

New book explores emergence of touch-based language in DeafBlind communities

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GOING TACTILE

Life at the Limits of Language

TERRA EDWARDS



Credit: Oxford University Press

As deaf individuals lost their sight in the DeafBlind community that Asst. Prof. Terra Edwards was studying, she discovered that an entirely new language had emerged—one that doesn't try to negotiate with a seeing world, but is rooted in a tactile world.

In Edwards' new [book](#), "Going Tactile: Life at the Limits of Language," the linguistic anthropologist explores the existential and [environmental factors](#) that impact language for DeafBlind communities.

The book is the culmination of almost 20 years of anthropological engagement with DeafBlind communities in Washington, D.C. and, mainly, Seattle. Prior to graduate school, Edwards was trained as a professional interpreter for the DeafBlind community.

"I thought I was going to study how they were changing American Sign Language, but I ended up studying how a new language emerges," said Edwards, an assistant professor in the University of Chicago's Department of Comparative Human Development.

"That is really the basis of all of my research since then: How we exist in the world, and how our modes of existence actually give rise to particular ways of representing the world."

Limits of language

Within this Deafblind community, Edwards explains, individuals are born deaf and have a genetic condition that leads to a slow progression

into blindness. This means they acquired American Sign Language as [deaf children](#), but as they become blind, this visual language is increasingly difficult to use. For example, a group conversation would require cueing to know who's talking next, and interpreters, such as Edwards, would step in and prompt or offer additional information.

As people become blind, more and more descriptions of the environment are added, which are meant to stand in for the environment itself—but a person can't actually live in a description, Edwards explained.

"You can get lost in a book," she said. "But what we discover from my research is that there's a limit to that. It turns out that it's an empirical fact."

She gives the example of the COVID pandemic: Connecting with people via phone or video calls couldn't stand in for a true social life. There's a limit to what representations of the world can do, versus actually living in the world. As a deaf person began to go blind, the solution was to rely more and more on sighted people to translate and relay information.

"And what I argue in the book is that that led to existential collapse," she said. "It led to the impossibility of existence."

Going tactile

In her first summer returning to the DeafBlind community in Seattle as a researcher, Edwards started to witness a change in interactions she hadn't previously noticed. She watched an interpreter talking to a DeafBlind person, who in turn was correcting the interpreter: "You're saying that wrong."

At the time, it seemed unusual, she said. Sighted people were the ones who were the "experts" on communication because they were able to use

a [visual language](#), and DeafBlind people were constantly in the position of receiving knowledge about the world. In this moment, however, the DeafBlind person was taking a stand and saying, "No, you're getting something wrong."

In that moment, she also noticed that what the DeafBlind individual was doing was radically different, language-wise; it was a form of pointing, but on the other person's body.

The process started with two DeafBlind women, authority figures within the community, who asked: Why are we depending so much on sighted people? Why don't we just communicate with each other? In response, they organized events without interpreters.

Slowly, DeafBlind individuals let go of what they were missing out on, and focused on what was already there. The premise—also philosophical in nature—was that everything in the world is also tactile, and so there's no reason why someone needs vision or hearing to live.

The resulting language was a process of uncovering obstacles and relaxing sighted social constraints on touch. A sighted person can distinguish between words in American Sign Language based on the backdrop of the signer's body, but that context isn't there for a DeafBlind individual.

The first step in the process became about feedback: If a person couldn't show they understood by nodding, they would tap on the other person's body to convey they were following along.

Providing feedback allowed them to understand when understanding was not taking place. And out of that process, one of the systematic changes was that instead of one's own face and body as the backdrop, people would use the other person's body as the backdrop for distinctions.

"That may seem like a small thing, like, 'Oh, you just take the language off of here and put it on there,'" Edwards said. "But one thing leads to another, and pretty soon you've got a completely different system. That was the beginning of this radical grammatical divergence between the two languages."

She describes the process as "almost magical." Much of the information we receive from the world is already tactile, we just stop perceiving information in that way. But that has to do with social and historical phenomena, it isn't a physiological problem. Once those social and physical barriers are removed, the language uncovers itself.

Provided by University of Chicago

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