

A Historic Perspective on Social-Haptic Communication in Norway

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Abstract This contribution presents the development and spreading of social-haptic communication in Norway. Haptic communication started at the end of the Nineties and since its beginning, it saw the cooperation between deafblind individuals and their interpreters. It is now part of the training of sign language interpreters. The Norwegian haptic signals have also spread to the USA, thanks to the translation into English of the book collecting the haptic signals used in Norway.

Keywords Social-haptic signals. Deafblindness. Visual impairment. Norway. Hapti-Co.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Beginning of SHC in Norway. – 3 SHC in the Training for Interpreters in Norway and Its Applications Abroad. – 4 Further Applications of SHC and Conclusions.

1 Introduction

The authors of this contribution in a way witnessed the development and spreading of social-haptic communication (SHC) in Norway and try to provide an account for this in the present. SHC started at the end of the Nineties with the Norwegian deafblind woman Trine Næss and her cooperation with Riitta Lahtinen and Russ Palmer, now experts in the field of SHC. Trine Næss saw that the cooperation between deafblind individuals and interpreters was a key to further develop social-haptic communication in Norway. This vision became the most important pillar in the development of haptic communication in Norway.

In Norway, there are established regional interpreting services. Trine Næss started giving courses to those who were already educated and to those who went through training.

2 The Beginning of SHC in Norway

In the Nineties, Trine Næss observed what persons with deafblindness were doing to compensate for reduced vision and hearing. In 2006, she published a booklet with the title *To Grasp the Surroundings* (Næss 2006). In this publication, she systematized her findings, developed new signals, and established a system we continue to use today.

Unfortunately, Trine Næss died in 2008, and her wish was that her interpreters (later gathered in the company named Hapti-Co) continued with her project in collaboration with The Association for visual and hearing impaired/deafblind people (LSHDB). At that time, Hapti-Co consisted of three interpreters.

LSHDB and Hapti-Co have arranged courses for persons with deafblindness to give peer courses. Bibbi Hagerupsen, a deafblind woman, was one of the participants in our peer course program.

Bibbi Hagerupsen experienced haptic communication for the first time in 1999, during a workshop given by Trine Næss and Russ Palmer. Their workshop focused mostly on the description of images and music. “I don’t remember much of the content, but I remember well the experience of receiving descriptions on my back”, states Bibbi. During a workshop given by Trine Næss in 2004, Bibbi Hagerupsen got an epiphany. During a Deafblind International (DBI) conference later the same year, the interpreters cooperated with her to test out how to use haptic signals during presentations. Since then, there have been no way back. Bibbi Hagerupsen is now an important link to the deaf signing community, since she delivers courses to deaf individuals, so that the deaf community might be more aware and more accessible for persons with deafblindness.

3 SHC in the Training for Interpreters in Norway and Its Applications Abroad

In Norway, there are three university programs for sign language interpreters, providing haptic communication in their curriculum. SHC classes focus on learning the signals and emphasize the importance of cooperation between the deafblind person and the interpreter. When possible, classes are delivered by a person with deafblindness and an interpreter from Hapti-Co.

Hapti-Co continued Trine's work by giving lectures, but also wanted to fulfill her dream about a book of haptic signals. The dream was fulfilled in 2013, with the book *Haptisk kommunikasjon* (Haptic Communication) (Bjørge et al. 2013). During this work, Eli Raanes, a Norwegian professor at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) expert in the field of deafblind communication, was examining some papers at the Deaf museum in Trondheim and found a clip from 1864, describing persons with deafblindness receiving signals for yes and no (tapping and stroking). This is a nice little detail showing a bit of history and that communicating through touch can be dated far before the development of a standardized SHC system.

In 2014, the Helen Keller National Center invited Hapti-Co to present the Norwegian SHC system in the USA. In 2015, the book was translated and published in USA (Bjørge et al. 2015).

Both Trine Næss and we emphasize that a shared and standardized SHC system can ensure a fruitful communication for anyone who learns it, not limited by their first language. This means that most of the signals are the same in the Norwegian book and in the American version of the book.

In 2021, we launched a smartphone application with all the different signals which are in the book. This was done since paper-based books are not accessible for all, and technology is more available. We applied for funding through the same foundation who supported the book, DAM with the support of LSHDB. The application Haptics: Pocket Edition functions like a list of words, describing every signal by pictures, videoclips, vocal and written descriptions. Our aim was to make it as accessible as possible. The app is now available in both Norwegian and English.

4 Further Applications of SHC and Conclusions

People with deafblindness may enjoy different life and sport activities. Therefore, in collaboration with the deafblind community, dedicated haptic signals have been created and collected in small booklets. New signals regard, for instance, hiking, attending sports events, working

with guide dogs (see the chapter by Cathrine Timm Sundin and Nina Frisnes Øyan in this volume) and other areas where the community itself experiences a need or a wish for communication.

For many years, haptic signals were mainly used only within the deafblind community in Norway, but in recent years, people with visual impairment have started to use them as well. The National Blind Association have invited us to give courses on both regional and local rehabilitation centres. The Association realized that haptic signals could be a useful tool to compensate for people's visual impairment and reduce some of the obstacle they may find in everyday life.

As a final note, we would like to emphasize that haptic signals should be useful for the individual and that we are all different. Some people only use a few signals, and others use all those that have been created so far.

In our opinion, nobody owns haptic signals, rather they are a free communication tool to bring people together.

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