Storyteller's gaze in multi-party storytelling

Abstract

This paper presents a video-based single-case study on frequent within-turn shifts in gaze direction, a pattern I refer to as multi-directional gaze. The focus is on storytellers' multi-directional gaze in multi-party storytelling sequences. Drawing on recent research suggesting an intimate association of gaze with assessments (Haddington 2006, Kendrick & Holler 2017) and based on Stivers' (2008) conceptualization of storytelling as a sequential environment where speaker-recipient stance convergence is key, the hypothesis is proposed that multi-directional gaze performs an expressive (rather than regulatory or monitoring) function in storytelling. The analysis confirms the hypothesis. Specifically, it suggests that multi-directional gaze offers a practised solution to the constant danger of marginalization (Auer, forthcoming) caused by the fundamentally dyadic structure of conversation (Stivers 2015). The gaze pattern further partakes in story organization in that the teller's gaze-direction can be observed to shift from one interlocutor to the other at points of transition from one story component to another, thus aiding story recipients with the job "of distinguishing different subcomponents of the talk" (Goodwin 1984: 243). Finally, multi-directional gaze contributes to the storytelling's 'texturing' (Goodwin 1984) as it accelerates in synchrony with the storytelling's progression towards the climax.

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