Title: The sign use of guide dogs and their visually impaired handlers

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Research situation: Besides white canes guide dogs are today the other most widely used vision aids for visually impaired persons. The studies conducted so far on guide dog and handler interactions have covered the physical and mental well-being of the guide dog handlers, the comparisons of different vision and mobility aids, the selection procedures of based on their behavioural and psychological characteristics, guide dog genetics etc. However, little attention has been paid to the real-time interactions of guide dogs and their handlers: the behavioral signs they use for interaction, the cues they attend to in the environment, the adaption to the local environment after training. My study aimed at targeting those semiotic aspects of guide dog work, while investigating teams, who have been trained and work in different countries.

Asked questions: Why is the umwelt change of the guide dog team members important for their successful cooperation? What kind of signs are involved in guide dog assistance and what function do they serve? What does the maintenance of sign relations specific to guide dog work depend on? What are the semiotic challenges that the team members face?

Methodology, methods and data: The empirical research relies on the traditional research tools of humanities: interviews, fieldwork and participatory observation. Interviews were conducted with the focus group guide dog users from Germany, Estonia, Sweden + representatives from a few other countries (Austria, Romania, Australia, USA, UK). Additional non-systematic observations of the teams’ work were also made as a volunteer guide for the Estonian teams. Swedish, Estonian and German legislative documents pertaining to guide dogs, as well as documents and publications issued by the guide dog users’ organisations and national organisations of the visually impaired, were consulted for a comparison of the organisation of guide dog work in the three countries.

Major results: The presence of certain systems of signs is implied in urban space, expressed in the rules and regulations of behaviour as well as in the material properties of the built environment. The cooperation of a guide dog and a visually impaired person involves intricate ways of transforming the expectations, searching for novel cues, and inventing ways of gaining access to objects and places with the help of interspecific communication. With time, the teams tend to enter a less hierarchical interaction, whereby both members have an equal say in deciding the next step in their cooperation. The teams also face various semiotic challenges during their cooperation. The perceptual challenges stem from a mismatch between affordances of the urban environment and perceptual and motoric abilities of the team. Sociocultural challenges pertain to the conflicting meanings that are attributed to (guide) dogs in different social contexts and to incompatible social norms. Challenges related to intrateam communication and interpretation of the other counterpart’s behaviour are mostly tied to the difficulties of placing the other’s activities in the right context. The study established that not only do many of the challenges that the teams face have a semiotic ground, but also much of the improvement of the team’s work can be done from a semiotic basis.
Publications:


Magnus, Riin (2016). Semiotics in the interaction of guide dogs and visually impaired persons. In: Maran, Timo; Tønnessen, Morten; Armstrong Oma, Kristin; Kiiroja, Laura; Magnus, Riin; Mäekivi, Nelly; Rattasepp, Silver; Thibault, Paul; Tüür, Kadri, Animal Umwelten in a Changing World: Zoosemiotic Perspectives. Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 256–266.