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Processes of Mutual Monitoring Implicated in the Production of Description Sequences



One of the characteristic things that participants do within face-to-face conversation is gaze toward each other.¹ The ability to gaze at each other may be relevant to participants in a number of different ways. For example, the speaker might produce not only paralinguistic but also kinesic displays about how his or her talk is to be understood and interpreted. For their part, recipients might not only attend to such actions of the speaker but also produce nonvocal displays of their own that provide information about their understanding of the speaker's talk. These displays might then be consequential for the ongoing organization of the speaker's actions. The speaker, being able to see such displays, might take them into account in the production of talk.

In this paper I want to begin to explore features of such processes of mutual monitoring between the speaker and the

hearer within a particular domain: speaker's providing descriptions containing evaluations or assessments of an object to persons being informed about that object. I am going to focus on three separate issues: (1) the speaker's activity of producing the evaluation; (2) how recipients might respond to the assessment with an activity of their own; and (3) how the speaker takes the recipients' response into account in the organization of his or her own actions.

The following fragment provides an example of the type of phenomenon I will be looking at. In this an object is being described, and it is also being assessed with the adjective "unbelievable." Some relevant nonvocal activities of the recipient are indicated below the utterance next to the recipient's name. The letter *n* is used to indicate a nod.² Pauses are marked either by numbers in parentheses that measure seconds and tenths of seconds or by dashes, each dash (-) equaling a tenth of a second:

(1) [G.136:P:442]

Debbie: Well- (1.6) um:, (1.2) we went- first
of all we got lost
an we drove all over an we saw these
unbelievable mansions
in Sewickley Heights. (----) just-
Eileen: n n
Debbie: (-----) u I mean they
Eileen: n n n n

The speaker shows her orientation toward the object being described by using the modifier "unbelievable" to qualify the object "mansions." As a next action to the description, the addressed recipient nods while the speaker pauses in her talk. This nod would seem similar to verbalizations such as "yeah," "mm hm," and "uh huh" and might, like them, be considered a gesture of acknowledgment.³ More precisely, a nod in this position would seem to claim recognition of what the speaker has said and also to display that the hearer is having no particular problem in dealing with the speaker's talk. It should be noted, however, that while the hearer's gesture acknowledges the speaker's talk, it does not show

in detail the sense that the hearer is making of it and thus does not provide proof that adequate understanding has in fact been achieved.⁴

In the following fragment both the speaker's techniques for performing the evaluative description and the recipient's response to it are somewhat more complex than in the previous one. Here the speaker is describing one of the mansions referred to in fragment one. Movements of the speaker's body are indicated in the line above the speaker's name:

(2) [G.126:P:470]

Debbie: An uhm, (1.4) we drive up to this
place, (0.5)

((lowers body))

I thought we were

((lowers body and holds it in place))
inna °museum or something. (-----)

Faced with the task of making the mansion visible in a relevant way to her participants, the speaker does not attempt to provide an exact description of the house as a physical object. Neither does she qualify her description of the mansion with a modifying adjective as in fragment one. Instead she provides her listeners with a description of her reactions to the house on first confronting it. Her experience of seeing the house is likened to being inside a museum or a museumlike place.

A sense of the awe that she experienced is conveyed to the hearer in several ways. First, the selection of the word "museum" with its suggestions of richness and value guides the recipient to see the house in particular ways. Second, the words "°museum or something" are produced in an almost whispered voice, as is indicated in the transcript by a degree sign. The lowered volume suggests an attitude of reverence toward the house. Third, during the production of "I thought we were inna °museum or something,"

the speaker noticeably lowers the upper part of her body in two stages. Finally, following her description, she holds the lowered position for one second, during which the speaker remains silent. The speaker thus displays her sense of having been overwhelmed by the mansion not only with words but also kinesically and paralinguistically.

The following fragment provides a transcript of some relevant nonvocal activities of both the speaker and the addressed recipient during the description. The actions of the speaker are marked above the utterance and those of the recipient are marked below. A line indicates the presence of gaze toward the other. The absence of a line indicates the absence of gaze. Relevant nonvocal behavior of the speaker is indicated above the line indicating gaze, while relevant nonvocal behavior of the addressed recipient is indicated below her gaze line. An *s* is used to stand for a lateral headshake and marks the boundary of one of these actions. Dots show the continuation of some movement. Tenths of seconds are indicated by dashes:

(2) [G.126:P:470]

	((lowers body))	
Debbie:	I thought we were	
Eileen:	((cutting food . .	
	((lowers body and holds it in place))	
Debbie:	inna °museum or something. (-----)	
Eileen:))	_____ S...S...S.

In this sequence, shortly after the speaker begins to mark her description with lowered volume, the recipient begins to organize her actions with reference to the talk. The recipient, who has been looking at the plate where she is cutting up food, brings her gaze to the speaker over the word "something." In the pause after the completion of the speaker's talk, the recipient begins to move her head laterally. The recipient has thus moved her gaze away from a competing activity and displayed coparticipation in the talk.

The execution of the recipient's lateral head movements is closely coordinated with the speaker's own actions. The silence in which they occur has been given a particular shape not only by the talk that precedes it but also by the way in which the speaker's lowered body position is being held during the silence. The silence is thus neither a pause nor a gap,⁵ that is, a break in the activity of producing talk, but an environment in which the involvement of both speaker and hearer in the talk is not only still relevant but actively being sustained through the details of the ways in which they structure their orientation toward each other.

In attempting to analyze nonvocal phenomena such as headshakes, various researchers in nonverbal communication have proposed that gestures can be interpreted in a context-free way. In terms of such a perspective Peter Collett in a personal communication (1979) has argued that lateral headshakes, whether produced by speaker or hearer, invariably carry a meaning of negation.⁶ But such a meaning does not appear to be appropriate to the present data. During the pause the speaker does not treat the headshakes as negations of what she has said but instead continues without interruption to display awe by means of her body. This suggests that such lateral head movements need not be interpreted as negations on all occasions of their use.

At this point we can return to the first fragment and note the nonvocal activities that the speaker produces as she talks:

(1) [G.126:P:442]

Debbie: Well- (1.6) um:, (1.2) we went- first
of all we got lost

S

an we drove all over an we saw these

S S .
unbelievable mansions

. . . S S
in Sewickley Heights.

Here, as the speaker produces the clause depicting the quality of the mansions as "unbelievable," she makes a series of lateral headshakes.

Head movements of this sort frequently occur when participants are commenting on or appreciating a quality of an object or experience interpreted by them as out of the ordinary. For example:

(3) [G.136:P:614]

S S
Paul: Oh: it was beautiful.

(4) [G.126:P:496]

S . S S . . S
Debbie: Oh: she was s:o nice.

(5) [G.26:15:30]

S..S..S..S.S.S.
John: (-----) 'S really wi:ld.

Indeed, if headshakes could be interpreted only as indications of negation of polarity and never as appreciation of the prior utterance, they would on occasion contradict the words they accompany. The following provides an illustrative example:

(6) [G.126:P:517]

((discussing a bath house of a mansion))
Deedee: Do they have stuff set up like to comb yer hair an stuff set up // too?
S..S. . S . . S . S . . S . . S . .
Debbie: Yeah:. They had everything there.

Here the lateral headshakes provide a comment on the out-of-the-ordinary quality of a place rather than a response of negation or polarity to the prior question. It would thus appear that participants, rather than treating gestures such as headshakes as though they had context-free meaning, make sense out of them by analyzing them with reference to the particulars of the local environment in which they occur.

The headshake that occurs after the description in fragment two can be contrasted with the nod following the description in fragment one. With the headshake the recipient does not simply acknowledge receipt of the talk but, by treating it as talk to be appreciated, demonstrates that she has performed some type of analysis on it. Unlike the nod of acknowledgment, the headshake, by being a display appropriate only to some types of talk, provides the recipient with the possibility of displaying at least some aspects of the understanding she has of the speaker's talk.⁷ Other nonvocal actions such as eyebrow flashes, smiles, eyeball rolls, jerks of the head indicating a "take," and so forth also provide the recipient with a range of resources for showing various types of understanding.

The different responses given by recipients in fragments one and two are sensitive to the particulars of the way in which the speaker performs her evaluation in each fragment. In fragment one the modifying adjective explicitly tells the recipient how the speaker is assessing the objects she is describing; in fragment two, however, the speaker invites the hearer to enter into a realm consisting of the speaker's feelings. While in fragment one the speaker's evaluation is overt, in fragment two it is embedded within a description of the speaker's past sensations. The speaker in fragment two relies on the competence of her recipient to figure out from her kinesic and intonational markers something that goes beyond her actual words. (Note also the words "or something" that instruct the recipient to see beyond the particulars of the offered comparison.) In turn, the recipient exhibits to the speaker her ability to perform this task and to come to an understanding, not just of the words spoken, but of what these words are pointing to, by selecting, from a range of possible displays, one that analyzes the talk in an appropriate fashion.

The fact that recipients can perform differentiated actions upon the speaker's talk raises the issue of what consequences such activities have for a speaker monitoring these actions. When a speaker finds no problem with the type of response given by an addressed recipient, the speaker may move on to a new section of his or her description⁸ or even open an elaborated appreciation sequence.⁹

When, however, the speaker finds that the recipient is not dealing with the talk in the way in which the speaker wants it to be treated, the speaker might attempt to solicit more appropriate understanding. Note the following example:

(7) [G.126:P:473] ((referring to the mansion))

Debbie: 'h Anyway I'd say it probly goes t-
(0.3) It includes

Debbie: the length ov: [(---) at least three:]
Eileen: [(puts food in mouth .

Debbie: four of our houses.

Eileen:

.

((opens hands)) ((hands held))
s s s

Debbie: At least. (-----)

Eileen:

. . .)) s . .

n . .n . . n . .

Debbie: Probly four. (0.3)

Eileen:

s . s

. .n

Debbie: of our s. Next to each other. (0.4)

Eileen:

_____ |
ss s s .

Debbie: Much longer,

In this sequence the speaker is attempting to indicate just how massive the mansion she visited was. When the speaker reaches a

first completion point, after the word "houses," the recipient is gazing at her but does not produce any differentiated display of understanding. At this point, instead of proceeding to further talk, the speaker recycles part of the prior unit—the words "at least." In addition, as she does this, she produces a series of nonvocal movements, that is, four rapid small headshakes and the opening of her hands in an expansive gesture, all of which intensify what is being said verbally.

The work done here would seem to indicate that the talk being produced should be treated in a special way. By adding the segment "at least," the speaker displays that even though her talk has in fact passed a point of completion, the speaker is continuing to keep that unit available and operative. This might constitute an instruction to the hearer to search her own actions produced during that unit to see if there were anything absent from them that might be relevant to the speaker's failure to advance further.¹⁰

The hearer does not initially participate in the type of assessment that the speaker is providing. Over the words "at least" she is placing a fork in her mouth, an activity that might impair her ability at that particular point to produce actions relevant to the speaker's talk. At the completion of this unit the speaker pauses and the recipient, who has just removed the fork from her mouth, begins to operate on the talk. She provides lateral head movements that are similar in meaning and placement to those discussed in fragment two. They occur after the speaker provides an added segment to her talk and are produced at the same time as the speaker's held gesture of opened hands, which is occupying the silence. In this example, then, the pause functions much the same way as the pause in fragment two. The speaker argues for the continuing relevance of her prior activity by becoming silent while holding a body position implicated in the prior talk; the recipient, during that silence, produces nonvocal movements that operate on that talk.

We are now in a position to be able to deal with how the speaker's actions might be responsive not only to recipient actions occurring after the completion of a turn constructional unit but also to the activities of the recipient occurring during the course of the speaker's talk. The hearer's lateral head movements begin dur-

ing the pause following the speaker's talk and continue into a second unit added to the speaker's utterance ("Proibly four"):

[G.126:P:473]

Debbie: At least. (----) Proibly four.
Eileen: s . .s . s .

This new piece of talk intensifies or escalates the comparison being made between the mansion and the houses in the immediate neighborhood by choosing the highest number of the previous description. This escalation may in fact be responsive to the recipient's actions. Now that the recipient is displaying appreciation to the comparison, the speaker upgrades the description, picking the highest number from the range of numbers mentioned earlier. The upgrade occurs, however, only after the recipient has openly begun to display appreciation for the comparison that is being made and while the recipient's head is still moving, so that both speaker and recipient are simultaneously producing actions relevant to the comparison.

The fact that nonvocal activities can be produced simultaneously with talk leads to constraints upon their production. If they occur during talk, they should be performed so as to display their appropriateness to the talk co-occurring with them. Though they can begin slightly after the move by a speaker that solicits them, they should not extend into a unit for which they are not relevant.

This constraint may apply to the speaker as well as to the hearer. While the speaker is engaged in conversation, he or she should produce talk that is appropriate to the type of action that the recipient is performing. Objects such as lateral head movements take a certain amount of time to be produced, and these movements can be monitored by the speaker.

In fragment seven the recipient stops her headshakes at the end of the word *proibly* and thus no longer constrains the speaker to produce only a certain type of talk. The speaker, however, can now display that in fact talk is continuing to be produced that proposes the relevance of the type of actions that the recipient is performing:

[G.126:P:473]

Debbie: Probly four. (0.3) of our_s
 Eileen: ______s
 s . s .

She does this with the production of the words "of ours." Insofar as "probly four" can be adequately understood through use of the prior utterance to refer to "our houses," "of ours" displays that the speaker is noticeably holding the talk in place. When this is done, over the last sound of "ours," the recipient resumes her headshakes. The speaker now produces another section, "next to each other," and thus a new unit is entered during which the recipient performs lateral head movements while the speaker is talking:

[G.126:P:473]

Debbie: of our_s. Next to each other. (0.4)
 Eileen: _ss . . . s . . .

It is thus not only that the recipient performs actions on the speaker's talk but that the speaker takes the recipient's actions into account and produces talk that is appropriate to the action that the recipient is producing.

Within conversation recipients have the capacity to display not only hearership but also precise kinds of operations on talk. Insofar as there is this possibility, speakers may not only have to monitor talk but also have to organize their own emerging actions with reference to it, making their own talk relevant to the kinds of moves produced by the recipient. The turn thus becomes a locus for ongoing monitoring and readjustment as coparticipants operate on talk, not just at its boundaries but also during its course.

Footnotes

1. For a discussion of features of the organization of gaze in conversation, see Goodwin (1980) and Kendon (1967).
2. Each *n* stands for one quick lowering and raising of the

head. Elsewhere, when *s* is used to indicate headshakes, each *s* stands for one lateral head movement.

3. Erickson (1979, pp. 103–104) has discussed head nods as forms of “listening response-behaviors” that occur at points in conversation where the speaker signals the relevance of some action by the recipient (at “listening response-relevant moments”). Vocal displays such as “mm hm” and “uh huh” have been discussed by Duncan (1972) as forms of “back-channel behaviors,” following Yngve (1970).

4. Sacks (1970) has discussed how “second stories” provide one means through which a hearer might demonstrate and prove (rather than merely claim) his understanding of a prior story. See also Schegloff (1976) for a discussion of how in next utterances to prior talk similar processes are operative.

5. For a discussion of the distinction between pauses, gaps, and lapses, see Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974, pp. 714–715). Participants attend to silence in talk. (Indeed, the turn-taking system seems to be designed to minimize silence and overlap between turns at points of possible speaker transition.) In addition, participants have resources for both interpreting and dealing with those silences. For example, silence after a first-pair part is seen to belong not to the prior speaker but to the party who has now been selected to speak. In the Jefferson transcription system, silences generally over two tenths of a second are marked, though that is not to argue that participants orient precisely to that unit of time or even that they analyze time in such a way.

Wilson and Zimmerman (1979) have argued that it is possible to track the recycling of the turn-taking options by analyzing the length of a gap. This paper argues that participants utilize not only the possibilities of the turn-taking system but also the resources provided by their co-present bodies to provide and ratify interpretations of silences, with the effect that silences are neither pauses nor gaps but rather spaces that continue to be occupied with material implicated in the production of the speaker’s talk.

6. This argument was in fact made with reference to the headshakes being analyzed in the present data. For a more complete argument of this position see Morris and others (1979, p. 163).

7. Of course, on some occasions of their use, nods may be capable of demonstrating differentiated understanding.

8. For example, in the following the recipient provides

headshakes in response to the speaker's description. The speaker in turn moves on to a different part of her description, introducing talk about paddle-ball courts, after the recipient's headshakes are brought to completion:

(8) [G.126:P:490]

Debbie: They have- 'h Ya go out the back yard.
Big stone steps that go down,
Fountains, (0.2)

s . . . s . s . . . s . . .

Debbie: Just- hu- Flowers everywhere. Big

Eileen: s . . . s . s . . . s s .

Debbie: gardens n everything. You walk down
this one court. They have a paddle ball
court.

Such an analysis is not incompatible with the possibility that the speaker, finding that the recipient is engaged in the activity of appreciation, extends the place in her talk where such activity is relevant. ("Big gardens n everything" is an appositive to prior talk.) Only after the recipient completes her appreciation does the speaker move on to a different type of talk. Such possibilities are discussed later with reference to fragment seven.

9. For example:

(9) [G.84:P:291]

1 Mike: Well I can't say they're ol' clunkers
eez gotta co:rd?

2 (0.1)

3 Mike: Two Co:rds,

4 Curt (1.0)

Curt: [((Jerks head in a "take" response
and then remains silent gazing
directly at Mike))

5 Mike: And

6 Curt: Not original,

7 (0.7)

s .s. . s s .

8 Mike: Oh yes. Very origi(h)nal.

9 Curt: Oh::: reall//y?

n . .n n . . . n . .

10 Mike: Yah. Ve(h)ry origi(h)nal. (-----)

11 Curt: °Awhhh are you shittin m/e?

s . s . s .

12 Mike: No I'm not.

In line 4 of this example the recipient first registers his appreciation of the speaker's talk by rapidly jerking his head toward the speaker and holding it still while remaining silent. He then indicates the out-of-the-ordinary status of the description just produced by providing a verbal expression of amazement (line 6). Curt's talk operates upon what Mike has said, noting a relevant attribute, "original," of the object referred to. This leads to further elaboration of the appreciation sequence. In line 8 Mike produces headshakes that both express polarity and evaluate the talk he is producing. They thus provide an interesting contrast to the headshakes in fragment eight. These headshakes were clearly not to be interpreted as expressions of polarity. Here the expression of polarity is compatible with the assessment, indeed part of the way that that activity of appreciation is being done here. The headshakes are not, however, expressions of disagreement with Curt's appreciation. The appreciation in lines 9-12 is then expanded further in two more rounds of sequences in which Curt first marks the newsworthiness of the speaker's talk and Mike then replies.

10. Clarifications and indeed even prefaces of clarifications such as "I mean" and "you know" might also function in a way similar to the addition of segments in fragment seven. In the following, prior to the speaker's talk, the recipient has been discussing the den in the house of a member of the Christian Coalition:

(10) [G.126:P:596]

Chuck: Any relationship between the dens
and the: Christians?=
Debbie: _____
 ((lifts glass to mouth))

Chuck: =I mean- (---- [----]) An the: uh:,
Debbie: {Knhhnhh!
 ((puts glass on table))

Here the speaker appends to his joke a piece of talk containing the preface to a clarification, but not the clarification itself. However, from this clarification preface, the recipient is able to find the relevance of it for reanalyzing her interactions with the speaker up to this point. The silence following the clarification preface permits time for the recipient to produce appropriate operations on the talk. In the pause that follows the speaker's clarification preface, the recipient begins to laugh, even interrupting her activity in

progress by removing a glass from her mouth so as to achieve an appropriate orientation toward the talk. Thus the clarification preface, like the added segments in fragment seven, provides a means for holding the speaker's talk in place while also providing instructions to the hearer to reexamine her activities with respect to the speaker's talk.

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