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Multimodal “grammar” at the borders of turns: Action in transition spaces

Attention to multimodal constellations as speakers near the ends of verbal turns and enter spaces between turns provides strong evidence for the distributed and collaborative nature of what, from the perspective of traditional individualistic and narrowly lexico-syntactic theories of grammar, might be described as a single person’s verbal production. This project continues a research agenda addressing the need for a realistic notion of “grammar,” an approach to grammar that is true to the intricacies of social interaction. My presentation builds on long-standing as well as current findings regarding gesture, gaze, and bodily movement at points of possible turn completion as well as points where recipient responsive behaviors are particularly relevant and closely monitored (e.g., C. Goodwin, 1979; M. Goodwin, 1980; Goodwin and Goodwin, 1987; Steeck and Hartge, 1992; Mondada, 2007; Perakyala & Ruusuvuori, In press). Using videotaped Standard American English data, I attend to spaces near and at the ends of verbal turns, as such moments are vital to an understanding of resources for social organization. My focus is on bodily and prosodic constellations produced in conjunction with, as well as separate from, lexico-syntactic forms in the contexts of transition spaces.

Rich and complex multimodal constellations of action are systematically performed as current speakers move into spaces in the unfolding of activities where “mutual monitoring” is heightened (M. Goodwin, 1980). I account for the work of current speakers and of potential next speakers as turns enter transition spaces, with such work both displaying (for the participants) and evidencing (for us as analysts) interactants’ fine-tuned coordination with one another on a moment-to-moment basis. Findings reveal that multimodal constellations in transition spaces are tightly fitted to the specifics of currently unfolding actions, and that they are also highly sensitive to developing aspects of the larger activities in which they emerge (Rossano, 2005). Findings also suggest a distinction between multimodal formations that pursue recipient responses and those best understood as primarily retrospective, that is, modifying an actor’s stance on the action-so-far rather than working toward progress in the activity.

Findings from this project are directly relevant to a use-based grammar that includes all of the resources interactants have access to in real-time embodied interaction. If we fully embrace the collaborative construction of interaction as built through a jointly managed set of semiotic resources in fine-tuned, dynamic and contingent interplay (Goodwin, 2000), then we need to continue an agenda of empirical research toward describing grammar in a manner that is true to the multimodal nature of that interplay.

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