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Citation

Mark, L. M. van der. (2023). Deafblind tactile signers: the dynamics of communication and space. *Sign Language Studies*, 23(4), 500-526. doi:10.1353/sls.2023.a905537

Version: Publisher's Version

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Sign Language Studies, Volume 23, Number 4, Summer 2023, pp. 500-526 (Article)

Published by Gallaudet University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sls.2023.a905537>



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LISA VAN DER MARK

Deafblind Tactile Signers: The Dynamics of Communication and Space

Abstract

The focus of this article is on deafblind people who are or have been involved with deaf signing communities and, when vision changes, transition to tactile reception of sign language. This brings about a disconnection with the signing community, exploration of (other) possibilities, and seeking or creating deafblind spaces. In the United States, the protactile movement led to a more tactile-centric form of communication and to more autonomy for deafblind people. In international settings, deafblind people from diverse language backgrounds communicate in a mix of visual and tactile representations or conventions of concepts.

At the academic level, deafblind people have been studied by a variety of disciplines. Deafblind studies benefits from multi-disciplinary and insider perspectives to gain more insights into theory and research methods.

Introduction

THIS IS A REVIEW of recent and current literature on deafblind signers, supplemented by the author's personal experiences and observations as a deafblind part-time PhD student involved in activities related to deafblind people in Europe. The goal of this article is to provide much-needed information about deafblind signers and their communication preferences and needs and to raise awareness about this often-marginalized group. First, I discuss the demographics of deafblind signers, that are the focus of this article. Second, I will point out the similarities and differences between protactile commu-

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nication and tactile reception of a sign language. Third and fourth, I describe some aspects of deafblind signers' concept of belonging to the signing deaf or deafblind communities and the communication dynamics of deafblind people. The dynamics of language and space are also addressed within the context of communication in international settings. Finally, the concept of space in Deaf studies and feminist frameworks will be described and applied to deafblind space as a key to understanding the fostering of personal, linguistic, and community development. Overall, this critical compilation incorporates both theory and practical observations from the author as a participant in these processes

Deafblind Signers and Tactile Communication

This review focuses on deafblind individuals who were born deaf and, at some point in their lives, learned and started using a sign language. They also experience vision loss to a degree that leads them to communicate and navigate the world differently than their deaf and sighted peers do. Opportunities to meet deafblind peers are few, since deafblind signers constitute only a small portion of the—also small—general deafblind population, which also includes deafblind people who use speech, elderly people with hearing and vision loss, and people with additional disabilities. For deafblind signers, visually signed communication becomes difficult to decipher. They require visual accommodations, such as lighting, reducing glare in the eyes, maximizing the contrast between one's skin color and the color of their upper clothes, limiting the signing space to fit within the deafblind signer's vision field, and/or eventually using tactile reception of signs.

Tactile reception of signs involves the listener placing their hand(s) on the hand(s) of the signer, thus feeling the motions and shapes of the hand(s) to understand what is being said. Tactile reception of sign language often requires some adaptations to supplement missed visual information. Researchers have observed and described both changes to the production of visual sign language and characteristics that are unique to tactile communication (Cecchetto, Geraci, Cecchetto, and Zucchi, 2018; Collins 2004; Edwards 2014a, 2014b; Mesch 2001, 2011, 2013; Willoughby, Iwasaki, Bartlett, and Manns

2018). A deafblind tactile form of communication is gaining ground in the United States that is not simply a development or an adaptation of the visual modality of American Sign Language (ASL) but rather stems directly from a tactile-centered modality. This “pro” attitude for advancing and enhancing tactile communication gave this form of communication, and the movement behind it, their name: *protactile* and the protactile movement (Edwards 2014b; Edwards and Brentari 2020; Granda and Nuccio 2018).

In this article, I use the term *tactile communication* as an umbrella term encompassing a spectrum of communication modalities and strategies used by deafblind signers, ranging from some use of the tactile modality to a tactile-centric mode of communication, and I focus on the often-misunderstood difference between tactile reception of sign language and protactile communication. The next sections provide a discussion of tactile reception of a sign language followed by a description of protactile communication (henceforth *protactile*).

Tactile Reception of a Sign Language

In the process of experiencing vision changes, deafblind signers move from requesting signing in a smaller space that fits within their vision field (tunnel vision) and, in some cases, “tracking” visual signing by holding the speaker’s wrists to keep the signing within their range of vision, to tactile reception of sign language in which the deafblind person puts their hands on top of the hands of their interlocutor to be able to feel the signs (Checchetto et al. 2018; Emmorey, Korpies, and Petronio 2008; Mesch 2001, 2011). In tactile communication, the interlocutors are physically connected to each other. Handshapes, orientations, movements, and directions are recognized through touch.

As a Swedish deaf and sighted sign language linguist, Mesch has focused part of her research on Swedish tactile communication (Mesch 2001, 2011, 2013; Mesch, Raanes, and Ferrara 2015). Among other contributions, she was one of the first to describe two basic positions in tactile communication: (1) the dialogue position and (2) the monologue position. In the dialogue position, interlocutors often sit face to face and have their dominant hand under the passive hand of their interlocutor (see figure 1). Thus, both interlocutors position their hands in such a way that one hand “listens” and one hand



FIGURE 1. Dialogue position.

signs. This allows interlocutors to take turns rapidly without changing positions. In the monologue position, interlocutors use both hands to either sign or listen, and taking turns requires a change in hand positions. Mesch (2013) discussed how deafblind signers also opt for one-handed signing, in which they can sit next to one another and use one hand to switch between the listening and signing positions.

In her study with American deafblind signers, Edwards (2014a) observed that when a third person is involved, the narrator signs with two hands that mirror each other so that both listeners hold one hand and receive the same message simultaneously. From my personal experience, I know that on some occasions, more than three tactile deafblind people will want to engage in the conversation. Whenever this happens, the conversation is paused, summarized, and passed on or is simultaneously interpreted to the next person. In simultaneous interpretation, the deafblind person receives the original message with

one hand and simultaneously copies the received message with the other hand for the next person. Depending on the addition of one or two extra interlocutors, one or both persons directly next to the narrator can pass on the message to a fourth and fifth person. In the case of four interlocutors, only one transmitter is needed to reach the person who is not in direct contact with the narrator. The direction of interpretation is negotiated depending on personal skill or preferences with respect to passing the message on with their left or right hand.

Mesch (2001) also observed turn-taking structures among Swedish deafblind signers involving a change in signing speed and switching between the horizontal and vertical planes in the space between the interlocutors. Thus, when it is the narrator's turn to speak, signing and listening occur in the area closer to the narrator (horizontal level), and a turn change is indicated by slowing down the signing speed rate, lowering the hands (vertical level), and moving the hands to the neutral space between the interlocutors (horizontal level). The horizontal-level location is also used to indicate question structures. Questions are signaled by pointing to the interlocutor, extending the duration of the final sign, and repeating a particular sign or sequence of signs that are part of the question. The use of pointing and extending the duration of a sign to indicate a question have also been described for American deafblind signers; sign repetition has been described for Italian deafblind signers, as well as the use of the signs *ASK* or *WHAT/HOW* in both American and Italian deafblind signers (Checchetto et al. 2018; Collins 2004).

Tactile alternatives to facial feedback, such as showing agreement and disagreement with interlocutors, have also been observed (Collins and Petronio 1998; Petronio and Dively 2006; Mesch 2001, 2013). Linguistic research on tactile communication has found that, among Swedish deafblind signers, feedback indicating understanding and agreement is produced, for instance, by tapping with the flat hand on the interlocutor's thigh or arm or by nodding affirmatively with the fist as in visual ASL. Disagreement is produced, for instance, by rubbing the interlocutor's thigh horizontally with the flat hand for *NO* in tactile Swedish sign language or by using the visual ASL sign *NO* with the fingertips on the interlocutor's thigh. Depending on the context, variations in speed and rhythm (in signing) also convey the

interlocutor's affective meaning (Collins and Petronio 1998; Petronio and Dively 2006; Mesch 2001).

Deafblind persons are experienced and skilled in grasping meaning from tactilely perceiving a language that is based on the visual modality. Most authors on tactile communication propose that most tactile deafblind people develop and learn an adapted form of sign language in which visual cues or expressions have been replaced by tactile conventions or are expressed in a different manner (Checchetto et al. 2018; Collins 2004; Edwards 2014a, 2014b; Mesch 2001; Willoughby et al. 2018). Nevertheless, Edwards (2014a) claims that with the protactile movement in the United States, American tactile communication will change in such a way that it will no longer look like an adapted version of visual ASL but will instead develop into a tactile-centric communication form on its own.

Protactile

Edwards (2014a) describes how deafblind signers in the US city of Seattle participated in a movement that started in 2007 and pivoted away from the visual world. They did so by allowing themselves to experience their surroundings and communicate by touch as much as possible, instead of relying on translations and adaptations of visual information. The philosophy behind the protactile movement is intertwined with the form and the development of protactile communication.

Granda and Nuccio, two deafblind women, are considered the first leaders of the protactile movement and have developed a framework for sharing the fundamentals of protactile (Granda and Nuccio 2018). They gradually developed a system for discussing matters directly with one or two interlocutors without interpreters. Thus, the fundamentals of protactile arose naturally and instinctively from the need to communicate effectively among deafblind and sighted protactile signers. In the early years of the movement, they hosted workshops and encouraged other deafblind people to be more in touch with one another. In this way, they discovered, incorporated, and expanded on the fundamentals of protactile. This led to the development of seven foundational principles, which are based on their philosophies as tactile-centric individuals, fundamental to protactile

as a communication mode. These principles include reciprocity, contact space, protactile perspective, size and shape (SASS), exceptions, information source, and tactile imagery. For a more extensive explanation of these principles, refer to Granda and Nuccio (2018). I will expand on the principles of *reciprocity*, *contact space*, *protactile perspective* and *tactile imagery* in the paragraphs below and illustrate these in a narrative example.

The protactile philosophy is reflected in the principle of *reciprocity*, in which everyone watching or involved in the conversation is expected to use the same communication method and be physically present by touching at least one other interlocutor, regardless of one's vision status. Watching from a distance is considered rude. Reciprocity ensures that both sighted and deafblind persons are equal when it comes to communication, to "seeing" who is attending to their conversation and feeling where everyone is, thus having equal opportunities to decide what to do with that information, such as approaching someone or being mindful of discussing particular topics.

Protactile makes a distinction between air space and contact space. *Air space* is simply the space in the air in which signs or depictions take place and is generally associated with visual sign languages. However, this does not work well for tactile communication because depictions and imagery are made in a nonperceivable space. In protactile, *contact space* is encouraged. In other words, signs or depictions are produced on the safe and culturally acceptable body parts of the interlocutor. For example, the eyes are not considered a safe area to function as contact space. In some areas, such as North America and Europe, appropriate contact space for tactile communication involves mostly the hands, arms, and shoulders, and may also include the upper chest and legs (in sitting positions). Several communicative actions are transferred from air space to these contact spaces. For instance, maps are drawn in the palm of the hand; references to objects or people are indexed on previously established locations on the contact space, and emphasis and emotions are expressed on the contact space by, for instance, tracing a smile on the interlocutor's thigh or arm, grabbing the arm or thigh as if in horror, or using pressure or repetition to express emphasis.

The *protactile perspective* principle focuses on the manner of expression that is best perceivable tactually. The interlocutor becomes part

of the narrative, as the narrator may prompt the interlocutor to offer their hand or arm as contact space or to become a passive “prop” on which actions are performed. The interlocutors work together to make signs and descriptions easy to feel and understand tactually. Thus, the narrator can depict actions on the prop, such as putting a ring on a finger, making an arm roll over and depicting the chopping of the arm into pieces, or just using the prop as a surface on which to trace shapes.

Tactile imagery is the seventh principle, which combines all other principles to emphasize sharing the experience by making the interlocutor feel or experience what the narrator felt or experienced rather than receiving information passively. That is, the listener is part of the story rather than a passive observer. In this way, tactile imagery seems unique to protactile.

To illustrate some similarities and differences between tactile sign and protactile, I used a section of the *Peach Tree* story in Mesch et al. (2015), “rewriting” the story to describe how it would be narrated in protactile. In the original story, Jane tells Eva about how she and her husband discovered a peach tree. Jane co-creates signs with Eva and enacts the actions. In the protactile version of the story, several of Granda and Nuccio’s protactile principles (2018) are demonstrated, including the use of contact space, protactile perspective, and tactile imagery.

The dyad sits in a monologue position. The interlocutor has their hands on both hands of the narrator, and both are sitting with their knees interlocked. The narrator depicts two walking people with the WALK sign performed on the interlocutor’s thigh (contact space). Each of the narrator’s hands depicts a character. One of the characters is deafblind and has a cane. This character is depicted using three fingers, of which two represent the legs, and one represents the cane that sweeps and taps the surface of the interlocutor’s thigh. The hand representing the sighted character alerts the deafblind character by tapping the interlocutor’s hand that is in contact with the narrator’s hand depicting the deafblind character. The hand that depicts the sighted character signs COME and gently guides the interlocutor’s hand in one direction. The narrator’s hands continue the depiction of two characters “walking” together in physical contact with one another. The pair pauses the walk, and the narrator snaps out of

character to prompt a new depiction. The narrator's nondominant hand taps the interlocutor's hand that is on top of the narrator's dominant hand, and the dominant hand depicts the sign for TREE.¹ For experienced protactile signers, this tapping constitutes a prompt for the interlocutor to mirror the sign with their free, dominant hand. This also signals a switch from the monologue position to the dialogue position. The narrator's nondominant hand is now placed on top of the interlocutor's active hand. The interlocutor signs TREE with their free arm, while their other hand remains on top of the narrator's dominant hand (see figure 2).

Then, the narrator, with their dominant hand, explains that the interlocutor's arm represents the trunk and the fingers its branches. The narrator's nondominant hand holds the interlocutor's arm that depicts the tree in place. The narrator's dominant hand—with the interlocutor's hand still on top—changes back into character and depicts the



FIGURE 2. The narrator (on the left) positions the “tree” (which is produced by the interlocutor on the right).

walking person with the cane. The character “walks” on the surface of the narrator’s thigh towards the “tree.” Due to ergonomic comfort, the interlocutor’s elbow, which depicts the base of the tree, does not rest on the thigh, and the depicted character skips from the thigh to the elbow. The narrator’s hand depicting the deafblind character then uses the finger that depicts the cane to tap the interlocutor’s elbow, which, in turn, depicts the base of the tree. Then the hand that depicts the deafblind character lets go of this depiction but remains in character: the hand enacts the character feeling around the tree. This is done by “feeling” the trunk (the interlocutor’s arm), starting at the elbow and reaching higher all the way up to the “branches.” The narrator’s deafblind character’s hand feels around the branches and then depicts the act of grabbing and feeling a fruit. At the touch of the first fruit, the hand produces a little jump as if in surprise and then depicts the shape of the fruit as if it were hanging from the branch (see figure 3).

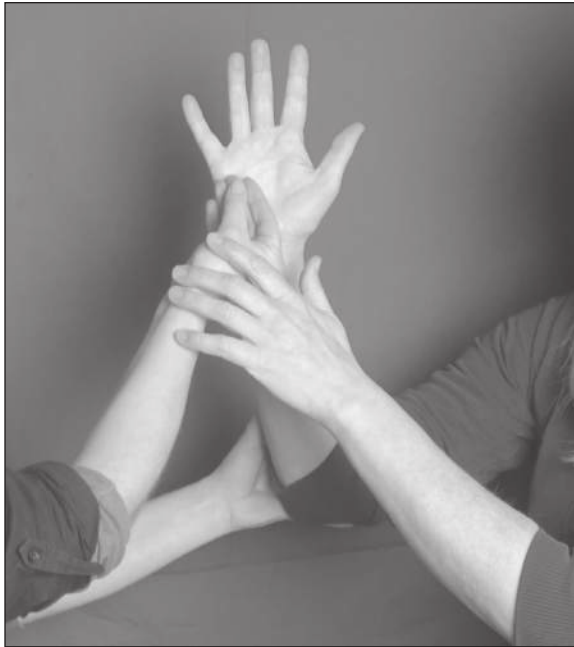


FIGURE 3. The narrator (on the left side of the picture) depicts a “fruit,” as the interlocutor (on the right) depicts the “tree” and feels what the narrator is explaining.

The actions of reaching around and depicting fruit are repeated several times on different branch locations as if feeling around for fruit.

The listener experiences the whole story on their body as contact space on which the characters walk and find fruit. Through the use of protactile perspective, the listener becomes the tree and feels what is happening on and around the tree. The narrator prompts the interlocutor to offer their dominant arm and hand to become a prop depicting the tree and then performs actions on it to increase the tactile imagery. If the narrator had used their own arm to represent the tree or reached up in the air space above their head for fruit, the experience would not have been as tactile or rich. The interlocutor is a prop for passive objects, thus serving the purpose of creating contact space and a protactile perspective.

In sum, deafblind signers can perceive a visual language tactilely by putting their hands on top of their interlocutor's hands and feeling what is being said. This is tactile reception of a visual sign language, accompanied by conventionalized tactile cues for visual signals, such as backchanneling one's responses and emphasizing whether something is a question, an affirmative, or a negative reaction. Protactile, in contrast, developed from the intuitive tactile communication insights of deafblind signers, results in a more tactile-centric form of communication with more use of contact space.

Perspectives on How to Classify Tactile Communication

Some scholars who have observed that deafblind persons perceive a visual language, with some adaptations for better receptivity by touch, claim that tactile reception of signs is a variant of a sign language (Collins 2004). However, other researchers have noted greater differences between visual sign languages and their tactile "variety." Edwards (2014a, 2014b) and Mesch (2001), for instance, pointed out that some characteristics of signs and constructions produced in a tactile environment diverge from their visual language equivalent, giving rise to a new tactile-based language. These divergences are observed, for example, in the way questions and turn-taking are constructed (Mesch 2001) and in depictions (Edwards and Brentari 2020), as described above. Willougby et al. (2018) indicate that sign adaptations depend on several factors, such as the individual and the community.

Deafblind communication is attuned to the individual but is often also conventionalized to fit what deafblind persons from a similar language background use and will understand. Willoughby et al. (2018, 1–2) use the term *tactile sign language* as an “umbrella term of choice”, claiming that it is the “default way of referring to the field of signing used by deafblind people.” Yet, while visual signs can be adjusted for easier tactile perception and research has identified dialogue shifts and backchanneling strategies unique to tactile communication, much of the vocabulary is borrowed from visual language. However, Edwards and Brentari (2020) claim that protactile is in the process of becoming a language, based on their research on the conventionalization of phonological systems that emerge in protactile use. For the purpose of this article, the workaround umbrella terms *tactile communication*, *tactile sign*, and *deafblind signer* are used. These terms apply to the full spectrum between (some use of) tactile reception of sign language and tactile-centric communication. Now that I have defined the terms, types, and features of deafblind communication and the demographic characteristics of the population that is the focus of this article, I will turn to the impact of deafblind people’s vision range and communication characteristics on their experiences and communication dynamics within their communities.

Belonging: Communication, Norms, and Values

Linguistic research on tactile signing often finds that deafblind signers are involved in and/or have been part of a signing deaf community: a community in which sign language and deaf culture are valued (Checchetto et al. 2018; Edwards 2014a, 2014b; Kyle and Barnett 2012; Mesch 2001; Schwartz 2009; Willoughby et al. 2020). It is important to note, however, that the discussion on tactile communication in this literature review is mostly based on the United States, Europe, and Australia. For tactile communication not in these regions, refer, for instance, to Ali et al. (2017) and Rocketship, Ali, and Braithwaite (2022).

One may consider that having been part of a deaf signing community will affect the deafblind signer’s values and perspective on the self and the world. However, studies have also uncovered deafblind signers’ feelings of oppression and marginalization by the larger deaf

signing community and their call for having their own space to grow personally, linguistically, and as a deafblind community. For example, Wolsey (2017), who is hearing and sighted, interviewed and observed deafblind students at Gallaudet University, a university for deaf and hard of hearing students in Washington, DC, in the United States. She observed that while the students were accommodated and respected by their peers, they remained a “hidden minority within a minority group.” Similarly, deafblind signer McMillen focused her Deaf studies thesis (2015) on the experiences of deafblind students and on attitudes towards visually and tactually accommodating these students at Gallaudet University, describing protactile gatherings and deafblind students’ attitudes toward each other and toward protactile itself. She concluded that a tactile habitus (socially and historically designed patterns of “appropriate” perspectives and behaviors) may take away some of the barriers affecting deafblind signers that are inherent in infrastructure, attitudes, behavior, and communication. Interestingly, she claims that the infrastructure of a visually oriented environment such as Gallaudet University may be “anti-tactual”—presenting physical barriers such as plastic screens, sunroofs, and white tabletops that cause brightness and glare that feel uncomfortable to the eyes of many deafblind people. McMillen (2015, 110) recommends setting up separate spaces “that foster tactile sensibilities” to strengthen the intuitive skill to feel and to increase the use of touch to gain information about one’s surroundings.

In the above studies with deafblind students at Gallaudet, such as those by McMillen (2015) and Wolsey (2017), the deafblind participants were engaged in a visual deaf world. However, when vision further erodes, the ability to belong to a signing community erodes as well. In Wright’s (2020) study on “deafnormativity,” the author, who is deaf and sighted, and his deafblind co-researchers discussed whether deafblind signers belonged within the “deaf (power) hierarchy” or whether they had a separate sphere next to the deaf signing hierarchy. In this discussion, the co-researchers felt that they were at the bottom of the hierarchical pyramid. In the end, Wright’s (2020, 11) deafblind co-researchers agreed that they “felt like they have their own culture and community but do not share much in common with Deaf of Deaf, Deaf of Hearing, and Hard of hearing individuals.”

In Kyle and Barnett (2012), a study conducted in the United Kingdom, Barnett, who is deafblind herself, and Kyle, who seems to be hearing and sighted, interviewed deaf and deafblind individuals and arranged their responses into topics and themes that came up repeatedly. They wanted to examine the experience of being deaf and deafblind and argued that deaf people should be good allies for deafblind people because of their similar experiences and sign language backgrounds. However, in their analysis, they also observed the link between a deaf signer's sight and their hierarchical position within the deaf signing community. The deafblind interviewees felt a barrier between themselves and sighted deaf people, which was, in turn, confirmed by the responses of deaf interviewees showing ambiguity toward welcoming or including deafblind people. The deafblind interviewees said that deaf sighted people ignored them and were incapable of communicating with them. Deaf signers said that deafblind people were like foreigners; they communicated differently and slower, and it took more work to interact with them, a responsibility that they were not eager to accept.

While deafblind signers in the previously described studies engaged with other deafblind people and formed bonds, Kyle and Barnett (2012) observed that conversations among deafblind people often occurred through an interpreter instead of directly among themselves. It was not that deafblind people were not able to communicate directly among themselves, but that everyone was accustomed to the involvement of interpreters and guides. Another reason contributing to this type of communication interaction could be the unconscious habit of sighted people sitting apart, which impedes tactile communication.

On her part, Edwards (2014a, 2014b), a hearing and sighted linguistic anthropologist who has been extensively engaged with deafblind tactile people, has studied deafblind signer interactions among themselves and with the world. Edwards (2014a, 2014b) described a similar type of interpreter-mediated interaction among deafblind signers in Seattle as described by Kyle and Barnett (2012), until the protactile movement began in 2007. However, during the protactile movement, deafblind people shifted from interpretation to direct contact with their peers and environment. The shift to direct contact between deafblind signers resulted in changes in their linguistic

environment, which, in turn, led to a different tactile form of communication and a movement for autonomy throughout the United States, Europe, and other parts of the world.

Despite these findings, the range of interactions in deaf and deafblind signing communities has not been widely researched. Furthermore, the scarce research that exists on deafblind signers' experiences mostly comes from the United States, which constrains the discussion to a US-centric data representation.

Reaching Abroad and Other Factors Impacting Deafblind Signers' Experiences

For tactile communication to develop, conventionalized tactile concepts, interaction norms, and reciprocity that allows people to touch each other are needed. Since there are not many deafblind people, the opportunities to meet and gather with others like them may be few. I have observed that some deafblind signers travel abroad to deaf events and, at some point, connect with other deafblind signers. For example, as a European resident, I observed that deaf and deafblind signers travel to other European countries and attend international events for and by deaf or deafblind people. These events result in personal development, are places to meet friends and new people, and provide opportunities to discuss and compare deaf and deafblind-related topics. For instance, deafblind people in Europe can participate in a nine-month-long learning program (Frontrunners²); attend Deaf events such as the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) conference, European Deaf (Youth) events, study sessions, youth camps, and performing arts and sports events; or go to local Deaf clubs while traveling. On these occasions, people encounter other deafblind people who have similar interests and are also adjusting to navigating and communicating based on their visual abilities. When multiple deafblind persons happen to attend one of these events, they have the opportunity to discover being deafblind at their own pace: meeting their deaf friends as well as other deafblind people at the same occasion and shifting between the deaf visual environment and the deafblind mix of visual and tactile environment. In some cases, the peers they meet abroad are the role models that they have not had the opportunity to find at home.

When deafblind signers feel ready, they can attend deafblind events as well. The European Deafblind Union hosts an assembly and conference every year. In 2018, for instance, the World Federation of the Deafblind (WFDB) conference took place in Spain. In 2022, the first Europe-wide deafblind youth camp was hosted. During the past few years, I have met several deafblind people who have actively sought to gather at and outside of these events. These individuals use a mix of visual and tactile communication modalities, vary in modality use and preference, and range in their experience with and use of tactile reception of sign languages.

However, the opportunities to even be able to go to events and meet other deafblind people deserve attention. Many factors play a role in deafblind people's presence in both local and international settings, such as one's financial situation and the physical and mental ability to travel. Additionally, one needs access to information on these events, as well as access to a network that provides support and information. Additionally, when traveling alone, usable vision for navigation is very handy. These resources vary among individuals and countries. Despite the dearth of research on deafblind international travel, the themes below provide an idea of the factors that influence deafblind signers' international presence.

Hersh (2013) interviewed twenty-eight deafblind people from the Czech Republic, England, France, Italy, Poland, and Spain about communication, independence, and isolation. They discussed how information about blind or deafblind organizations often was not readily provided and the negative impact that becoming deafblind had on their mental health, due to feelings of isolation and overprotection by family and professionals. They also discussed how other deafblind people served as role models to newly deafblind people by showing and teaching them what was possible. These findings emphasize that receiving information about deafblind events and meeting role models from whom to learn would be beneficial for one's mental health and autonomy. However, the scarcity of services and the lack of professional quality of existing services for deafblind people (rehabilitation, interpreting, mobility) in their countries have impacted their ability to communicate or travel. Shariff (2015, 104), a sighted hearing sign language interpreter, interviewed five deafblind signers who "serve

in significant roles in deafblind advocacy organizations” and noted that participants strongly appreciated the presence of deafblind role models and leaders who would provide them with a sense of security and confidence in their future.

In sum, research has explored a variety of factors affecting deafblind experiences, including deafblind people’s sense of belonging to signing deaf communities, access to services (e.g., interpreting or other accessibility services), access to information relevant to deafblind people, and the presence of role models. Based on my personal experience, important factors that I identify for individual thriving are opportunities to gather, actively explore and participate in deafblind events, have direct contact with other deafblind people, and be in the presence of role models.

Language and Modality Orientation in Communication

When deafblind signers travel to deaf and deafblind international events, they are likely to come across different sign languages. Some crosslinguistic communication strategies observed among deaf signers may also be found among deafblind signers communicating across different linguistic backgrounds. Additionally, one may wonder how crosslinguistic mobility among deafblind signers affects their language and modality use.

Deaf and deafblind signers from different countries who use different sign languages are quite adept at communicating with one another. In recent years, academic research has gained interest in signing among people who do not share the same sign language. For instance, researchers have studied cross-signing, which often occurs in first-time encounters (Byun et al. 2019; Mesch and Raanes 2023; Zeshan 2015), and International Sign (IS), which is a more conventionalized communication form used among sighted signers with more crosslinguistic experiences (Kusters 2020; Mesch 2010).

Mesch and Raanes (2023) may be the first to study first-time encounters among deafblind tactile signers from two different language backgrounds: Norway and Sweden. They observed how participants paid attention to their interlocutor’s “hand movements, bodily orientation, turn-taking, and backchanneling signals” (12) and how body language through physical contact can signal cues for calibration for

both interlocutors. For example, they noticed how, at the first encounter, an interlocutor was paying close attention to what the narrator was saying by holding their interlocutor's hand tightly and feeling all fingers, which made their interlocutor slow down to ensure comprehension. Additionally, differences in turn-taking strategies resulted in the interlocutors emphasizing or repeating turn-taking cues. Also, backchanneling cues among participants were similar, as in the form of tapping for understanding or using haptic signals, such as drawing a question mark to convey confusion.

Negotiation strategies included asking questions and breaking down new topics into sections before the question or topic was put out. These new topics were sometimes explicitly introduced as new.

When misunderstandings occur, interlocutors recognize these by their interlocutor's irresponsiveness in backchanneling, their missing turns, their active interruptions with requests for clarification through the haptic signal of drawing a question mark, the repetition of the sign that was not understood, and/or the use of the general PALM UP gesture for WHAT? Clarifying strategies included depiction of actions or objects and pointing. They also observed haptic signals being used as part of a signed sentence and the use of writing in one's palm for letters and numbers.

Zeshan (2015), a hearing and sighted linguist, systematically observed first-time encounters among deaf people across language backgrounds holding somewhat "natural" conversations. While the study was conducted in a controlled setting and the primary focus was on numerals, the research yielded some interesting insights. For instance, the participants used different strategies to make themselves understood, including pantomime, drawing in the air or on surfaces, various forms of manual fingerspelling, pointing to objects and referents, incorporating signs from (other) sign languages, and going back and forth until understanding of signs or sign structures was achieved. Eventually, in this six-week study, the participants' different languages and communication strategies evolved into a converging form of multimodal communication. In her conclusion, Zeshan suggests that IS probably originated from such cross-signing interactions and, due to its wide use at international events, developed further and eventually reached the point of its currently debated linguistic status. Below

follows a citation from Moriarty and Kusters (2021), with further explanations of what IS entails:

IS typically incorporates signs from national sign languages (including ASL) and often includes mouthings from English and other spoken languages. Its use is variable and dependent on the geographical, political, social, cultural and linguistic context in which it occurs and the backgrounds of the people who use it. There are conventionalized and less conventionalized uses of IS (Zeshan, 2015), and they are typically used together in the same communicative contexts (such as deaf international events).

Based on personal observation as a deafblind signer from the Netherlands participating in several European deaf and deafblind events, deafblind signers—who communicate directly with peers without an interpreter—also engage in crosslinguistic processes and become familiar with IS. Green (2014) named these processes “moral orientation”: signers appreciate the effort that goes into these crosslinguistic communication processes, which include modifying each signer’s expressions to reach mutual understanding, agreeing on signs or sign structures to use from that point onward, and sharing and learning bits of each other’s sign languages. In deafblind signers, as observed by Mesch and Raanes (2023), mutual understanding, repairs, and clarifications are based on signals received through physical contact.

These intersubjective processes can be very tactual. In my personal experience, some signs may remain strongly visual with simply the addition of the listener’s hand(s) on top of the narrator’s hand(s). Other aspects and expressions of IS are transformed into a more tactile-accessible manner. Take for example the IS indication for numbers. A sighted person will see the two hands, of which the passive hand represents “five,” and look at the number of fingers of the dominant hand. The same strategy is used in tactile communication: counting to five with one hand but using both hands to count to ten. When the interlocutor uses only one hand for tactile reception of signs, the signer’s passive hand represents five as the fingers of the dominant hand are used to indicate numbers six to ten. The signer places the passive hand on top of the interlocutor’s hand, signaling that it is a number that uses two hands and, therefore, is a number between six and ten. The interlocutor simultaneously feels the fingers of the signer’s dominant hand and knows which number is meant.

When deafblind signers from different sign language backgrounds gather, crosslinguistic processes are put into practice, as are processes across modalities. Take, for example, the emergence of strategies for better tactile reception of concepts such as the indication of the numbers five to ten. Given that some community members have had experiences with protactile, one may observe elements of international tactile communication that are borrowed from or inspired by protactile. The extent to which interactions in IS are perceived tactilely and expressed in a tactile-centric manner at a given occasion depends on the signers' modality preference and skill in tactile communication.

In sum, the variability in communication practices in IS shapes those spaces that are unique to deaf signers and can also inform those spaces unique to deafblind signers. Next, I discuss the dynamics of a space where deafblind people gather within the framework of deaf space (Bauman and Murray 2014; Gulliver 2009; Kusters 2009; O'Brien 2020) and the feminist framework of a safe space (Lewis, Sharp, Remnant, and Redpath 2015).

Deafblind Space: Does the Gathering of Deafblind Signers Make a Deafblind Space?

When deafblind signers at deaf events meet each other and gather in a visual-centric deaf context, they may, in some way, also form their own environment: standing in a circle around a light pole, crowding together to be able to touch each other; something that deaf people take notice of and refer to as a separate zone. This is reminiscent of a concept from Deaf studies: deaf space (Bauman and Murray 2014; Gulliver 2009; Kusters 2009; O'Brien 2020). The term *deaf space* has been used in different disciplines and for different contexts (for further discussion, review Kusters, de Meulder, and O'Brien 2017). Deaf space may refer to permanent spaces specifically designed for deaf people (such as educational institutions for the deaf), where a high number of deaf people reside and space has been created for enhanced visuality (Bauman and Murray 2014). Deaf space may also refer to temporary spaces created by actions in the midst of mainstream society. In Mumbai trains, for instance, deaf people would gather in the "handicapped" section and, with their presence, positioning, and signing with each other in the train, create a deaf space (Kusters 2009). O'Brien (2020) visited the offices of deaf signers working in a hearing

environment and conducted interviews while walking outside. He noticed that these workers adapted their physical space to be a deaf space by adjusting furniture and using mirrors. He also found spatial deaf space when deaf signers walked and conversed together: they created deaf space when physical space allowed them to have more space among themselves to produce and perceive signs. The spatial deaf space was a continuum in which the signers knew and exhibited deaf communication and mobility norms, such as signing and warning one another about obstacles in their path while walking.

Exploring such a theme for deafblind people involves exploring the social conditions that contribute to deafblind space, especially those characteristics and behaviors of a deafblind use of space that are found to be constant compared to others that seem to be more variable. For instance, depending on their affordances and resources, deafblind people may travel to and navigate an event with or without guides, and may or may not communicate through interpreters. A deafblind person may sometimes interact with their environment through their interpreter or guide as opposed to directly interacting with it or with other people. In fact, it is difficult to find deafblind spaces without sighted signers or interpreters. Sometimes, when deafblind people meet and interact with each other, the sense of being in a deafblind space might be interfered with by the presence of hearing and sighted people or by the presence of interpreters. That is, their presence, availability, and behavior might enable distantist norms, where *distantism* is defined as “the privileging of the distance senses of hearing and vision” (Clark 2017). Some actions may be needed to move toward a deafblind space, so that authentic socialization and behavioral norms and values unique to deafblind signers can develop. So far, based on my own participant observations, I have found deafblind, tactile-centric, non-distantist thinking and action only in protactile settings.

Edwards (2014a) describes restructuring processes in communication during the earlier stages of the protactile movement in Seattle, from 2007 onwards, and at Gallaudet when the protactile movement reached Gallaudet University (McMillen 2015). Edwards (2018) described interactions with deafblind students, sat in meetings with visiting protactile leaders, and conducted interviews. She observed the

communication and navigation strategies of the protactile signers and placed this against the backdrop of the university's work in restructuring the campus to be more accessible to their neighborhood while, at the same time, protecting their Deaf space. In this context, deafblind people wondered what an environment designed to include protactile would consist of and feel like. An interesting remark expressed by the students was that discussing and creating a protactile environment together was also teaching them "how to be blind" (Edwards 2018, 9). In some way, while exploring with other deafblind students, they felt safe to be deafblind.

While it may be tempting to directly apply the concept of space from Deaf studies as a sphere where deaf norms are implemented to the idea of deafblind space, I would argue that this needs some consideration. Based on Edwards' (2018) and McMillen's (2015) observations, it is evident that deafblind signers experience a transition from visual individuals to individuals with deafblind tactile identities and learn to interact with their environment as such. This is a difficult process because society is designed for distantist norms—not to be touched. Furthermore, deafblind space includes deafblind signers at different stages of their transition and at different degrees of tactility who may have yet to develop deafblind norms. To form deafblind spaces with norms that are fully accessible to deafblind signers, a necessary first step is the establishment of deafblind-only spaces where deafblind signers do not have to anticipate distantist norms—a *safe space*. To anticipate distantist norms in this context is when one knows that there will be a moment when distantist norms are imposed or expected, thus feeling the pressure to conform to societal norms before they even happen. This is especially true when one is still learning the tactile norms.

In other disciplines, such as feminist studies, the term *safe space* has been used, discussed, and redefined. Lewis et al. (2015) studied what safe space meant for feminist women in the United Kingdom. The authors summed up research that focused on what women were not "safe from," such as harassment, abuse, and misogyny, and they emphasized that there was little research on what would happen if safety enabled women to *do* or *be*, instead; that is, what would happen if women were "safe to," by being in a feminist, women-only space.

Using their study as an example, or rather focusing on the outcomes of enablement, such a safe space for deafblind people would be one in which individuals have shared experiences, mutual understanding, and temporal protection from (paternalizing) privileged others. Wilkinson (personal communication, December 28, 2022) also points out the relevance of “language use and experience: constructing and maintaining deafblind spaces means that there will be more (1) flourishing deafblind signers and (2) more evolved and higher use of pro/tactile signing incorporating linguistic features unique to deafblind discourse, such as tactile imagery.” It is a space where individuals have the opportunity to experiment, discuss, succeed, and fail in order to figure out how to navigate and communicate among themselves. In turn, these findings and norms would be passed on to new deafblind signers and deafblind spaces that may include hearing and/or sighted people.

In short, the idea of a space can be interpreted in different contexts and apply to different groups of people. This includes both physical and spatial space. These spaces include members of minorities and groups of people who benefit from shared norms and values. To enable the growth of deafblind individuals, tactile norms, and tactile communication, nondistantist spaces are needed.

Conclusion

In this article, I have described deafblind signers and their experiences in deaf and deafblind communities. I have described different methods of communication in different contexts and settings and discussed the concept of space as a place for deafblind signers to develop as deafblind individuals. While doing so, I refrained from adopting the deficit model of deafblindness. Instead, it is more useful to explore how deafblind people navigate through their lifetimes and to focus on how they become flourishing individuals.

Furthermore, although research on communication practices among deafblind signers has begun, many open questions remain. Despite research showing evidence of patterns that are unique to tactile communication, authors often still use visual language as the language of reference for the tactile variety. Thus, the question remains as to how tactile communication should be perceived: is it an adaptation of visual sign languages, or are tactile forms of sign languages separate languages from visual sign languages?

To me, the key issue is not whether tactile communication is viewed as a language or as an adaptation of visual languages. The answer to this question may tell us more about the researcher's own comfort with visual or tactile languages than about the language itself. The discussion of linguistic status may distract from other aspects worth discussing. For instance, I find it more interesting to dive deeper into the potential of tactile communication and to analyze and document more unique aspects of tactile communication. While doing so, it would be better to focus on the tactile modality rather than compare it to spoken or visually signed languages.

It has been noted that deafblind signers need their own spaces to develop personally, linguistically, and as a community. However, how exactly do individuals journey to a point at which they feel comfortable and safe as deafblind tactile individuals? A deafblind community offers role models and provides deafblind spaces. However, the concept of deafblind space requires further exploration. The questions to be considered are: what and who makes a deafblind space? In what contexts and environments can deafblind space thrive? Can this space be part of or should it be kept separate from signing deaf communities or privileged others in general?

It is hoped that valuable insights and effective developments affecting deafblind signers and their language and community will materialize with more opportunities for a deafblind tactile perspective.

Notes

1. In ASL, that involves both the nondominant arm and hand as well as the dominant hand, arm, and elbow to depict the ground, tree base, tree trunk, and topiary. The nondominant arm and hand represent the ground; the dominant elbow is situated on the nondominant hand, representing the trunk of the tree; and the dominant hand represents the tree's topiary.
2. Frontrunners is an international deaf youth leadership training program based in Denmark.

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