

International Conference on Conversation Analysis (ICCA10) “Multimodal Interaction”

Organized by the Institute for the German Language (IDS)
July 4-8, 2010 / Mannheim, Germany

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“Embodiment and Emplacement”

In the first part of my presentation I present examples of embodied communicative practices that link people to places. One example are gestures of joint attention by means of which workers on a shop-floor orient each other to objects on the floor, their undisclosed features and relationships, and to the role that they are to play in future courses of action. Another are patterned movements of the fingers by which they communicate relevant tactile experience. Of a somewhat different kind are ways of orienting and positioning themselves by which adults and children manage territory and participation in an urban plaza. Every time, social interaction saliently includes sequences in which physical contact with or possession of the material world is shared. In each case, the parties have developed site-specific techniques of the body (Mauss), a local habitus (Bourdieu). The techniques are techniques for inhabiting a place as much as they are methods for making sense in interaction.

These examples give us pause to rethink how we use terms such as body and embodiment, as I will do in the second part of the lecture. The study of multimodal interaction has inevitably moved and blurred the boundaries of our units of analysis. The locus of agency has shifted, from the socially identified, but disembodied speaker-hearer of purely verbal interaction, to the embodied interaction participant of gesture research, to the distributed system that extends into self-made environments made of artifacts. I want to explore what might be gained by understanding embodiment in relation to emplacement and multimodal interaction as co-inhabitation.