



Interaction and the living body[☆]

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Abstract

Following Goffman (1963), research on embodied interaction in the tradition of conversation analysis has largely approached embodiment as visual conduct. This paper addresses aspects of embodiment, surfacing in interaction episodes in an auto-shop, that resist such an approach, including embodied knowledge and kinesthetic experience, and discusses a variety of approaches that offer alternative views of the human body. These include phenomenology, Philosophical Anthropology, and neuroscience, among others. The question is raised how a rigorous, observational methodology of interaction analysis can be married to a holistic conception of the human body.
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1. Introduction

Naturalistic research on human interaction has primarily conceived the human body and its movements in visual terms. After the initial concentration on verbal interaction, conversation analysts who investigated an ever-expanding range of embodied phenomena of interaction primarily conceived of these as visual conduct.

This visual focus was established by Goffman. In *Behavior in Public Places* (1963:13), Goffman characterized focused interaction as an “exchange of words and glances between individuals”. He wrote about face engagements that “not only are the receiving and conveying [of information, JS] of the naked and embodied kind, but each giver is himself a receiver, and each receiver is a giver” (15–16). Then he pointed out that, ordinarily, this mutuality is made possible by sight:

Sight begins to take on an added and special role. Each individual can see that he is being experienced in some way. . . . Further, he can be seen to be seeing this, and can see that he has been seen seeing this (Goffman, 1963:16).

Goffman’s statement is correct, of course, and his approach to the micro-analysis of interaction has been tremendously productive, not least because the focus on visible—and thus observable—behaviors has saved our field from the speculative attributions of intent and other mental states that have corrupted so many other approaches. And yet, there are aspects to embodied interaction and meaning that are not accessible to vision and videography. These become relevant when we investigate multimodal interaction, which is multi-sensory interaction. For example, during activities that involve the shared handling of physical objects, intersubjectivity is maintained not only by the parties’ visual perception of one another, but also by the tactile or haptic sensations that they experience and generate. Equally important is kinesthesia, the ability of the human body to feel its own movements and states. Without kinesthesia, I would not be aware that it is *I* that is acting or feeling. As Sheets-Johnstone writes, movement and kinesthesia are “the originating ground[s] of knowledge”:

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Not only is our perception of the world everywhere and always animated, but our movement is everywhere and always kinesthetically informed (Sheets-Johnstone 2011:113).

In this paper I want to illustrate the need for a more comprehensive and holistic conception of the interacting body by pointing to a handful of aspects that are not easily accommodated to our customary, vision-based accounts. They all, however, have received a great deal of attention in other fields, including pragmatism (represented here by Joas, 1996), phenomenological philosophy and anthropology, “embodied” cognitive science (Barsalou, 1999; Clark, 1997; Varela et al., 1991), Philosophical Anthropology (a school of thought originating in the 1920s in Germany and most prominently represented by Gehlen, 1988 (1958); Plessner, 1923, 1975), and in the work of Gibson (1962, 1966, 1986). Among these aspects are the body’s skilled familiarity with the material world (embodied knowledge); the role of the “haptic system” (Gibson, 1966) in the production of embodied knowledge; kinesthesia; and the heterogeneity of the ways in which bodily actions contribute meaning in social interaction. I discuss the relevance of each aspect in light of videotaped interaction episodes that took place in a setting rich in skilled bodily activity and artifacts, an auto-repair shop. My aim is not to provide a new conception of the human body in interaction, but simply to provide arguments why it is needed and make suggestions where elements of a holistic conception can be found. How we can study the moment-by-moment production of intersubjective understanding and concerted action in a fashion that accounts for phenomena presumed to be “internal” such as kinesthesia (the subject’s perception of his or her own movements) while maintaining rigorous standards of observability, is a question that is beyond the scope of this paper and will have to be answered by future research.¹

There is an additional factor that makes the development of a more complete conception of the interacting body difficult. Most research on embodied communication implicitly treats the body as a communication *instrument*, under the control of that same authority that controls utterance production. I contend that

we have focused on the ephemeral products that emanate from bodily activity (e.g. gestures), and abstracted them from the bodies that are making them. . . . We have treated the body as a generic machine that, by virtue of its motility, is capable of making gestures—much as the vocal apparatus is capable of producing language sounds—, but we have . . . disregarded what the body, besides its motility, may bring to the process (Streeck, 2003:433).

The sociologist Hans Joas, referring to social science in general, writes that “the relation between an actor and his or her body is [construed as, J.S.] purely instrumental in nature” (169).

The body is thought of as a permanently available instrument of pure intentionality, be it as a technical instrument in instrumental action, be it as a controllable body in the framework of normatively oriented action, be it as the mere medium for expressing intentions in the context of communicative action that is neither recalcitrant nor significant in itself (Joas, 1996:168).

While instrumentalism is commonplace in the social sciences, it comes with a price. “Motility”, Merleau-Ponty said, “is not a hand-maid of consciousness” (Merleau-Ponty, 1960:138). Instrumentalist accounts therefore miss the spontaneous, quasi-autonomous contributions that the body makes to communication, the *creativity* of embodied communication and action:

The instrumentalization of the body by the actor . . . must never be posited as all embracing if the ability to act is assumed at all. . . . In order to solve a problem, you must . . . open yourself to ideas and new types of action that result from the pre-reflective intentionality of the body (Joas, 1996:169–170).

I use the term *living body* (German *Leib*), in contrast both to the anatomical body (German *Körper*) and the body construed as communication instrument. The concept of the living body has occupied center stage in phenomenological research since Husserl (1912), and its importance corresponds to that assigned by phenomenologists to preconscious activity and movement in the world, to “‘mindless’ everyday coping skills as the basis of all intelligibility” (Dreyfus, 1991:3), what Heidegger (1926) called *Sorge* (care), the unconscious intentional acts by which the living body takes care of itself. Paul Valéry noted that “I know only what I know how to handle” (Valéry, 1964:21, cited after Sheets-Johnstone, 2012:110), and Sheets-Johnstone suggests that the foundations of human understanding are “kinetic-kinesthetic” (120). The living body, thus, is a repertoire of “I can’s” (Husserl, 1912). Merleau-Ponty wrote that

the body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them. . . . I am conscious of my body *via* the world, . . . it is the unperceived term in the center of the world towards which all objects turn their face. . . . My body is the pivot of the world, and . . . I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body. [It is] our means of communication with it (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:82, 92)

¹ For a more systematic attempt to clarify this question with respect to gesture see Streeck (2009).

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