

Dr. Cornelia Gerhardt

c.gerhardt@mx.uni-saarland.de

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Negotiating multimodality: The gaze behaviour of television viewers

This paper examines 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.

In regular everyday conversation, gaze is used as a key cue for turn-taking and interactionality. However, telephone calls 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.

Talk-in-interaction is a mutual endeavour by both speaker and recipient(s). For this reason, 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. 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, utterances such as “good pass that was,” 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.

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.