Welcome to DCAL’s eNewsletter

Language...a Multimodal Phenomenon

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This has been another busy year for the DCAL research centre. I have given a number of invited keynote talks at conferences in Europe and Asia.

The first of these was on “Why sign linguistics research is important to the Deaf community” and was presented at the 2nd International Conference on Linguistic Rights of the Deaf, held in Moscow back in May. The conference was organised by the All-Russian Society of the Deaf, with the support of the World Federation of the Deaf and the Russian Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare.

The conference agreed a resolution to be sent to the Member States of the United Nations, appealing for them to include in their legislation and practice—the principles stated in international agreements on the protection of rights of people with disabilities and their full participation in society, which includes Deaf people; to provide development and adoption of legislative acts to enhance sign language studies, training and retraining of sign language interpreters, sign language teachers; and the realisation of the linguistic rights of the Deaf.

The second talk took place from 5-6 June, at the International Conference on Enhancing Language Ability and Language Education, in Suzhou China, sponsored by UNESCO and Jiangsu Normal University.

My talk on Languages and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, was the only keynote talk presented by a linguist and discussed access to the study of languages for people with disabilities and the need for the recognition of sign language in education. These arguments were incorporated into the Conference Conclusions and Recommendations, which state that “sign language … should be respected and used in education”. This is the first time that UNESCO has specifically mentioned the importance of sign language and incorporated it into policy documents.

The final talk, on Sign Language and Technology, took place in Hamburg on 18th July at the conference Technologie in Empirisch-orientierten Forschungsmethoden (Technology in Empirically-Oriented Research methods). My paper reviewed how technological advancement had stimulated the development of sign language research, as well as examining techniques currently being used in sign language research.

Closer to home and as part of our study of the BSL Corpus, we have just launched the first ever usage-based dictionary for British Sign Language. We have are also working hard to lobby politicians at Westminster to secure public funding for a national specialist neurology clinic. However, you will read more about those two issues later in this newsletter.

My colleagues and I endeavour to ensure our research not only has impact but that it also makes a real difference to those in the Deaf Community.

Bencie

Prof Bencie Woll, Director
UCL host summer school for Deaf students

In August, University College London ran an innovative three day residential summer school exclusively for D/deaf and hard of hearing students from across the UK.

The Discover UCL Summer School, the first of its kind run by any UK university, was developed and run in partnership with UCL, the Deafness Cognition and Language Research Centre and the Deaf Education Advocacy Fellowship, and gave 20 Year 11 and 12 pupils a taste of student life in London.

Students took part in a variety of academic taster sessions and workshops – which included tips on writing a UCAS personal statement, applying for student finance and information on the specialist support available to D/deaf and hard of hearing students at university.

DCAL ran three specific sessions across the three days:
- a history of BSL time line game;
- mini-lecture on ‘The Building Blocks of Language: What Sign Languages Can Tell Us’;
- The UCL Student Experience and beyond: Q&A session – with a panel of three Deaf former/current UCL students.
What if the study of language had started from sign rather than spoken language?

If the study of language started from signed language, how would our theories be different?

DCAL Co-director, Prof. Gabriella Vigliocco and colleagues Dr. Pamela Perniss, Dr. David Vinson and Dr. Robin Thompson, asked psychologists, anthropologists, linguists and neuroscientists to discuss this question; first, in a workshop held at UCL in January 2012 (funded by DCAL and the Experimental Psychology Society) and next in a theme issue of the prestigious Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B, titled “Language as a Multimodal Phenomenon: Implications for Language Learning, Processing, and Evolution” (which was published in July 2014).

Our current theories of language
Our understanding of language – how it is learned and processed in the brain – has traditionally been firmly based on spoken languages, mainly English and few other languages from the same (Indo-European) family, and studied mainly as only speech or printed text. The focus on these spoken languages has led to the assumption that language is comprised wholly of an arbitrary system of symbols and rules in the oral (or text) modality.

Language as a multimodal phenomenon
But language is primarily used and learned in contexts of face-to-face communication. As such, language is multimodal: the sounds of speech are invariably accompanied by visual information on the face and in manual gestures, and sign languages deploy multiple channels (hands, face and body) in utterance construction. When we look at language in this way and when we look more broadly across the diversity of languages in the world, we see that (1) language uses multiple channels for expression and (2) language is iconic (i.e. there is resemblance between aspects of communicative form and meaning): speakers use iconic gestures when they speak; many spoken languages around the world exhibit a substantial amount of iconicity in word forms (also called sound-symbolism); and iconicity is the norm, rather than the exception in sign languages.

What if...
Would we think of language differently if sign language had been the starting point? Likely, yes. First, we would have taken language as inherently multimodal and would have considered speech or text only as an impoverished representation of language. Second, if the study of language had started from signed language rather than spoken language, we would have taken language to have both arbitrary and iconic aspects, with iconicity also contributing to language processing and development.

Thus, if we had studied language from the start as a system which embeds iconicity and which conveys meaning in multiple channels of expression – features of language which are immediately obvious in signed language – our dominant theories of language may have developed along very different trajectories.
The theme issue brings together researchers who provide theoretical arguments, evidence for, and criticisms of: (1) taking a multimodal approach to language where meaning is derived from the integration of information from multiple channels (e.g. hands, face, intonation); and (2) including iconicity, along with arbitrariness, among the foundational properties of language.

The volume is structured around these two main themes with papers addressing each theme from the perspective of the acquisition, processing, or evolution of language. Contributors include: Morten Christiansen, Karen Emmorey, Susan Goldin-Meadow, Judith Holler, Mutsumi Imai, Adam Kendon, Simon Kirby, Sotaro Kita, Stephen Levinson, Ulf Liszkowski, Padraic Monaghan, Asli Özyürek, Pamela Perniss, Marty Sereno, Richard Shillcock, Jeremy Skipper, Gabriella Vigliocco, and David Vinson.

The articles can be found at: http://rstb.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/369/1651.toc

DCAL staff win more awards

DCAL's most senior administrator has won a public engagement award for her ‘remarkable’ work establishing a major online exhibition on the history of British Sign Language.

Dr Manjula Patrick, was awarded the title of Professional Service Staff Engager of the Year, in the 2014 Provost Awards, for the work that she has done to encourage colleagues in public engagement and the leading role she has taken in her department. The Provost's Awards for Public Engagement have been created by the University College London to recognise the fantastic work that UCL's staff and students are doing to open up what happens at UCL, creating two-way conversations with the public.

Dr Patrick won the award for the conception and organisation of ‘The History of British Sign Language (BSL) Exhibition’, which took place in July last year and ran for a month. Over a thousand people visited the exhibition, from all over the world. The exhibition was based on research undertaken by DCAL in the past 8 years and brought together documents and artefacts from several hundred years of BSL's history.

The exhibition raised awareness of BSL's history within our local community, UCL's wider academic community and an international audience. The exhibition was also visited by parents of deaf children, professionals providing services to deaf people (such as teachers, speech and language therapists and interpreters), deaf arts groups, trade union groups and workers in the public sector and charitable organisations.

Nominations for the 2014-15 Provost's Awards for Public Engagement will open during this coming autumn term 2014. Nominations are made by a short form but nominators are strongly recommended to read the specific award guidance which can be obtained from the Public Engagement Unit.

You can email the Unit via this address: publicengagement@ucl.ac.uk

Details of the History of British Sign Language exhibition can be found online at: http://www.ucl.ac.uk/dcal/bslhistory
DCAL builds case for specialist neurology centre

Deaf people in the British Sign Language community have had a long struggle to access dementia diagnosis and support, with serious implications for quality of life of both patients and carers.

Academics at DCAL are concerned that what the Prime Minister has called the ‘quiet crisis’ may become just that, as the health and well-being of Deaf people are compromised as they continue to be denied access to appropriate diagnosis, treatment and support.

That is why throughout 2014, DCAL has ramped up its policy and campaigns activity to robustly lobby Westminster politicians and key decision makers at the heart of NHS England, for a specialist neurology centre in London, along with satellite clinics across the UK; so that the Deaf community has access to appropriate health treatment that it not only needs but deserves.

Currently there is no permanent specialist neurological service provision to properly assess and diagnose those Deaf patients who present with acquired neurological symptoms. However, DCAL has been working with the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery - the UK’s largest dedicated neurological and neurosurgical hospital - to pilot access for Deaf patients to their diagnostic Cognitive Disorders Clinic. This non-NHS investment will cease in 2015 when DCAL research centre funding from ESRC comes to an end.

So DCAL has been engaging with politicians across the political spectrum to build a strong business case to present to Government and NHS commissioners, to show that a specialist centre will not only improve patient outcomes but that it will save the NHS a significant amount of money in the long-term as well.

DCAL’s Director, Prof Bencie Woll, along with Clinical Psychologist and leading architect of the pilot clinic, Dr Joanna Atkinson, have worked closely with the Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Deafness, Steve Lloyd MP, to put the business case together. It will be used in the months leading up to the General Election next May, to persuade whoever is elected, that this is a vital service that warrants commitment of both political and funding capital.

It is clear that a failure to provide specialist support will mean our health and social care services will struggle to meet the Deaf community’s needs under the pressure of increasing numbers of people with neurological conditions associated with ageing. DCAL see this as a major service priority and will do everything possible to make it a reality.

If you have experienced difficulties in accessing NHS neurology services we would like to hear from you. Please address the email ‘FAO Jo Atkinson’ and send it to: dcal@ucl.ac.uk
New living dictionary for British Sign Language

Now anyone with an interest in British Sign Language (BSL) will have access to the first ever usage-based dictionary.

The dictionary has been developed by academics at DCAL and the signs were collected from the BSL Corpus, a large collection of videos of signing that have been recorded and described.

It differs from other dictionary type BSL resources because it has been uniquely developed using the same principles as dictionaries for spoken languages. Until now, online dictionaries available to BSL users, and people learning the language, have consisted of BSL signs that are translation equivalents of English words, perhaps decided by one or a few people.

BSL SignBank is based on signs used by 249 Deaf people filmed all over the UK. Visitors will see more signs for colours, countries, numbers and UK place names than any other BSL dictionary.

“We are delighted to launch BSL SignBank. It is a living dictionary and will grow as we view and study more of the BSL Corpus. We are sure it will be the most up-to-date and informative resource available as we will be using crowdsourcing to continually seek the views of the Deaf community on missing signs.”

Dr Kearsy Cormier, Senior Researcher, DCAL

BSL SignBank can be found on-line at bslsignbank.ucl.ac.uk
Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth paid a special visit to DCAL to lend his weight to the Centre’s call for improved access to services for BSL users.

Having been made aware by DCAL of the disparities that exist for the Deaf Community in accessing key NHS services, the former leader of the Welsh Conservatives in the National Assembly and close ally of the Prime Minister, agreed to spend a morning at the centre meeting researchers and staff members, as well as being briefed about some of the key research and teaching projects that DCAL is undertaking.

He was shown how DCAL’s research was actively making a difference to the lives of deaf children through tailored training and education programmes. He was informed about the campaign to secure a NHS funded, specialist neurology centre to improve early diagnosis and intervention within the Deaf BSL community.