

POETIC AND NARRATIVE ELEMENTS OF GREEK SIGN LANGUAGE: A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON POETRY FOR HEARING STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This presentation describes the second part of a wider deaf awareness campaign among hearing schoolchildren in the city of Volos, conducted in three stages and covering three distinct levels of education. The first project covered the school year 2010 and involved teaching Greek Sign Language to pre-school hearing children aged four to five (Sapountzaki et al, 2010; Botsoglou and Sapountzaki, 2012). The second project dealt with hearing primary school children; it was conducted in the second term of 2014 and involved eight and nine-year-old third grade pupils, culminating in the presentation of our work to the broader community in an artistic performance at a prominent theatre. The third project was carried out during the academic year 2014-15, with a target group of high students aged fifteen to sixteen. Our primary objective for the overall campaign was twofold, with both linguistic and cultural end goals. We set out to familiarize hearing children with the basic vocabulary and structures of Greek Sign Language (GSL) while at the same time enabling them to appreciate the three dimensional aspects of poetry in sign language (for similar projects, see for example: Rossini et al, 1998; Capirci et al, 1998). On a cultural level our aim was to raise awareness of Deaf issues among the primary children involved as well as in the wider community of Volos, according to similar projects on diversity (Brereton, 2008;). In all three projects, Deaf volunteers had frequent contact with the hearing participants with the use of sign language interpreters, thus they had an essential role as linguistic and cultural role models.

PROJECT SETUP

Initiation

The spark for our project was provided by a primary school teacher who felt the need to explore the Deaf community more after some incidental contact she had had with Deaf people in our town. At the university, meanwhile, we had long felt the need to bring about a change in the views and attitudes of the hearing majority, especially among people of the younger generation. The linguistic and cognitive benefits for hearing children learning a sign language as a second language are also soundly supported by evidence from prior projects (Acredolo and Goodwyn, 2000; Daniels et al, 2001; Browen et al, 1993; Barratt-Pugh and Rohl, 2001; Larson and Chang, 2007; Robinson, 1997). Thus, cooperation between a hearing primary school and our team at the University posed an ideal challenge for setting up a deaf awareness programme of a cultural and linguistic approach.

Team recruitment

A group of professionals working in two different domains worked together during the project: b) a sign language specialist and GSL interpreter, a research assistant who is also a trainee GSL interpreter, three undergraduate (two native Deaf signers and one advanced level hearing signer) all from the department of Special Education of the University of Thessaly, Volos; a) the class teacher, a music teacher and a theatre play teacher working in the primary school in question

After an initial period of planning, target setting and role assignments to each member in the group, weekly meetings were held between the members of the university group. Meanwhile,

the second presenter worked as the connecting person with the primary school group, giving weekly instruction in GSL in conjunction with the undergraduate students, to the groups of hearing schoolchildren.

Source and target language styles

The linguistic texts that we chose to adapt from spoken Greek to Greek Sign Language are widely known to the Greek speaking public since they are all taught as part of the school curriculum and their context is characteristic of Greek culture and history. The material selected included well-known classic poems by Gatsos and Elitis that have been set to music by Savvopoulos taken from the 3rd grade Greek Language text book. The lexical signs taught corresponded to words that appeared in the poems. Pupils were also taught the basic manual structures and use of space as well as the importance of facial expression in GSL. In this way pupils were able to convey meaning and figures of speech in sign language, retaining the original poetic form of the Greek poems without simply replacing every word with a sign.

Although an exact translation of poetry is neither feasible nor desirable, great care was taken to ensure that the discourse and imagery of the original texts were retained in the sign language output. This was achieved through the appropriate use of space, classifiers, intensity of facial expression and rhythmic patterns. In the abstract and metaphorical poems, which made up the majority, the emphasis was on conveying the meaning without adhering faithfully to each line. This required encouraging the children to develop their confidence in expressing dialogues as well as abstract ideas. Initially it was felt this would prove difficult and thus the three volunteer students endeavoured to maintain a link between the words and signs. We subsequently observed, however, that the children were more than capable of coping without following the Greek language at all.

It involved the presentation of songs, poems and drama in Greek and Greek Sign Language simultaneously. The theatrical play was a combination of signing and drama. The show's title was: Songs and Theatre in Greek Sign Language.

Target pupil group

The twenty-two participating children were third graders from the 13th Primary School of Volos. The number of children participating in each song ranged from one to four, though for two of the songs half the class sang while the other half signed. All pupils were hearing, with no prior contact with GSL or with deaf individuals.

Project timeline

The programme began after the Christmas break and ended with a theatre performance in May. After a period of preparation on deaf awareness in class, children were ready to begin instruction in GSL. During the first two meetings with the pupils the university students introduced Greek Sign Language to the pupils. Along with the weekly meetings of the members in the university group, meetings at school were held every Friday (excluding the 4-week exam period and Easter). These lasted 2 or 3 teaching hours each time, this being deemed reasonable by the class teacher to ensure the pupils would not fall behind with their syllabus. The next two months (mid-February to mid-April) were assigned to GSL instruction, and the period after Easter was used for preparation of the actual final performance.

METHODOLOGY

First stage

At the language learning part of the project we primarily used a top-to-bottom model, as our overall goal was on the importance of communicating meaning rather than exact translation; isolation of certain grammatical features of GSL and structured instruction on grammar however was also essential for the students to grasp the expressing means, so we dedicated some hours on fundamental word order issues in GSL, morphological features such facial expression and syntactic features, such as the function of classifiers; lastly, a

large part of the lessons was dedicated on demonstrating basic vocabulary in GSL and relevant enhancement exercises. Working on all linguistic levels at the first stage ensured that the pupils would be ready to respond positively to the next stage of poetry adaptation.

Second stage

At the beginning of poetry introduction the class teacher wrote the poem on the board and asked the deaf students to demonstrate the corresponding new GSL vocabulary to the pupils line by line. At the same time, the hearing student explained that the class is important is to convey the meaning; the pupils were asked to draw on their notebooks what they had just read in the form of a picture. Converting the text into a visual image was done for each semantic unit of the text, i.e. every line or paragraph which contained a complete idea. The stage of putting meaning on paper in a two-dimensional form functioned as a link that would help the pupils transfer from a linear language, i.e. Greek, to a three dimensional language, such as GSL: a string of words in a spoken language was conveyed as two-dimensional images of objects, ideas and relations on paper, to be smoothly transferred to the third step. The pictures drawn were kept to be exhibited during the closing theatrical / musical event of the project.

Third stage

The deaf students then subsequently showed the pupils how their images could be conveyed in Greek Sign Language. The pupils watched the students mimicking their movements and their type of signing showed that they were aware of their new linguistic productions. The deaf instructors carried out the task of correctly illustrating each image in Greek Sign Language, while at this stage the hearing assistant facilitated the process as a communication intermediate.

The pupils had no difficulty whatsoever in comprehending a taught Greek poem when they saw it presented in GSL, as well as the means a signed language uses for conveying text from the spoken to the signed language modality. After several exercises of this type, the deaf instructors selected the pupils who would be most ready to participate in presenting each poem or song.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Assessment of the initial goals

Our objective for the overall campaign was twofold, with both linguistic and cultural end goals. We set out to familiarize hearing children with the basic vocabulary and structures of Greek Sign Language (GSL) while at the same time enabling them to appreciate the three-dimensional aspects of poetry in sign language. On a cultural level our aim was to raise awareness of Deaf issues among the primary children involved as well as in the wider community of Volos

The children's comprehension of poetic imagery and their potential to express these linguistically through the visual-spatial medium of sign language exceeded our initial expectations; in a period of only a few months, our group of eight-year-old hearing pupils grasped the main rhythmic and prosodic patterns that can render a linear artistic text into a three dimensional GSL linguistic production that retained much of the original semantic as well as aesthetic properties of the text. A secondary linguistic outcome of the project was an increased level of meta-knowledge on behalf of the pupils as speakers of Greek language.

Among the cultural goals that were sought after through our project was to promote awareness in a hearing school as to the language and culture of Deaf Greek people with a focus on sign language story-telling which is a central as well as positive feature of the Greek signing community. A first-hand experience, repeated over a period of several weeks, in the pupils' familiar environment was found to finally enable our group of hearing primary school children to interact with young Deaf as positive models in a context where the sense of hearing was not the issue.

Awareness raising in the local community with an evening event in a central theatrical stage of the city was the closing part of our project. This too, worked towards both the deaf and hearing community: On the one hand, we aimed to raise hearing people's awareness on Deaf issues, as Volos is a city with a very strong oral tradition. The local school for the deaf is currently closing down due to educational policies and although there are several Deaf teachers working in the broader Volos area, no deaf child is currently taught by a deaf teacher. On the other hand, we aimed to offer Deaf local people the opportunity feel welcomed in the hearing community and to experience Greek poetry with which they have had little or no contact and of which they have limited artistic appreciation.

Final outcomes and further directions

The number of attendants in the end-of-course performance as well as the depth of their interest was beyond any expectations of the team. Besides the positive responses of the broader audience and local authorities who embraced the final stage, two initiatives confirmed that some seeds had been sown in fertile ground: First, it came as a pleasant surprise that parents of the hearing pupils' group had not only been watching their children's progress all along, but they had also been taught to sign by their children at home. As a token of their appreciation, a group of mothers and fathers got up on stage at the end of the performance and presented their own short speech in sign language; second, the adaptation of poetry and singing in GSL inspired the local Music High School, a group of which had played the music along with the young signers, to set up a similar project for them. Following their request a third stage was designed for the next academic year 2014-15, this time with a longer time span, a focus on teenagers and a deeper insight of poetic and rhythmic patterns of both languages, as all of the participants are students in the Music High School and they attend the GSL classes as part of their literature class syllabus.

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