



Photo: Annelies Kusters

In the Streets of Mumbai

A modern metropolis in India: many different ethnic groups come together every day. A wide variety of languages can be heard, and very often, people who have no common language have to communicate with each other. People involuntarily resort to gesticulation, and their counterparts usually have no trouble understanding what is meant. But gestures can also be defined terms in a language of their own – the sign language of the deaf. Things get particularly interesting when sign language – here in its Indian form, of course – and spontaneous gestures are used in parallel and in combination. This is precisely what Annelies Kusters from the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity and her team are studying in the streets of Mumbai.

Kusters is interested in both the potential and the limitations of gesture-based communication. Being deaf herself, she makes it a point to involve deaf people in her research work. They can contribute greatly to these studies because they are very skilled in the creative use of gestures – both conventionalized and spontaneous – in conversations with the hearing as well as with other deaf persons.

The researchers observe and document the experiences of both hearing and deaf participants in conversations combining oral, gestural and written communication. And they also study what role the various surroundings play. It makes a difference, of course, whether a conversation takes place at the market, in a loud street, or in a quiet environment. Here, two researchers from Kusters' team watch a deaf businessman using facial expressions and gestures to negotiate with a hearing shop owner.