A new approach to the use of gestures in aphasia rehabilitation: stimulating spontaneous gesturing and body language

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Literature on the use of gestures in persons with aphasia (PWA) is increasing, with some promising, but variable results. Several types of gesture therapy have been proposed and investigated; the main approach is to replace words by hand gestures (cf. Marshall 2006). This approach has several challenges: a large number of gestures have to be learned in order to improve communication function, not only by the PWA, but also those communicating with him/her. Which gestures are most relevant for individual PWA varies widely; in any case the method provides only a limited functional vocabulary. Often, only hand gestures are used while facial expressions and other body language are not included.

Recent research has provided new insight into gestures and body language in general (Kendon 2004, McNeill 2005): Contrary to spoken utterances, gestures cannot be divided into smaller parts, and cannot be understood without their context in the communication situation. Several types of gestures and gesticulations can be defined, amongst those pantomime, emblematic gestures as well as iconic gestures (McNeill 2005). Iconic gestures depict or illustrate meaning and have a large communication potential as they can refer to a wide number of entities depending on their context. They use three different iconic mechanisms different from meaning construction mechanisms in spoken language, which might be an advantage for the use in PWA (Erlenkamp 2009).

On this background, we are developing a new rehabilitation program for the use of gestures in aphasia, called SunnGest. Its main approach is to teach PWA and their communication partners not a set of gestures, but rather a strategy on how to use gestures in communication. The program includes education of PWA and their relatives on different types of gestures, aims to increase the combination of gestures functioning as each other’s context, and focuses especially on the use of iconic gestures and body language. The strategy includes the internalization of the acronym “husk” (Norwegian for “remember”) referring to the 4 principles action, form, size, and context. In addition to this educational program, a variety of exercises have been developed for practicing the use of gestures.

SunnGest has so far been tested in a few PWA, and will this spring be further applied in a session with 8 PWA and their relatives, in addition to a separate session for their speech therapists. These sessions will be evaluated.

The theoretical basis for SunnGest, its content and evaluation results will be presented.

References

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