On the hierarchy of interactional resources: Embodied and verbal behavior in the management of joint activities with material objects

Melisa Stevanovic [*], Chiara Monzoni

Finnish Centre of Excellence in Intersubjectivity in Interaction, University of Helsinki, Finland

Abstract

Joint activities are managed through a coherent use of verbal and embodied behaviors. In this study, we examine the distribution of labor between embodied and verbal resources in the accomplishment of activity-management moves at different phases of joint activities with material objects. On the basis of our analysis, we suggest that, at all phases of such activities, the "default" way of managing the activity is through participants' embodied behavior. This claim is based on observations (1) on the omnipresence of embodied behavior in the different types of activity-management moves of our data, (2) on speech being resorted to for specific reasons only, and (3) on embodied behavior being primarily oriented to in those instances where there is a discrepancy between the participants' speech and their embodied behaviors. While highlighting the primacy of embodied behavior in the management of joint activities, we also shed light on the particular circumstances that call for participants to use speech. Our results are of profound importance for a more general understanding of social interaction and human language use. Specifically, the top position of embodied behavior in the hierarchy of interactional resources calls into question the feasibility of logocentric categorizations of social action.
© 2016 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

It is a truism that social interaction involves more than words; it is a complex endeavor where a wide range of different modalities cohere (see e.g., Goodwin, 2000; Mondada, 2006; Enfield, 2009). Yet, empirical research on social interaction has been suggested to suffer from logocentrism (Goodwin, 2007; Erickson, 2010; Ayass, 2015). Within the domain of conversation analysis (henceforth, CA), certain logocentric tendencies may have arisen simply from the history of the approach. For example, Jefferson's transcription system, which arose from the analysis of audio-recording and gave primacy to spoken words over other interactional resources, is widely considered as the "default" system also in the transcription of video-recorded interactions (Ayass, 2015:2, 10). In addition, given that CA transcripts arrange interaction around the sequential progress of talk, researchers are inclined to perceive it as chains of verbally based actions; and while the categorization of these actions is an essential part of CA claims, participants' gestures, postures, gaze, and other embodied behaviors are frequently described primarily as to how they relate and contribute to these verbally based actions (see Have, 1999:108). Similarly problematic, of course, is to uncritically impose the same action categories that have arisen in the analysis of spoken utterances on the embodied features of the participants' conduct.

---

* Corresponding author at: Finnish Centre of Excellence in Intersubjectivity in Interaction, PO Box 4, 00014 University of Helsinki, Finland.
E-mail addresses: melisa.stevanovic@helsinki.fi (M. Stevanovic), chiaramonzoni@yahoo.it (C. Monzoni).

In this study, we have tried to counteract logocentrism in various ways. Besides starting from spoken utterances and considering how embodied behaviors relate to them, we have also adopted the opposite approach: we have taken the embodied behaviors as our starting point and considered how spoken utterances contribute to what is being accomplished by the embodied behaviors. Moreover, we have sought to describe interactional phenomena in terms that would do justice (also) to the distinctive features of embodied behaviors. In what is to come, we will highlight the advantages of such methodological choices for the gained results and suggest a reversal of the customary CA perspective on the hierarchy of interactional resources.

1.1. Management of joint activities

The empirical part of this study is about the basic ways in which participants coordinate their actions in the context of joint activities involving physical manipulation of material objects and/or specific bodily configurations in the environment. While humans are intrinsically motivated to engage in collaborative activities with shared goals, they also exhibit precise skills in the coordination of their behaviors with those of others (Tomasello et al., 2005). Some of the processes of coordination are automatic and unconscious. For example, people have a tendency to synchronize their body postures and movements with those of each other (Chartrand and Bargh, 1999; Richardson et al., 2008), and to entrain into each other's speaking rate (Street, 1984), vocal intensity (Natale, 1975), pausing frequency (Cappella and Planalp, 1981), and melodic features of speech (De Looze et al., 2011). It is often the case that, for example in an interacting dyad, both participants adapt to the behaviors of their co-participants in an ongoing loop of continual adjustment and feedback.

From another angle, however, coordination of behavior in the context of joint activities is never entirely symmetrical. Instead, joint activities are permeated by fleeting asymmetries as to how the participants are positioned with respect to each other and to their current activity. A person may, for example, try to initiate a joint activity from scratch by recruiting another person's assistance in what the person him/herself is trying to do (see e.g., Mondada, 2009; Kendrick and Drew, 2016). Or a participant may instigate a noticeable shift in an already ongoing joint activity, for instance, with the help of material objects or visible aspects in the environment (see e.g., Modaff, 2003; Broth and Lundström, 2013; Mikkola and Lehtinen, 2014). Likewise, one participant may instigate a closing of a joint activity, for example, by walking away (Broth and Mondada, 2013). Sometimes a closing of a prior activity simultaneously proposes a new one – something that happens, for instance, when parents use tactile interventions to terminate their children's prior activities by perceptually reorienting them to new activities (see e.g., Cekaite, 2010; Goodwin and Cekaite, 2013). What is common for all these instances is that one participant momentarily takes the lead while others are expected to follow, such moments being potentially infused with complex considerations of the participants' respective rights to direct and obligations to comply (on ''deontic statuses,'' see Stevanovic, 2013).

In this paper, we will focus on the above-described critical moments of coordination when a participant carries out a single *advancement* in the participants' joint activity and calls for his/her co-participant to react to that. We refer to these advancements as *activity-management moves.* In using the notion of "move" (see Goffman, 1967:20), we want to assume that, in principle, such advancements could be instantiated both by spoken utterances and by visible bodily behaviors that do *not* involve speech (see also Enfield, 2013:63). What then turns out to be the case empirically is another question – and one we are particularly interested in.

The activity-management moves that constitute the focus of our analysis involve one participant instigating a change in the participants' trajectory of action, while that change is expected to be carried out *instantly by the participants together.* From this perspective, these moves could possibly be characterized as ''proximal proposals'' (on the idea of ''proximity'', see Houtkoop, 1987; on the notion of ''proposal'', see Couper-Kuhlen, 2014; Stevanovic and Svennevig, 2015). However, there is a danger that defining these moves as ''proposals'' would invoke the need to distinguish them from other directive actions such as ''orders'', ''requests'', or ''offers'' – something that does not necessarily do justice to the distinctive features of embodied behavior. If someone throws you a ball, your ''default'' way of responding to such a move (i.e., catching the ball) is the same independently of whether you label your co-participant's action (i.e., throwing the ball) as an order (*Catch this ball!*), offer (*Here, I'll throw this ball to you*), request (*Could you, please, catch this ball*), or proposal (*Let's play with this ball*). In avoiding these verbally based action categories, we want to refrain from introducing a logocentric bias into our analysis.

Still, different phases of joint activities are associated with different types of activity-management moves. In case two or more people have been previously engaged in solitary activities, one of them may instigate a move to (1) *initiate* a joint activity. But if the participants' previous activity appears as a joint one and the move does not radically change its course, it is more appropriate to talk about the move as an attempt to (2) *modify* a joint activity. Analogously, if participants have been previously deeply involved in each other's doings, one of the participants may instigate a move to (3) *close* the joint activity. However, if the closing of a previous activity leads immediately to the initiation of a new one, the move may be best described as (4) a *pivot* between two different joint activities. Of course, the borderline between the instances of (1) and (2), on one hand, and the instances of (3) and (4), on the other, are not always clear-cut. Still, the characterization of the different activity-management moves with reference to their location within the participants' current activity may give us a