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'Showing' in talk-in-interaction

While the practice of 'pointing' has received great attention in the literature (e.g. Kita 2003, Streeck 2009), 'showing', a kindred gesture which involves the prehension of objects to refer to them, less so. This paper investigates the gesture 'showing' in its vocal, verbal, sequential and multimodal gestalt, as a means to shape a specific activity as well as local roles and moral obligations.

In contrast to pointing, the gesture 'showing' involves picking up the object referred to and moving it into the projected site of vision of the addressee to establish mutual orientation and, potentially, a joint activity space. It is accompanied by a shift in body position, gaze redirection (from object to addressee), and other (verbal) means such as summons, locatives or demonstratives. In the main, 'showing', as (part of) a first pair part of an adjacency pair, appears to be a powerful means of increasing the relevance of a response. While the difference between 'pointing' and 'showing' may be partly based on exogenous criteria, like nature of object or proximity to speaker, the choice between the two is also relevant for the trajectory of the interaction. First, showing allows for manipulations of the object (e.g. 'exploratory procedures' Streeck 2009). Also, because of the greater effort it requires and the ensuing closer proximity between speaker and object, it represents a display of greater commitment, closer association or contiguity (cf. also Clark (in Kita 2003) for 'directing to' vs 'placing for'). The gesture 'showing' is always only interpretable against the backdrop of the current activity, shaping or constituting it at the same time.

In the main, this paper will concentrate on the specific case of a German father-daughter dyad cleaning the girl's room and sorting things out, an activity they refer to as 'aufräumen'. Dad uses an array of prosodic, verbal, and multimodal resources to engage the girl in the activity (e.g. terms of address, questions, positioning of the body, and gaze). This also involves picking up the object under discussion and showing it to the girl. Not only does this make a response from her immediately relevant, also it represents a first step in the practical activity of sorting the room (i.e. moving objects from one place to another). Hence, with the help of this gestures, dad manages to engage the girl in the activity, constructing it as a common endeavour of the two in which she has a moral obligation to join.

Finally, as a conclusion, I will compare this specific use of 'showing' to other instances to illustrate the intrinsic connection between activity, roles and gesture, highlighting some of the specific meanings the gesture 'showing' can take on because of this interplay.

Witch holding apple

Adam and Eve

Market stall transaction

class room use of realia