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Video communication and 'camera actions' The production of wide video shots in courtrooms with remote defendants

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Abstract

We consider here the use of videoconference for remote testimonies in the courtroom. Based on video recordings of actual hearings with remote participants, we analyze the systematic organization of camera motions in this setting, and show how they constitute interactional moves in their own right, i.e. 'camera actions', characteristic of 'video communication contextures'. We focus on the production of wide shot, as a situated and timed camera-mediated accomplishment in the course of the hearing, and show: (a) how such an accomplishment is sensitive to its sequential environment; (b) how it is accountable as a way to mark the particular relevance of a group of participants with respect to the ongoing talk, and therefore oriented-to as a resource to visually highlight collective forms of speakership or recipiency; (c) how such camera motions are sequentially relevant and sequentially implicative with respect to the ongoing video interaction; (d) how such camera motion, and more generally the video communication ecologies which enable them make visible a particular member's interactional competence, that of being able to recognize the relevance of subtle changes in participation frames, routinely, unreflexively and on the fly.

Keywords: Courtroom interaction, Video communication, Camera action, Participation, Wide shot

1. Introduction

The study of language use in interaction has proven useful to our understanding of technology-mediated collaboration and coordination in the workplace and in institutional settings, giving rise to the corpus of research known as workplace studies (Luff et al., 2000; Heath and Luff, 2000). Because of the increasingly distributed nature of work in a globalized environment, and of the cost of co-present meetings, various forms of remote participation based on video communication have been spreading, reviving the interest of researchers in video-mediated interactions in work settings (Harrison, 2009; Both et al., 2014). However, contemporary video communication settings are characterized not only by the fact that they have remote participants appearing through video links, but also by the fact that it is possible to move the cameras or devices to which they are attached. In the course of the accountable production of a recognizable activity, parties tend to move the camera, because there is a methodical organization to the joint production of image and talk in video communication settings, whether they be mundane (Licoppe and Morel, 2012) or institutional, as in the case of courtrooms with defendants appearing from prison (Licoppe et al., 2013). This has led to new observable phenomena involving camera motions which were a common issue in TV production studies and have been studied there from a praxeological perspective (Broth, 2008; Mondada, 2009), but which were not relevant at the time of the seminal conversation-analytic studies carried out on video communication and media spaces (Heath and Luff, 1992; De Fornel, 1994), and have only

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been remarked in more recent research on video communication (Mondada, 2010). Camera motions become a particularly salient concern in one camera multi-participant video communication settings like the one we discuss here, and a central issue for studies of video use at work (Both et al., 2014).

In mundane video communication settings, the production of a relevant image involves the active, moment by moment collaboration of the 'shower' and the 'viewer' through talk, embodied displays and camera motions (Licoppe and Morel, 2014). In a courtroom setting, such a collaboration appears constrained, in the sense that the person responsible for the camera will usually elect to move the camera on his or her own (requests to move the camera may happen, but not often) and the potential 'viewed' or 'viewers' will collaborate, but in a more restricted sense as compared to interpersonal Skype communications, which does not involve talk or overt negotiations over the video shot being produced (though they may occasionally display some reaction to the image being produced). With the collaborative production of video shots being thus restricted, from an external viewer's perspective, the camera or the shot appears to be changed by the person in charge of it during the proceedings, in a way which is retrospectively treated as occasioned by the ongoing interaction. Prospectively, the interactional setting is reflexively renewed by the camera motion, and as we will see, participants orient to them as relevant actions.

There is thus an inherently 'filmic' dimension to activities produced in most contemporary video-mediated communication settings, in the sense that: (a) different video shots which are in some sense familiar or 'plausible' are available at the same time, so that the choice of a given one at a given time is 'inference-rich' for members and analysts alike; (b) camera motions leading to the production of a new video shot are not the work of a distanced observer documenting some action, but of an involved participant (or involved participants when the process is collaborative) responding to interactional contingencies in a manner that is relevant to the unfolding video-mediated hearing. Therefore they provide an empirical take on the way members may view, or more accurately inhabit, the current situation. (c) The image on screen is not just a running visual illustration of the talk. Image and talk are a joint, collaborative and situated production testifying to the particular interaction order which is characteristic of video-mediated settings. Camera motions are therefore produced and oriented to as meaningful and accountable actions in their own rights, the intelligibility of which is a common sense phenomenon which may be analyzed in the same spirit as the organization of talk in early conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992; Lynch, 1993).

Our fieldwork involved pre-parole hearings in front of a judiciary commission, with remote inmates appearing from their prison through a video link so as to have their potential dangerousness assessed before they were released. Unlike embodied interactions in the co-present courtroom, which have been extensively documented and analyzed (see for instance Atkinson and Drew, 1979; Maynard, 1984; Travers and Manzo, 1996), interactions in the video-mediated courtroom proceed through video-enabled actions in which the camera is moved at certain sequential junctures in order to attend some specific interactional concerns. We will focus on a particular recognizable 'camera action' in such a multi-party setting, that is the transition from a medium shot, showing one or very few participants, to a 'wide' shot, in which the whole scene or a much greater number of participants is made visible. Such camera work appears as one of the crucial and distinctive threads in the ''improvisational choreography'' (Whalen et al., 2002) of judicial hearings with remote participants.

Such camera motions have traditionally been part of the visual vocabulary of multimedia production. They are constitutive features in the grammar and language of films and TV shows, seen from a semiotic perspective (Metz, 1990). A major difference with the video communication settings we will study here is that with TV and movie production, such 'camera actions', as well as other editing practices and talk itself, are mostly done for the sake of a remote audience (Jayyusi, 1988). However, there as well, they constitute timed accomplishments which reflect a sequential and categorical real time analysis of ongoing media events by their producers (Relieu, 1999; Broth, 2008; Mondada, 2009). Such video practices in media production environments have been studied from two distinct perspectives. The first focuses more on the 'live' collaborative practices of realization crews (Laurier et al., 2008; Broth, 2009), in the spirit of Workplace Studies (Luff et al., 2000). The second puts more emphasis on particular types of video-mediated actions and the way they are responsive to contingencies in the unfolding situations and 'doing' particular things. Such a praxeological perspective has been applied to the 'listening shot' (Broth, 2008), the 'half-split screen' (Mondada, 2009), the 'long shot' in anthropological documentaries (Macbeth, 1999) and minimal 'conventional camera gestures' such as pans, tilts and zooms (Broth, 2014). Our study will not just add another important type of video practice to that list, i.e. the production of 'wide shots', it will also provide a setting in which the use of camera motions appears highly specific, and where such a praxeological perspective will be particularly relevant: in the video communication case, 'camera actions' are not produced for a remote audience by a team of (also remote) professionals. They are produced by one who is party to the interactions and are addressed to others who are party to the same interaction, and thus appear as a kind of endogenous 'live editing'. Camera motions are available for the visual inspection of others who are all involved to some extent as participants in the same institutional interaction, whose response can also be documented. Other participants to the hearings occasionally request that some remedial change be made in the image in the course of the interaction, thus showing that image production and camera motions are accountable in ways which are specific to video-communication settings.

In this paper we will specifically analyze how the transition from a medium shot (where one or a few participants are visible) to a wide shot (showing many participants) features in a particular type of pre-parole hearing with remote inmates