Revisiting Discourse in Deaf Studies in Germany

Deaf Studies Conference Transformations Proceedings

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Abstract
Within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (see e.g. Wodak & Meyer 2015), the paper examines the positionality of the academic discipline of Deaf Studies in Germany from the point of transformational view. Specifically, the paper critically examines five core aspects:

(i)   Understanding the concept of Deaf Studies in Germany from diachronic perspective (what has been changed since 1990's?)

(ii) Understanding the concept of Deaf Studies in Germany from synchronic perspective (what are the contemporary issues and priorities in Deaf Studies?)

(iii) Interaction between actors in Deaf Studies, practitioners in Deaf Education and activists in German Deaf communities

(iv) Use of medium in the discourse of Deaf Studies in Germany (which languages and modalities are used? What kind of information has been distributed through which channels?)

(v)   Interaction between Disability Studies and Deaf Studies in Germany with special focus on positionality.

In line with Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 2017), the first analyses look for indicators for particular concepts which in turn will be expanded into categories. On the basis of these results, further data (in form of expert interviews) will be collected and examined (theoretical sampling). The results then enables us to critically examine the discourse of Deaf Studies in Germany from the transformational perspective.

Presentation Transcript

(Slide 1)
TG: Our presentation today will be on revisiting the discourse in Deaf Studies in Germany. Our current project may be a small one, yet it has conducted a number of stages of research. We are excited to give you a snap shot view of some results in our presentation today.

(Slide 2)
Before I begin, let us provide you with some context regarding the field of Deaf Studies in Germany. First of all, our stakeholders consist of: Deaf individuals, practitioners such as teachers and interpreters, and a body of researchers. Germany has a variety of programs and institutions at the Bachelor, Master and Doctoral levels in a number of federal states of Germany that include Deaf Studies as one of their subjects. The stakeholders of Deaf Studies also includes a number of associations including minority ethnic, language and religious associations. The field also includes joint efforts with professional collaborations to some extent, such as between sign language teachers and interpreters. A significant historical milestone was the official and legal recognition of German Sign Language in 2002. The topic of Deaf identity constructions has been the subject of many years of long, arduous discussions and deliberations, about 30 years' worth all-tolled. We will be bringing forward some of the results of that discourse on Deaf Studies which are of interest to us.

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Our research question was on the discourse of Deaf Studies in Germany from a transformational perspective. From a diachronic standpoint, how has Deaf Studies transformed over all these years? Has it evolved? Is there evidence of interdisciplinary collaboration among those in Deaf Studies and their involvement in other fields and with other stakeholders? Another core issue is the modality-specific language issue: signed or spoken language. What has been the main language medium used during the interactions of persons involved in the discourse of Deaf Studies? We also included a question about social media; the ability to broadcast messages in signed language, such as vlogs. We want to keep an eye on what is being discussed on these platforms as well. Finally, the last research question was: is there intersectionality between Deaf Studies and Disability Studies? Or should they be regarded as distinct fields of study?

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Moving on to the methodology section, we conducted an online survey between June and September 2018. The survey was distributed to many individuals. The respondent sample by gender was comprised of a near-balanced ratio of males to females. As for hearing status, there were three categories: Hearing, Deaf, and Hard of Hearing. You can see the proportions of each respondent category reflected on the slide.

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A large number of our sample reported that they hold positions in academia as demonstrated by the blue arc. The second largest group consisted of deaf people who were activists, deaf leaders and interpreters. The smallest group were teachers – both deaf and hearing. We accounted for their country of origin, including in our sample those who were born elsewhere, but emigrated to Germany and who are Persons of Color.

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As for our methodology, the timeline for conducting the online survey was between the months of June and September. We collected data from all the participants in the sample. Individuals could respond in German Signed Language (DGS) or type their answers into the survey. If the responses came to us in DGS, then they would be translated into German text and captured in our

database. We made a first round of analysis looking for the essence of the content in each response. Next, we took the responses and made a content map allowing us to categorize the data. We then took related sub-categories and collapsed them into a more overarching category for further analysis and performed any necessary adjustments. We have had to add a step to our methodology now that we are here at this Deaf Studies conference. All the German text had to be translated into English text. The methodology was that of a qualitative approach which is roughly in line with Grounded Theory. As with any methodology, there are limitations. There could have been a larger sample size. Data could have been collected through focus groups and face-to-face interviews where there was more transparency and accessibility. But in that case, one could run the risk of influencing the outcome. Thus, the decision was to deliver the survey virtually, and accept the possible limitations. I will now turn the floor over to Christian to discuss our findings.

(Slide 7)
CR: Once all the responses were collected, they were broken into several groupings, the first being language and modality. There were no attempts to interpret the responses, they were just identified by language and categorized accordingly. One particular respondent said that in Deaf Studies, DGS seemed dominant – which could limit whom could participate in the Deaf Studies-related discourse. It could also result in the exclusion of hearing people who may have little or no fluency in sign. Another respondent said that it seemed German – written or spoken – was the language primarily used in the Deaf Studies discussions. A Deaf person wishing to engage in the discourse would have no viable opportunity – prohibited from participating in the stimulating conversations because they are being conducted using a language to which he has no access, resulting in a "perspective rift" in the constituent body of Deaf Studies. On a positive note, one respondent said they were elated at the use of technology, more specifically social media such as Facebook and Twitter and various other social media platforms where posts are made using sign language. An idea or question can be posed via these platforms which subsequently generates discourse – a community-driven discourse in sign language. Looking at the opposite end of the discourse continuum – academic discourse – the resulting product of that discourse is delivered via written text, as in publications or dissertations, to which the signing community has no access. At the same time, one must note that the converse is also true, the contributors to the written texts have no access to the discourses occurring in sign, i.e. to signed text. There is an obvious bifurcation in the discourse paths between the two different language modality groups. The questions that must follow are: for whom are we carrying out these discourses? For whom are we disseminating the knowledge? Who is the intended audience when it comes time to design and implement the dissemination? And - of course - we have questions about accessibility and transparency. Next I would like to show some actual quotes that were extracted from the survey respondents, so you can get an impression of what their perspectives look like.

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One respondent said that they often did not feel welcome in the scientific community of Deaf Studies. They told the conference organizers how elated they were that sign language was being used at the opening ceremony! There was direct communication at long last! It so happens that we also attended this same conference, and I would like to add that there were interpreters present, they were only for sign language-oriented presentations and conversations.

The respondent said that they were under the impression that there was a "DGS only" policy for the conference, and the spoken language interpreters should be dismissed – to which there was no retort except to say that doing so would exclude non-signing or non-fluent signing hearing participants. That person seemed accepting of that consequence.

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One respondent said, "It would certainly be desirable – as an exchange between academics and non-academics can always lead to empowerment, and the dissemination of research results, especially in minority research, should be an important part of research work."

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The same respondent said: "In addition, the discourse is still heavily influenced by academic participants. Some of those same academics are neither knowledgeable of or fluent in a signed language nor cognizant of the cultural norms of Deaf people. And yet, they still engage in their written discourses that revolve around the lives of Deaf people." Another response was: "This complicates the discourse because some participants endure obvious language and cultural barriers. The use of German language as the language of discourse can be taken as an act of paternalism towards the Deaf community."

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The emphasis remains: The Deaf community has repeatedly faced language and modality-related barriers. Moving on to the realm of science and scientific discourse … Deaf people are once again excluded as participant interlocutors.

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To summarize the section on Language and Modalities, existing in a milieu where there are language barriers or modalities where the language is not accessible leads to a sense of insecurity, may cause misunderstandings, or cause one to feel self-conscious or uncomfortable and thus hold back any efforts to participate. The point being, this is one of the many ways that certain populations are excluded from co-creating discourse.

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Harkening back to the topic of Transformation in Deaf Studies … as Thomas pointed out at the beginning, arriving at transformation has been a 30-year process. However, our investigations into language modality tells us that we have not arrived yet. The process has halted its forward trajectory, and has more or less maintained status quo. One possible culprit for this cessation of progress is language ideology. Another could be language access and power within academic communities. These struggles must be resolved before further progress can be made.

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TG: From the studies we conducted, we discovered there were several topics that need to be pursued within Deaf Studies: First and foremost, ethnographic studies. Secondly, the topic of intersectionality needed to be addressed. Next, the interface between Deaf Studies and Disability Studies. Was there a point where they remained distinct?

If so, what was it? And lastly, postcolonial studies. According to our respondents, these topics needed to be enumerated and incorporated into the field of Deaf Studies.

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We included in our findings the sense by our respondents that in German Deaf Studies-related programs the social sciences and linguistics have usually had a very large and dominating presence, whereas Cultural Studies and its related theories have only a minor existence. Cultural Studies would need to be a greater presence in Deaf Studies.

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This is consistent with what others have said. There is an ever-increasing number of Deaf Studies programs being added into universities. However, when one thinks of professional programs, what usually comes to mind are medical schools, psychology programs, programs for linguistics, etc. Unfortunately, here in Germany, Deaf Studies has not been incorporated into programs such as those to date. Hopefully in the future it will find its place among their ranks.

(Slide 17)
CR: I would like to reiterate what Thomas said about pursuing ethnographic studies. Conducting them, along with making our findings more available to the public. That information should not be warehoused in the institutions who conduct the studies. Rather it should be publicly accessible and available. To date, that practice has been missing. Our aim is to make a public space in which to deliver and store this important knowledge.

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As mentioned, another topic to be pursued is the interface between Disability Studies and Deaf Studies. It is worth noting that the responses we received regarding this topic were mixed. One person said that Deaf Studies and Disability Studies should remain distinct. Deaf Studies should not be subsumed under Disability Studies. Despite the fact that there may be similar topics worth discussing, they must remain separate disciplines.

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One respondent seems to agree. Deaf Studies and Disability Studies should be kept separate, each contributing its independent perspective on a topic. The second person or group to engage in discourse about a topic should not try to conform to the discourse initiated by a previous source from the opposing "camp". Their respective bodies of research should exist independently AND on equal footing.

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Another respondent said that there was no need to have Deaf Studies apart from Disability Studies; that they should be part of one and the same field of study. The sentiment was: topics that would be addressed in the field of Disability Studies include topics that are Deaf related, so why separate them? And besides that, the perspective portrayed of deaf related issues there, is from a deficit model with the focus on the ear, for example; all the more reason why people coming from the mindset of those in Deaf Studies should join in the conversation.

And the last point along this vein, the field of Deaf Studies should be opened to people who are not fluent in DGS.

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One more topic we wish to pursue in Deaf Studies has to do with the academicization process. There has been a meta-level of discourse which has been on the rise in the academic field; and while there have been a few positive developments in Germany, it is still too reliant on the Anglo-Saxon discourse. As mentioned in one of the morning sessions yesterday, as a field, Deaf Studies cannot always investigate and replicate any studies of another country, but should pursue studies which are germane to the situation in particular countries and disseminate the findings widely.

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One of the respondents shared this interesting perspective: The concept of Deaf Studies and all that it entails is clear in the minds of some colleagues. For example, the work of Gertz and Boudreault: The Deaf Studies Encyclopedia. And yet, there are those out there who have other views, different from what has been previously proposed. So one must ask: what is the best approach in doing so? It is not obvious as to what the various kinds of critiques would entail. The bottom line here is that some frameworks have been a bit too narrow. They need to be broadened and to include diverse views.

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In summary, Thomas and I have been discussing our research and actual responses we received from some of our participants. Let us return to our main topic for today: The Transformation of Deaf Studies.

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Apparently, there is the perception among our respondents that there is an impediment to full transformation; that is, the ownership of Deaf Studies – a physical and bounded institutional space – which needs to be opened and shared instead – transforming it into a public space rather than one being contained by particular academics. Another question to revisit is regarding the positionality of Deaf Studies. From whose perspective? Which perspective is the one to follow? The answer to those questions of course depends on power.

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Next we would like to discuss our methodology and applications. As Thomas said earlier, many of the universities have programs in education, medicine, psychology, etc. But there are not enough of them that have Deaf Studies as an interdisciplinary field of study. The number needs to be expanded. It is a topic worth pursuing – a perfect segue into the application portion of our research.

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One of the respondents said it was possible for it to go in the field of psychology, for example. There are numerous Deaf-related issues that are discussed in that discipline, but most of them usually revolve around the sub-topic of mental health. Additionally, there isn't sufficient input

provided to them about the benefits of a Deaf Studies perspective. These institutions don't avail themselves of the information that we are willing to share. Instead, they continue to operate on a course separate from us. There are psychology departments and medical programs out there that feel no connections with Deaf Studies.

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A comment made by one of the respondents said that, as a whole, the methodology within Deaf Studies is still a little mixed. It seems to have political aims. The political and scientific aspects are not clearly delineated. Their boundaries are ambiguous and blurred. Politics seems to be running in the background of research activities, meaning that activities are perceived as politically driven. The issue here is whether the approach should be one that keeps them clearly segregated, is more objective, and scientifically driven. Conflating the two, might pose an ethical conflict. One respondent, as you see on the slide, clearly stated there should be two distinct entities; ensuring that Deaf Studies maintains an independent and objective stance.

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While the aforementioned perspective is worth consideration, another respondent posited that the aggregation of politics and science would be very difficult to disambiguate. One should always consider what connections lie below the surface. Recall a comment that was shared earlier regarding the associations in Deaf Studies. One must not forget that those who conduct studies of the Deaf communities are studying minority communities. The researcher may encounter times when science and politics will intersect. That can be acceptable according to this person's view.

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To summarize this section on Application, we again look to increasing the presence of Deaf Studies. But one must also ask: what is the motivation for doing that? Do we wish to become members of prestigious research institutions? One must always keep in mind that when doing so, there is also a political goal to achieve. That is, this work is being done for the betterment of the Deaf communities in several capacities.

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Coming back to the topic of Transformation in Deaf Studies, first one must raise the question: what is the agenda? And who decides what agenda the members will have? Is the separation of politics and science even possible? In the concept of transformation, the second consideration relates to how the members use scientific methodology, as was discussed in the session yesterday morning. And for our final consideration, we once again come to the issue of language. Should it be a component of, or factored into how we define our ethics? – by that we mean research ethics.

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In summary, we have taken the findings from our research and presented them to you so that you can see the multiple transformational perspectives found in the discourse on Deaf Studies in Germany. Thomas would now like to make a few comments about the perspectives and discourse which were presented today. When he is done, I will do the same.
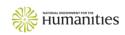
TG: There has been discourse and a transformational process present in Germany for the last 30 years. Despite that amount of time, Deaf Studies is yet to be established firmly in place. It has continued to exist but with less than a solid foundation. I suspect the same may be true in other countries for example, in Belgium or Iceland. Perhaps someone in the audience would like to give us an example of where it is also unstable in their country or whether they have things more solidly in place. Those were the reflections I had. Now for those of Dr. Rathmann.

CR: As you can see, this is something that's been quite controversial and the topic of lively discussion. It is not as if we leave here and tomorrow we can solve all differences and establish a clear agenda. We must refer to the most salient point – that is language and modality. This relates to a conversation that I had with Ben Bahan two or three years ago in Barcelona. It was a very stimulating and healthy discussion where we talked about having a "modality plan" as a part of language planning. Such modality planning would state explicitly that sign language would be acknowledged as the official medium of academic discourse. In that way, it enables Deaf researchers to access academic discourse in Deaf Studies. This would prevent some competition or a power struggle over which language should be chosen. Simply stated, an assurance. A transformation – if it is to come to fruition – requires further endeavors towards a clearly defined transformational modality planning. Thank you.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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