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The gaze behaviour of spectators: Tackling the multimodality of watching TV

This paper seeks to examine how participants negotiate the multimodality of their everyday lifeworld by describing the gaze behaviour of people watching television and talking to each other. It is based on a turn-by-turn analysis of the ATTAC-corpus which consists of video-recordings of Britons watching football on television in their homes. It must be stressed that the participants in this corpus gathered for the purpose of watching football, i.e. the television is more than “unanalysed and unattended background decoration.” (Scollon 1998: 151) Instead, it holds a central role in the interaction of the participants as e.g. when England plays Argentina.

In regular everyday conversation, generally people tend to face each other, and gaze is used as a key cue for turn-taking and interactionality. However, telephone calls and the language competence of the blind show that gaze is not a necessary prerequisite for oral interaction. In this specific setting, the conversationalists face the following dilemma: on the one hand, they can direct their gaze at each other, but only at the cost of not being able to look at the screen. On the other hand, they may decide to concentrate on the pictures on television. This, however, may be potentially impolite considering the availability of gaze.

First, two non-linguistic factors need to be taken into account, as they are dominant and come before any linguistic or interactional considerations. The spatial arrangements of the viewers seem consequential. The closer and the more in line the participants are seated, the more effort must be used to look at the other person. This represents an extra strain for the elderly, which they may choose not to take. Contrariwise, the further apart (under normal living room conditions) and the more in an equilateral triangle with the television, the easier it is for a dyad to exchange mutual gazes.

Talk-in-interaction is a mutual endeavour by both speaker and recipient(s). For this reason, in conversation, we expect the speaker to gaze at the listener from time to time. Also, the listener should be looking at the speaker to signal listenership. (Goodwin, 1980) In contrast, in the ATTAC-corpus, the football fans, immersed in the games, often choose to waive gaze as a resource in their talk. The violation of this rule is not oriented to by the speakers.

The following factors, however, do prompt the viewers to (re)direct their gaze towards their co-viewers. Humour plays an important role: quantitatively, gaze redirections and laughter often co-occur. By directing their gaze away from the television towards a co-viewer, the participants mark the keying as humorous or draw the attention to (humorous) passages in the media text. Hence, to make humour a binding force between interlocutors, extra-linguistic reinforcement seems called for.

Another context triggering gaze redirections is evaluations. First, regarding the primary media text, utterances such as “good pass that was” or “foul for sure,” where participants take an evaluative stance against the media text, are accompanied by gaze. Also, when participants tell stories, instances of evaluation (Labov & Waletzky, 1967) are marked by gaze. Hence, when viewers open themselves up and give personal opinions, or invite in criticism, gaze is used.

Taking these examples together with the gazes in the context of humour, the umbrella for all these instances is apparently that the selves of the viewers become instantiated or

foregrounded at these points. Hence, further inquiry may yield that gaze in this setting is primarily a marker for identity work.