Background Information

The DGS Corpus Project is a long-term project with two major aims: (i) to establish an extensive corpus of DGS and (ii) to develop a comprehensive dictionary of DGS-German based on the analysis of the corpus.

The purpose of the corpus is to document the use of DGS and to provide material of and on Deaf culture and life. The corpus will be a resource that can be used for a variety of research questions, which is why it needs to consist of a large variety of discourse modes and grammatical structures as well as various subject areas. As one of the project aims is to compile a general dictionary of DGS, the corpus should also provide enough material on the lexicon of DGS and its use.

To this aim we have to make sure that different text types are collected. Our data collection (Nishio et al. 2010) consists mainly of staged communicative events. Consequently, stimuli had to be collected. This was also necessary for various communicative events, such as monologues, dialogues, emotional vs. factual text, re-tellings, prepared vs. fully spontaneous text etc. To achieve this goal, we have developed, tested, modified, tested again – and sometimes been dismissed.

From Jan. 2010 to Dec. 2011 the data is collected from more than 300 informants in a mobile studio which is set up at 12 sites throughout Germany. The tasks are presented to the informants on screen. In order to keep it simple for the regions contact person, who also moderates the data collection, and to make sure all informants get the same instructions, for each task movies with explanations in DGS are provided.

Calender Task
Task: informants are shown a one-week calendar with fictive appointments and are instructed to arrange two meetings of two hours respectively.
Goal: Collecting signs for days of the week, numbers (e.g. for time terms), activity terms, eliciting planning and negotiation discourse.

Results: The task succeeded in effectively eliciting signs for numbers and days of the week. For the informants having tasks like this even might be as necessary as no days of the week appeared in the control sample. In addition, calendar layouts seem to have an effect on how the conversation focuses on time and days.

Warning and Prohibitive Signs
Task: informants look at 16 warning and prohibitive signs collected from different places of the world (and therefore unfamiliar to them) and discuss what they might possibly mean.
Goal: Eliciting negative expressions (as well as expressions of possibility, judgement and opinion), warning up by having fun.

Results: The task elicited negations effectively, although the difference to the control group is not as large as we had hoped for.

Travel Story
Task: The travel story is a picture story re-telling task with tasks where almost no instruction time is needed. On the basis of the logs from 46 data collection sessions completed so far, the signers are actively communicating with each other during a 4 to 4.14 out of 5.6 hours. The ratio ranges from 37.0% (restless) to 96.8% (free conversation).

Effectiveness of Tasks – A Preliminary Study
In order to make sure that less frequent grammatical constructions and vocabulary are covered in the corpus in large enough quantities, some tasks were defined with the goal to augment the frequency of those target constructions while staying within the paradigm of corpus collection. In order to measure the effectiveness of those tasks, we have conducted a relative frequency of target constructions from those tasks with that from a close-to-spontaneous narrative signing task (“What did you do when it happened?”). At this point of time when corpus transcription has only started, the frequency is calculated as the absolute number of target hits divided by the total signs count in the task as extrapolated from per-signer signing speed sampling.

Criteria for Future Stimuli Design
One criterion for our task evaluation was the ratio of invoked explanation and stimulus-viewing time compared to sign production time. To ensure that there will be enough signed output, very complex tasks that needed a long explanation and stimulus viewing time, or that were found to produce many questions on the task by the informants had to be left out or simplified. This was also necessary in order to prevent too much signifying to an by the moderator, who is supposed to stay passive as much as possible. We also wanted to keep it simple for the moderator and to ensure that the informants stay at ease at all times and do not feel overstrained or being tested.

*All of the tasks were tested with deaf subjects and some of them had to undergo several rounds of modifications while others did not work out at all and thus were not included for the actual data collection.

From our findings there are some points to keep in mind for future stimuli design:

• Be aware of cultural differences (iconography, school curricula, customs/traditions…).
• Be aware of the requirements for a given task which might be non-existent in the target language – or might be highly unusual for informants to use.
• Be aware that meta-linguistic knowledge cannot be taken for granted.
• Be cautious about giving tasks which could evince a testing situation.

References

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