

The primordial centre of everything

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Abstract

The conceptual and technical turn towards multimodality in conversation analysis and interactional linguistics facilitated by digital video prompts us to rethink aspects of language that we might have previously thought of as predominantly occupying a single modality such as speech or sign. In this talk I explore the relationships between pointing gestures, speaker-gaze and talk, by reference to the physical configuration of participants within face-to-face conversation. Noting that points may be performed with a variety of articulators including the eyes, I propose that gaze by the current speaker can always be inspected as a ‘possible point’; that is, by indicating an angular vector. We’ll see how points and gaze can be operationalised in object transfer requests, references to places and persons, and in the selection of next-speakers within conversational turn-taking.

I also propose that the primordial archetype for human social interaction is a facing-formation (Kendon 1990; 2010) in face-to-face conversation (Cf., Levinson 2006; Schegloff 1996; 2006), which is ground zero for spatial and social deixis. The existence or otherwise of a neatly bound orientation space at the centre of a facing-formation provides an interpretive basis for distinguishing happenstance gaze from overt points, particularly headpoints. This orientation space also underpins a speaker’s selection of spatial demonstratives and personal pronouns. As the area between referents of a great many personal pronouns, the orientation space is an ideal manifestation of the participation setting. This can be evidenced through straightforward recruitment of next speakers in conversational turn-taking. The data under consideration come from conversations conducted in Gija, Jaru, Murrinhpatha, Australian English and Bahasa Indonesia.

References

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