by sign language signers in visually oriented communities, as well as the research in such domains, have been marginalised. The paper reflects some of the main reasons for such marginalisation and argues how marginalisation is a result of some crucial misunderstandings in relation to (signed) languages, language learning, deafness, and disability. Research into human interaction, in general, has taken a multimodal turn. This paper suggests, through practical examples, how multimodally oriented research could enrich its view by recognising communication-practices inside visually oriented domains, as well as research in the area, instead of considering D/deaf and sign language related research as a specialised area of research.

Keywords: Finnish Sign Language, deafness, multimodal discourse analysis, social semiotics, marginalisation, languaging

Introduction

In 2004, I started my PhD research with the aim of examining English language in the everyday life of Finnish Sign Language (FinSL) signers. I believed that examining complex interactional situations from a multimodal viewpoint, with an ethnographic research frame, could broaden our understanding of English language learning by FinSL signers and through that, give us valuable ideas for developing English language teaching for the Deaf.¹

¹ In order to demark a cultural and linguistic view of deafness, Deaf communities in the Anglophone world have capitalised the word “Deaf” when referring to people who identify themselves with the Deaf community and who are also audiological deaf. By contrast, the uncapitalised term “deaf” is used mainly when referring to a person’s audiological status (Ladd 2003; Padden and Humphries 1988). However, due to recent criticism on this old practice (see e.g. Davis 2008; Jokinen 2001; Tapio 2013), I rarely choose to use only one version, but prefer the use of D/deaf or the terms “FinSL signer” or “signer”, by which I mean people who participate in a signing environment. When referring to a community of signers, I use the terms “Sign Language community” or “signing community”, however, I do consider it to be synonymous to the term “Deaf community” because both terms encompass different ways of being a person who uses signed language(s). I have discussed these concepts further in Tapio (2013, ch. 2).

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I adopted multimodality as a key term from the beginning of the research since I wanted to examine interaction without presuppositions regarding the mediational means – in other words, cultural tools – with which an action is realised (Scollon 2001; Wertch 1991). I had learned that signed languages and signed interaction question the prevalent dichotomisations between linguistic vs non-linguistic, gesture vs signs, as well as the taken-for-granted materialities of communicative modes (see, for example, Liddell 2003, for discussion on interplay between signs and gesture). In the case of a heterogeneous group of D/deaf, hard-of-hearing, and hearing people, the division between the communicative modes and their materiality is not as straightforward as in spoken language research. For example, speech is visible in mouthing, and signing is not silent, as many people tend to believe. Both of these materialities may offer affordances for meaning-making. A multimodal approach let me steer away from presuppositions and examine the entire semiosis of action (Jewitt 2009; Norris 2004; van Lier 2004: 62).

In concordance with ecological and socio-cultural views on language learning, I focused on analysing the ways learners engage with multimodal environments and affordances provided by such environments. It became essential to examine resemiotisation, the way meaning-making shifts from context to context, from practice to practice (Iedema 2003; Scollon 2008). In my study, I was mostly concerned with remodulation, resemiotisation on levels of situated practices, “shifting from a mode such as text to a mode such as graphic images” (Scollon 2008: 243). I focused on the chaining of modes, in particular, where modes such as signing, mouthing (i.e. mouth patterns derived from spoken languages), and typing are arranged into a chain of action (Humphries and MacDougall 1999; Bagga-Gupta 1999, 2004). My claim was: “It is justified to assume that FinSL signers live in a multimodal world of images and gestures, forming their own pedagogical strategies from their everyday encounters.” I was agreeing with researchers in the field of Deaf studies and Deaf education on recognising and highlighting practices created and learned culturally within the signing communities (Rainò and Seilola 2008; Tapio 2013).

During my research project, however, I became rather critical when phrasing the further goal of the research, i.e. getting pedagogical insights for English language teaching for the Deaf. I find it difficult to respond to well-meaning comments on how I am doing good by “helping the deaf” or developing special education through my research. After all, the practices I have set out to examine are mostly familiar to my research participants, it is me who is learning something new.

The reason for such awkwardness comes from the growing realisation that both the phenomena I am interested in and research on signing communities is often labelled, as “special,” as language and practices of the Other, rather than research that has relevance to so-called mainstream research. Rather than accepting this as a natural state of being, I have come to a conclusion that we have ended up in a situation where certain modes and communication-practices are out of reach and out of awareness of “us” (the normalised majority) and limited to the use of “them” (abnormalised communities of practice) due to the marginalisation of signed languages and users of signed languages.

In this paper, I will first discuss some of these processes of marginalisation and the main reasons behind them, after which I will draw on research findings from ethnographic research in signing communities, and move on to arguing the significance of such research for mainstream research through some practical examples. While marginalisation of D/deaf people, signed languages and D/deaf related studies have been discussed profoundly by, for example, Ladd (2003), Bagga-Gupta (2007), Davis (1995), and Bauman (2008b), this paper takes a social semiotic point of departure when arguing the significance of multimodal research into embodied-visual practices in signing communities.

The goal of this paper is to suggest that we should see the semiotic practices inside these “visual arenas” as innovative and complex semiotic systems that emerge in visual-kinaesthetic modality. Looking into these specific domains would give us valuable insights of finely tuned multimodal and multilingual practices. From a social semiotic viewpoint, the signing communities have invested work over an extended time towards developing the semiotic potential of embodied and visual semiotic resources; specifically, the movements of limbs, the head, the upper torso, and movements of facial muscles, all of which are involved in face-to-face interaction, no matter the language a community uses. However, in signing communities, such resources have become “a full representational and communicational resource”; in other words, a

highly regularised ensemble of semiotic resources (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001: 125–126). Further, this viewpoint can be applied to include visual and embodied communication-practices used in the signing communities, practices such as chaining modes for highlighting equivalencies between languages, and hybrids of written and signed modes; for example the fingerspelling of words of spoken languages via the manual FinSL alphabet, received by the eyes, and produced manually (Bagga-Gupta 2004; Tapio 2013), and recognise them as finely tuned, highly regularised strategies in languaging.

Even if we do not add such practices to our own “toolkit,” by understanding these visual-embodied practices we can reflect our own actions as individuals, the practices used in formal education, and languaging from a different perspective. In other words, research on signed interaction – with a multimodal viewpoint – has a potential to offer us a new analytical lens through which to examine languaging and meaning-making and in that way expand our view, which rather often is biased to focus on oral and written forms of languages.

“The historic misunderstandings” in relation to (signed) languages, deafness, and disability

The marginalisation of signed languages and communicative practices created in visually oriented signing communities, as well as the research on such areas can be explained by misunderstandings in relation to signed languages, languages in general, and misunderstandings in relation to deafness and disability. While the literature discusses these issues in depth, I will summarise and discuss a few main points here with regard to conceptualisations of language and language learning, as well as the conceptualisations of the deaf people.

Misunderstandings and reconceptualisations in relation to (signed) languages

Traditionally, language has been seen as analogous to speech, learning a language analogous to hearing. Although any recent book on linguistics does not slip into this confusion, we still have a long way to go to deconstruct the presumed natural status of speech both among linguists and the general population (Haualand 2008). Signed languages are still seen as secondary systems to spoken languages, similar to writing, even among linguists.

Why this confusion? Is it because the majority in the world communicates in spoken languages? This, I suggest, is a fact that can also be discussed critically: How and why have we ended up in a situation where speech is the main communicative mode of the majority? Why is the current state of being that signed languages are emerging and used mostly in places where deaf people come together? In my opinion, this is not to be taken for granted. We need a critical reflection of the history, as well as some freedom to imagine other possibilities when it comes to the choices and prioritisations of modalities.

Language evolutionists who believe there was a gestural stage in language evolution have long attempted to find an answer to the question: What led to the dominance of speech? by listing the pros and cons of signed and spoken languages or gesturing and vocalising. However, when getting acquainted with such discussion, one can draw two conclusions: (1) it was not a matter of choosing between gesture-based or sound-based systems, but our ancestors very likely used both ways of communicating simultaneously; and (2) the reasoning on the advantage of speech over gesture is rather speculative and many times based on rather superficial knowledge on gestural meaning-making and signed languages (Corballis 2002; McNeill 2012). To add to the speculations, I would suggest that there are no practical reasons why the majority of people are not using signed languages. The prevalent view of the link between deafness and the use of signed language is just an impression we have. To reinforce my reasoning, I refer to communities in

human history where using a signed language was not connected to the audiological status of people, but “everybody signed” (e.g. Ladd 2003; Davis 1995), as well as to my own experience of being a part of the signing community and networks in the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Here categorisations based on hearing level are not relevant in our everyday communications.

The arbitrariness of vocal language has been pointed out as a possible advantage that led to the dominance of speech. While the arbitrariness of signs in signed languages is recognised, the argument for the difference in these two modes has been that spoken words “have virtually no iconic content to begin with, and so provide a ready-made system for abstraction” (Corballis 2002: 188). I would like to use this argument as a bridge to the reconceptualisations of “language,” put forward by post-modern sociolinguistics (Pennycook 2007; Blommaert and Rampton 2011), ecologically oriented linguistics (Kramsch 2002b; van Lier 2004), and those who take a dialogical and socio-cultural view on language (see, e.g. Dufva 2010; Lantolf 2000). Such approaches prefer the concept of languaging in order to emphasise that language is not to be seen as a whole, bounded, arbitrary system (a code), but a situatedly varying, dynamic, and multimodal activity. The distributed view on languaging emphasises how language is a physically grounded, culturally determined joint activity, while the dialogical view emphasises the Bakhtinian notion of heteroglossia (see Zheng and Newgarden 2012 for a discussion on distributed view vs code view on language, and Dufva 2013 for a discussion focusing on the dialogical view on language and language learning, in particular). Put simply, language or languaging is now seen as activity with semiotic resources (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic), and language learning as participation or interaction with the environment and its affordances. In other words, learning is activity with an environment that itself is a dynamic and temporally unfolding process (Firth and Wagner 1997; Kramsch 2002a; van Lier 2004; Lemke 2002; Zheng and Newgarden 2012). The wider, multimodal view on languaging takes into account multiple modes, media, and sensory channels.

Against this backdrop, one may see an ontological shift from vocal-auditory focus towards embodied-visual focus. Our understanding of human language was wrongly based on linguistic research that did not include embodied-visual languaging in the study until the linguistic status was given to ASL in 1970s. After this, we moved to a situation where we had two separate areas in language studies: research on vocal-auditory languages and research on visual-kinaesthetic languages. However, as languaging is now seen as multimodal semiotic activity, no matter which semiotic resources are prioritised in a community of practice, I see a potential bridge between research in signed and spoken interaction.

Abnormalisation and marginalisation of the Deaf

Another reason for marginalisation of modes and practices used in signing communities is linked to the way deafness and disability is conceptualised in today’s world. In the Western world, D/deaf people have been seen as disabled people for centuries. The cultural-linguistic model of deafness introduced as an alternative perspective to the medical view that sees deafness as a defect that should be cured has mostly been ignored. Instead, the link between signed languages and deafness seems to justify attempts at wiping out a linguistic minority in the name of curing a disability (Tapio and Takkinen 2012).

The “oralist agenda” is persistent despite the substantial body of knowledge of signed languages and language learning internationally proving that the use of signed language(s) does not make a child less capable of learning languages in general (e.g. Takkinen 2008; Niederberger 2008; Padden and Ramsey 2000). Ladd (2003) and Johnson (2006) suggest that the persistence of such assumptions is not due to sheer ignorance, but to some “deep level of ‘folk mythos’” (Ladd 2003: 72) and argue that speech-based educational practices actually rest on philosophical principles that “resemble systems of belief and practice that encourage the denial of observable facts” (Johnson 2006: 29). Ironically, as Bauman (2008a) points out, while hearing people become enthralled with the cognitive benefits of signing (i.e. “baby signing”), deaf children are systematically denied access to signing, “creating a strange message

that sign language is good for hearing people but bad for deaf” (Bauman 2008a: 18, see also Tapio and Takkinen 2012).

Education has a significant role in valuating speech over signing. The history of deaf education has had many (linguistic) turns in many places in the world (see Salmi 2010 on linguistic turns in Finnish deaf education in European context). A number of national school systems had/have a so-called oralist method, reflecting the medical view on deafness, which focuses on spoken language only, many times banning signing altogether. A typical situation in many countries, however, is similar to that of Sweden, where the national signed language is recognised as part of deaf education, and the use of a sign language is encouraged. However, a closer analysis of national education policies and curricula show how signed languages are placed in relation to spoken languages: deaf education is governed by compensatory agendas (Bagga-Gupta 2010), in other words, signed languages in education are considered as a tool to compensate the lack of access to spoken modes of languages.

To discuss and stay only on a level where one questions the links between signed languages, deafness and disability is not enough. Davis (1995) argues how the general population – including the academia – has failed to recognise how the concept of disability is “the end result of a series of complex cultural, social, and political processes.” While people nowadays understand how categorisation based on race, class, and gender are related to the structures of power, and the marginalisation of people is socially produced, we still take disability as a given, essentialist characteristic of certain human beings, the members of a minority, “the special one” (see also Bagga-Gupta 2007, and Foucault 2003).

In his book, Davis (1995) discusses how through “deconstruction of continuum” disability was constructed – in this case through polarisation of deafness–hearingness – and as a curious result from that, “the hearing people” are often unaware of the fact that they actually live a considerable part of their lives in “deafened moments,” such as one taking place when you, a reader, are reading this text. “This is a moment of disability,” writes Davis (1995: 4) and points out how the vocalisation of a text is a second-order activity, thus questioning the impression that aural/oral communication is always the natural one and writing is mediating speech.

Examples from a study: multimodal view on English language in FinSL context

In order to explicate practices of multimodal and multilingual languaging in visually oriented domains, I will bring together some of the main findings of an earlier study where the aim was to explore the use of English among FinSL signers (Tapio 2013). The study proceeded from an ethnographic survey to in-depth analyses of focal social actions, and through navigation of those social actions, the aim was to gain an understanding of the larger picture of FinSL signers’ English use. The study adopted a multimodal perspective with the aim of examining how semiotic resources work together in multimodal action and how those resources relate to each other in such events (Norris 2004; Goodwin 2000; Van Leeuwen 2005).

The multimodal view is integrated in mediated discourse analysis – the overall approach of the research – that takes social action as the unit of analysis (Scollon 1998; Scollon and Scollon 2004). In addition, the goal in MDA is to understand the history of each semiotic resource in relation to the actors that use them (Scollon and Scollon 2004: 164–164, also in alliance with the goals of social semiotics, such as introduced by Van Leeuwen 2005). The motivation for taking a multimodal view was inspired by semiotic approaches to language and language learning (e.g. Jewitt 2008; Kramsch 2002b; van Lier 2004).

The study focused on two areas in particular. The first area of interest was the everyday use of technology and media and how the English language was situated in such contexts. The second area of interest was multimodality in face-to-face interaction when dealing with English language and, in particular, in relation to the practice of fingerspelling of English words.

English in everyday life in technology context

Through analysis of the data collected with the research participants,² we got to see a wide variety of everyday actions with technology, including the use of different computer programmes, online messaging, and networking (Kuure and McCambridge 2007; Tapio 2013). The analysis showed how English is present for the participants in such contexts. It was also apparent that the participants were active in complex, multilingual, and multimodal networks and actively managed the mediational means in such environments.

An interesting finding in relation to this discussion paper was the way the participants expressed how they treat printed English text as images – as opposed to English words – in cases such as labels on clothes. Also discussing browsing the internet or using computer programmes raised interesting issues on how written English is perceived: The participants told me they usually simply “click away” the icons in the navigation bar, observe what happens, and remember the place of the icon. They use visual cues, such as the location of an icon or images attached to the icon, to know the function a key represents. Sometimes, they said, they learn the shape of the word or remember some of the letters in the word that appears in an icon. However, a gap seemed to exist between the school English and everyday English in technology context. In most cases, the participants were unaware that they were using English often or did not see everyday English as contributing to their “formal” English learning.

The study raises interesting issues on how a prevalent discourse on D/deaf learning English which positions FinSL signers as having limited resources with which to learn languages, such as English, because they do not hear English everywhere might have an impact on how the research participants underestimate the amount of English language that exists around them in their everyday life (Tapio 2014). The way the focus group participants described remembering written words by the approximate visual form of the word is a good example of how this particular community uses visuality for English language learning, yet more importantly, resembles a possible alternative discourse stressing visuality instead of “input through hearing.”

English in multimodal, multilingual face-to-face interaction

The multimodality in signed face-to-face interaction in which English language emerges – and in particular the remodelling of English words – had caught my attention during the initial phases of research. This led me to focus on one social action in particular, the fingerspelling of English words in FinSL interaction (Tapio 2013). The primary data for investigation included three video recordings. The analysis focused on one: the general multimodality of the situations, examining the semiotic resources used in relation to fingerspelling and mutual connections between those resources, two: how the participants chose from different communicative modes in order to achieve their goals, three: the modification of fingerspelling and other modes, such as mouthing, and four: how the technology and place affected the participants’ choice and modification of semiotic resources.

In the FinSL context, fingerspelling is the usual manner by which an English word enters a signed conversation. According to the usual, simplified definition, the English word in question – usually a proper name – is fingerspelled via the manual alphabet, received by eyes and produced manually. The manual alphabet is a set of signs that refer to the written alphabet, the graphemes of the Roman alphabet. When fingerspelling a word, the signer produces these signs in a sequence. However, there are many ways to produce these sequences. Research in American Sign Language (ASL) context has identified four types of fingerspelling that are used depending on the purpose of fingerspelling, for example, whether a word is

² The data come from the focus group of approximately eight 10- to 17-year-old FinSL signers and comprises interviews, pictures, and a videoclip taken by the participants and a group interview. See Tapio (2013, ch. 6 and ch. 8) for more detailed description of data collection and analysis.

introduced for the first time in a narrative, or whether the function is to “recall an already active template of a word” (Patrie and Johnson 2011).³

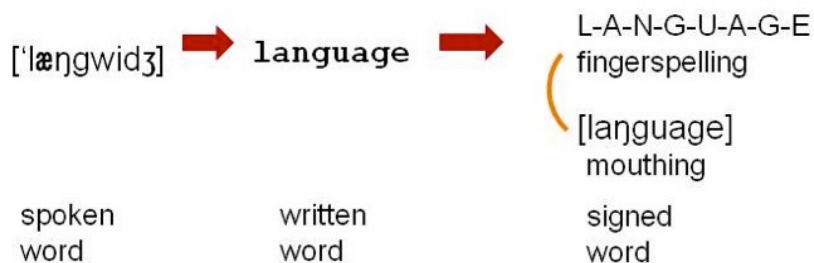


Figure 1 Semiotic relationship between modes when fingerspelling the English word *language* in FinSL context

Video 1 and Figure 1 present an example of fingerspelling an English word *language* (L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E) in FinSL context. As exemplified in the video, fingerspelling occurs often in relation to another mode, mouthing. In this case, mouthing resembles the movement of the lips when an English word is “read as written,” with sound and letter correspondence, instead of producing the mouthing of a pronounced English word. In other words, mouthing follows each letter fingerspelled. The practice seen in video 1, however, is one way of many of such practices. Based on the analysis of fingerspelling of English words in multiparty interaction (videoconferencing situation) and during a coffee table discussion between two signers, the following observations were made.

The practice of fingerspelling changes in relation to the task in question, similar to findings of Patrie and Johnson (2011). For example, signers move from rather rapid, careful fingerspelling to the letter-by-letter fingerspelling when the participants negotiate the correct spelling of a word. In the dialogue data, where a proper name “Jason” was mentioned ten times during the conversation, the name was first introduced with careful fingerspelling, after which the fingerspelled sequence undergoes many changes, resulting in a form that can be identified as a nonce sign used in the conversation.

The mouthing either emerges with fingerspelling or is inconsistent in videoconferencing situations, yet at times follows the Finnish names of fingerspelled letters. This, I contend, is a result of the way the technology in the situation rearranges the interaction: The participants abandon the convention of gaze (McIlvenny 1995) thus paying attention only to the hand, the keyboard and the screens. In analysis of ten occurrences of “Jason” the signers’ mouthing follows a sound-letter correspondence similar to that of the Finnish writing system, /jason/, strongly supporting the written form of the name “Jason.” The mouthing retains its form throughout the ten repetitions, while the fingerspelled sequence changed drastically in structure.

In technology context when the participants engage in videoconferencing, activities lead to finely tuned co-participation and synchronised fingerspelling-typing activity. Fingerspelling and typing is arranged in a

³ Most research on fingerspelling has been conducted in ASL. Tapio (2013, ch. 9) summarises research on fingerspelling, both international and Finnish research (e.g. Padden and Gunsauls 2003; Patrie and Johnson 2011; Wilcox 1992; Rainò 2001). It is important to note that my research focuses on actions in which a “foreign” language, English, is introduced to FinSL conversation and signers are mostly bilingual in FinSL and Finnish.

chain of action in which after each fingerspelled sign the person at the keyboard presses the key of the similar alphabet. Gaze and head-movement also play important roles in interaction; the manner in which participants actively scan the environment for possible signed information is a typical manner of establishing a participation framework, in signing communities (see, e.g. McIlvenny 1995).

Bagga-Gupta (1999, 2004) has examined similar complex practices in the context of “visually oriented bilingual arenas” where the languages used are Swedish Sign Language and Swedish. Following Humphries and MacDougall (1999) among others, she calls a microcommunicative use of resources from two languages local chaining where different modes are connected for highlighting equivalencies between languages or for signalling distance between two linguistic/modal resources; for example, a signer can chain a sign language sign to fingerspelling. In my data, we can see a complex, distributed local chaining taking place where several participants chain saying a word in Finnish to saying a word in English, to fingerspelling, to typing, and so on. Also, what Bagga-Gupta calls simultaneous or synchronised chaining is used in my data when a participant focuses on reading on a screen and simultaneously signs the words with FinSL signs. However, in this context, these practices are not used for pedagogical purposes by teachers, but for problem solving in a quiz.

I contend, these actions with English language are not random, on the contrary, it is a sign that the signers are aware of the contextual configurations of the situation. Goodwin (2000: 1700) highlights activities in such situations by writing: “the ability to rapidly call upon alternative structures from a larger, ready at hand tool kit of diverse semiotic resources is crucial to the ability of human beings to (–) show that they are aware of each other and of the situation.” Such activities result from the vast range of cultural and linguistic resources available to the participants in that learning context (Gutiérrez et al. 1999) and should be recognised, enabled, and encouraged in language teaching for diverse learners.

In summation, even though I examined the fingerspelling of English words through a relatively small amount of primary data, the ethnographic data gave me the possibility to examine this particular social action as deeply situated in a larger context, and argue, that the manner in which the participants used mediational means in the analysed situations is culturally learned within the Finnish signing community. Moreover, from a language learning point of view, I conclude that through a detailed, holistic analysis of the multimodally dense interaction I have shown language learners acting and participating through English, skilfully using and managing affordances. Also, by analysing the semiotic resources used in the situations, this study captured different (embodied) emergences of English language; in other words, the remodalisation occurring.

Significance for language education and the mainstream research

I have argued that practices evolved among sign language users, practices such as described in Section “Examples from a study: multimodal view on English language in FinSL context”, often become marginalised due to misunderstandings in relation to (signed) languages, deafness, and disability. Why and how could such research findings contribute to our understanding of languaging, i.e. multilingual and multimodal practices, and further, what significance could research into such practices have for the mainstream research, for example, research in the area of language learning?

As discussed earlier, our understanding of interaction and language use are based strongly on research into spoken languages, and as such, are limited. By turning our focus to embodied and visual practices taking place in domains where spoken language does not play the main role in communication we could deepen our understanding of how human beings create meaning through visual and embodied resources and enrich the communication and learning strategies of those who are not yet familiar with such semiosis. More importantly, examining such practices can give us another analytical lens for studying actions we take with language.

For example, the concept of chaining has been taken further by Gynne and Bagga-Gupta (2013). In their recent studies, they use the concept, arguing that chaining as a phenomenon – regardless of the

modes chained in action – has analytical relevance when the aim is to examine the relationships between multilingual and multimodal communicative resources. Gynne and Bagga-Gupta (2013: 492) claim that chaining as an analytical lens allows for “the (re)examination and (re)interpretation of human beings’ participation in various kinds of communicative activities where literacy plays a role,” and such research highlights the interplay and interconnectedness of oral, written, and other modalities in human communication rather than categorises different linguistic codes as separate from other. Taken further, this leads to “a novel way of understanding languaging and meaning-making practices” (Gynne and Bagga-Gupta 2013: 492).

From the ecological viewpoint of language learning, the creative use of modes, remodalisation, and mixing of languages promotes agency in learning. I contend that it is essential to examine remodalisation when discussing language learning. A successful language learner can juggle between the modes, can make choices between semiotic resources based on their materiality and affordances in order to suit the goal of the action (see, e.g. Kramsch 2002a; Jewitt 2008; van Lier 2000). This type of awareness with regard to semiotic resources has become central also due to changes in the way we communicate in today’s society, since new technologies have enabled us to configure, circulate, and recycle modes in different ways than before (Jewitt 2009). Such changes in our linguistic landscape have made the researchers call for new ways of regarding the ways spoken languages are embedded in the surrounding semiotic world, including the language learning environments. As a consequence, it is easy to agree with Jewitt (2013) who proposes that there is a need to discuss what and where is English, and what is reading English in comparison to watching. As exemplified in Section “‘The historic misunderstandings’ in relation to (signed) languages, deafness, and disability”, research on signing communities raises interesting points on reading and embodied emergences of English. Such findings may offer a lens through which to discuss further the different ways we can see the relationship between spoken and written English, in other words, removing the taken-for-granted link between speech and writing, as well as contributing to discussions on speech vs writing and languaging as embodied action (Kravchenko 2009; Zheng and Newgarden 2012, see also Davis 1995 for contemplation on reading as a “deafened moment”).

Further, research that “zooms out” to examine the norms and ideologies linked to the embodied and visual semiotic resources and practices may help us to discuss the issues of identity and diversity on a larger scale. Such studies easily trigger dichotomies and boundary-making in relation to visual and embodied semiotic resources, for example mouthing, bringing forth ideologies and structures of power (see e.g. Bagga-Gupta 2010; Tapio 2013). Looking at multilingual situations and how boundaries are drawn in such contexts has been encouraged by critical ethnographers such as Heller (2008), however, such research is oriented towards spoken language.

In addition, methods used in signed language research can provide tools for the field of language studies. Currently, even in cases where a researcher is taking the gestures and visual layout into account, they end up analysing the spoken language in detail, while non-linguistic meaning-making is done only superficially. This research could go more in depth with the help of other methods, for example, researchers in the field of sign language phonetics have developed tools and conventions for analysing and transcribing micromovements of articulators such as fingers, eyebrows, and lips, and those can easily be applied to detailed microanalysis of embodied action in multimodal interaction analysis (see e.g. Johnson and Liddell 2011; Liddell and Johnson 1989).

Final reflections

When people draw on certain semiotic resources over time, the resources become regulated, contested, and scrutinised; the more a community uses and regulates those resources, the more fully and finely articulated their regularities and patterns become (Jewitt 2008; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001). Further, the community of practice gains tacit and explicit knowledge of the materiality and affordances of modal resources they

use. I have attempted to make a case for modes and multimodal, multilingual practices used in signing communities by giving examples of hybrids, remodalisation, and chaining that surfaced through ethnographic research among FinSL signers. I believe these are only a few examples of highly innovative remodalisations and that more such remodalisations will be highlighted through ethnographic, multimodal research into “visual arenas.”⁴

While discussing the reasons and the ways certain languages and modes become privileged over others, I cannot help but think that I might come out as privileging certain practices myself to a point where I “glorify” and “exotify,” which is just another practice of “othering.” That is not my intention, but rather to encourage the researchers interested in multimodal meaning-making to consider research in the area of signed languages as research with a long history of examining embodied and visual resources, rather than treating such research as something “different” or “specialised area of research.”⁴

What is important to note also is that research (re)creates categories when aligning to certain conceptual points of departure, such as age group. Research itself, according to Bagga-Gupta (2007: 9), is “normative activity that needs to be situated in sociohistorical context” (Bagga-Gupta). In this research area, one has to constantly bear this in mind when making concrete choices, from the beginning of data collection (e.g. when inviting participants along or preparing data collection methods for capturing certain modalities of communication), until the dissemination (e.g. when deciding on concepts for addressing the research participants). For example, I have enabled myself to steer away from strict audiology based categorisation by choosing to engage a pre-existing nexus of practice for fieldwork and situated myself to “the field” and communities of practice as they are, instead of doing as instructed, in other words, having only profoundly deaf research participants, or “deaf, native FinSL signers.” After all, signed languages and other visually oriented practices created in “visual arenas” are used by a diversity of people, regardless their audiological status. However, I find myself constantly (re)creating categories for semiotic resources and people, as well as imposing identities for people by positioning them in relation to different categories. For this reason, I align with Bagga-Gupta (2007) who encourages research in the areas of marginalised groups to conduct meta-analytical research on itself, as well as focus upon the concept of diversity, defined in terms of pragmatic differences and commonalities, which I understand as doing empirical, ethnographic research on communication-practices with a critical view to social processes linked to such practices.

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⁴ This is one of the main hypothesis, “an idea to check out” (Agar 1995: 589) of my ongoing postdoctoral research project with the title “Institutional academic spaces enabling and/or disabling multilingual and multimodal meaning-making in a Finnish Sign Language study programme.”

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Bionote

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