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On the interactional organisation of imitating actions: How young children learn to manipulate objects in social situations

A vast body of literature – ranging from neuroscience to cognitive psychology, education and sociology – has pointed out the role of “imitation” (and comparable notions) as a central means of learning in informal situations, be it with regard to domestic contexts, museums or other sorts of contexts. Given this widespread natural behaviour, also recent projects aiming at developing artificial embodied agents (such as “iTalk”) start to utilize the idea of ‘imitation’ as a means by which robotic agents should learn, within a social context, to handle and manipulate objects and tools. In order to achieve this, careful studies of the ways in which humans organise the activity of ‘imitations’ as a social event are required. In fact, little is known about the interactional organisation of imitative actions and its embedding in the social context in which it occurs. It is this gap, that we attempt to address in the paper.

If we examine video recordings of everyday situations, in which caregivers interact with young children and the latter, by virtue of this, acquire the ability to perform new goal-directed manual actions (e.g. to do a puzzle, to ring a doorbell, etc.), we – and other researchers before us – notice, that caregivers not only perform the action once and the child just copies it, but that the interplay of imitative actions and imitated actions is more complicated: caregivers repeat actions, decompose them, augment or diminish the amplitude of a gestures involved, guide the child’s hand to help performing the action, change the way in which they talk about it etc. – and this in the light of and in close interplay with the activities performed by the child at each moment in time. These changes are referred to within cognitive psychology as ‘variability’.

In this paper, we will start to unpack the notion of ‘variability’ from an interactional, conversation analytic point of view: How do participants organise ‘imitation’ as a social practice? How do imitative and imitated actions evolve with regard to each other in the unfolding course of the interaction? How are these actions shaped in the light of the coparticipant’s reactions (manual action, orientation, facial expression ect.)? How are manual actions, gestures and talk used in concert with each other to structure the activity? – Analysis will draw upon a corpus of video recordings of both naturally occurring interactions between caregivers and young children (18 to 30 months) and comparable semi-experimental situations.

Karola Pitsch & Katharina Rohlfing (2008): On the interactional organisation of imitating actions: How young children learn to manipulate objects in social situations. Paper presented at the ‘International Conference on Multimodality and Learning: New Perspectives on Knowledge, Representation and Communication’, 19-20 June 2008, London/UK.