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Book Review

Niklas Norén, Christina Samuelsson, and Charlotta Plejert (Eds.)

Aided Communication in Everyday Interaction, Guildford: J&R Press Ltd.; 323 pp.: 978-1-907826-11-5, £35 (paperback).

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This volume contributes practical observations and empirical analyses of interactions to developments in understanding communication as active, participatory, and embodied meaning-making. The focus of the book is on augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) employed with children and adults with impairments that obstruct the typical flow of communication. AAC employs aids such as VOCA boxes and sign boards to facilitate social engagements and allow explicit meanings to be generated and shared. By adopting an enactive and embodied approach to communication, this book is progressive and works to usher in a promising new phase in AAC research that recognises the importance of a rich subjective experience that is able to call on the many resources of the body to communicate affective, contextualised meanings. This book advances understanding of communication as shared, co-created meaning-making made in embodied dialogue.

The book opens this perspective with a well-written, informative, even exciting, Introduction (Chapter 1) seeking to develop an “interactionist and emic perspective... on how persons with communicative disabilities... participate in shared projects of everyday social activities” (pp. 2). The editors talk of developing “mental opportunities for participants” and the importance of analytic focus, not on the individual person and their aid, but on “the joint projects that participants resolve” (pp. 3). This new tact for AAC research, with its accounting of the temporal sequences of expressions of all kinds, acknowledges messages are not simply given meaning through an “input-code-output” computation, but are “situated constructs within the lifeworlds of the persons that produce and understand them” (pp. 5).

Theoretical perspective from semiotics, phenomenology, enactive and embodied social cognition, and intersubjectivity theory all appear to contribute to advance understanding how individuals with communication impairments engage with other persons and how these can be facilitated by devices, materials, and professional practice. In its attempt to reconceptualise assisted communication theory, it offers new light on important features of human interaction previously left out, and redefinition of what activities, expressions, and meanings are of value. Ultimately this alters how one interprets the nature of an engagement, and so measure of its success or failure. While this book aims to support and improve these engagements in professional practice, from the perspective of language development research, this also yields potentially useful data on the nature of communication and its particulars during disturbance.

However, the empirical chapters that constitute the book are not as conceptually advanced as the introduction sets out to be, although they do follow this theme well and work to develop and consolidate this position with detailed example, rather than to expand it conceptually – and this might be just what the field needs. Insightful, detailed, and useful analyses of embodied meaning

making in everyday examples are given in analyses of work with speech and language impairments, offering both grounded material for future refinement and development of communication theory.

The papers employ conversational analysis (CA) as the main element in their analysis and interpretation of interactions. CA is employed to “direct attention to turns and sequences of turns in a conversation, rather than language as an abstract systems of meanings” (pp. 98).

The first paper, Chapter 2 by Clarke and Wilkinson, gives clever analysis of the complexity and nuance of social affordance and affiliation within child-child interactions. Two conversations are analysed that demonstrate a subtle, but essential social connection that might otherwise be overlooked attending conventionally to communication as explicit code. The authors illustrate particular communicative competence “through the judicious alignment of speech, vocalisation, and non-verbal actions”, analysis of which reveal an interdependence that produce meaningful communicative coherence and intimate affiliative friendship.

The delicate interplay of gaze, tone, rhythm and chosen words with layered meanings to collude together in a “shared stance of naughtiness [or] impropriety”; the boys were talking about Daphne, a young, sexually attractive assistant. But I believe this chapter, the opening gambit of the editors’ play of ideas, with its choice topic of ‘improper’ collusion, speaks to us at another level: the authors are inviting us to join with them to recognise passions underneath the text and meanings in-between ‘acceptable’ words; they invite us to share acknowledgement that there exists something more meaningful, more powerful, and more relevant below and between language and civil speech to which most research attends. And it is to these meanings that communication strives to grasp and to share, but with words quickly loses.

I am reminded of A.C. Grayling’s caution that ‘words can diminish meaning’ and Scottish Enlightenment thinker Thomas Reid’s emphasis on the difference between explicit linguistic code and implicit affective meaning, stating that “artificial signs signify, but they do not express... the passions, the affections, and the will, hear them not.” (Reid, 1764, pg. 108). Reid’s “natural language” of feelingful understanding is now recognised essential also for language development, made in sympathetic enjoyment and communicative play, generated with the rhythms of vocalisation, gesture and bodily expression all transmitting dynamic motives and intentions in sharing with others (Malloch & Trevarthen, 2009). From this opening academic counterpoint to traditional interpretation, new territory is opened to explore meaning-making beyond language and in natural dynamics of interactions that recruit all resources available – eye gaze, postural shifts, technological aids, even ‘echolalia’ – to communicate feelings, intentions, beliefs and desires.

Chapter 3, by Pilesjö, looks at the importance of gaze as ‘gesture’, made together with facial, bodily, and vocal expression. By attending to direction and shifts in gaze to the object of shared interest, partner, or in withdrawal, and to temporal aspects of gaze shift in turn-taking and turn completion, this chapter gives better understanding of the role of gaze as communicative gesture. Noë (2004) reminds us of Aristotle’s claim that vision is active and ‘touches’ the environment as it picks up information about it. Pilesjö demonstrates how this ‘touch’ can be used meaningfully in social engagement, especially in turn completion. Improved understanding of the role of gaze in early communication is given new impetus by data on different gaze use in infants from before 6 months old developing autism (Jones & Kiln, 2013).

Chapter 4, by Bloch and Wilkinson, examines communicative “troubles” and their “repair” by adults with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, the commonest form of motor neurone disease. Interestingly, this is a fine example of disruption and repair important in early infancy, shown here to be equally important for generating meaning and companionship in later life.

Chapter 5, by Samuelsson and Ferreira, looks at communicative competence in children with autism spectrum disorder by shedding light on successful interactional mechanisms. The authors focus on “recycling” gestures, phrases, or elements of a conversation that could easily be dismissed as symptomatic of their repetitive and restricted interests to show that recycling is not merely meaningless echolalia but rather “meaningful contributions to communication” (pg. 146), giving another example of how resources of all kinds can be employed in dialogue.

Chapter 6, by Plejert and Sundqvist, gives a dialogic approach to Theory of Mind (ToM) disruption in children with cerebral palsy, casting a wide net that includes both embodied and cognitive approaches in search of theoretical explanation. Four children with cerebral palsy, rather than autism, were analysed by video microanalysis with focus, like Chapter 4, on adaptation and repair as a central aim of their social engagement. They emphasise that knowledge is constituted in social interaction and caution that the kinds of intersubjectivities generated while engaged with ToM tasks may influence its interpretation. Meaning is alive between participants.

The final chapters focus on communication technique. Chapter 7, by Ferm and Saldert, examines formal, facilitated communication with adult patients with Huntington’s Disease, a neurodegenerative disorder that occasionally also affects children. Chapters 8, by Rydeman and Hedvall, and 9, by Ferm, Ahlsén, and Björk-Åkesson, are geared to techniques of adult VOCA use and child Blissboard-mediated interaction, respectively, but are also useful for considering ideas about the whole child embedded and motivated within a world of social and object affordance.

In sum, this volume sets out to introduce a participatory perspective on embodied meaning-making for AAC research and practice. In doing so, it provides interesting studies based largely on conversational analysis that bring out features of bodily gesture, sequence, and timing important for understanding development of communication as much as it is important for improving professional communicational repair. This book makes a stepwise advance in our understanding of the bodily nature of communication.

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