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Social Interaction

Video-Based Studies of Human Sociality

Co-sensoriality, con-sensoriality, and common-sensoriality: The complexities of sensorialities in interaction

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Tout entière!

Le Démon, dans ma chambre haute,
Ce matin est venu me voir,
Et, tâchant à me prendre en faute,
Me dit: 'Je voudrais bien savoir,

Parmi toutes les belles choses
Dont est fait son enchantement,
Parmi les objets noirs ou roses
Qui composent son corps charmant,

Quel est le plus doux.'—Ô mon âme!
Tu répondis à l'Abhorré:
'Puisqu'en Elle tout est dictame,
Rien ne peut être préféré.

Lorsque tout me ravit, j'ignore
Si quelque chose me séduit.
Elle éblouit comme l'Aurore

Et console comme la Nuit;

Et l'harmonie est trop exquise,
Qui gouverne tout son beau corps,
Pour que l'impuissante analyse
En note les nombreux accords.

Ô métamorphose mystique
De tous mes sens fondus en un!
Son haleine fait la musique,
Comme sa voix fait le parfum!

Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, 1993: 82-85

1. Co-sensoriality

With this special issue about the interplay of sensorialities in social interaction, research on embodied interaction within and without the ethnomethodological and conversation analytic tradition makes an important step forward and again enters into new, hitherto unknown spheres. Some of the human senses have already been thoroughly investigated, most notably the auditory and visual realms of socio-practical and interactional “perceptual work” (Goodwin, 1994, p. 608). More recently, research on the tactile, haptic, and intercorporeal spheres is conducted with great energy to complement extant studies on sight and hearing with further sensory modalities, and to step-by-step come to an empirically founded, integral picture of human social existence. This special issue is important, because it reminds us that an understanding of human social existence certainly encompasses more than the activation of individual sensory modes explored in isolation.

The individual senses must be understood in their interplay, and circumspect studies that fully acknowledge the situational, environmental, and sensorial richness of each moment, as they are assembled here, are urgently needed. Moreover, in many social situations, individual co-participants have different sensorial accesses to the objects at reach and complement one another interactionally in regard to their perceptions, necessarily building upon what Merleau-Ponty (1968, p. 187) calls “perspective multiplicity” and thus establishing a situated “co-sensoriality”. Interestingly, in doing so, the “perceptual work” that is performed to accomplish them becomes at the same time invisibilized: “In a sense, the signification is always the divergence: what the other says appears to me to be full of meaning because his *lacunae* are never where mine are”.

Thus, studies like those assembled in this special issue enable us to obtain a fuller picture of what Heidegger (1962) called our “being-in-the-world” and of all the details of our existential “thrownness”. This, at one point, might allow us to fully understand how social interaction is conducted in “environments of rich relevant resources” (Goodwin, 2018, p. 343). Furthermore, without reducing sensorial experiences to the individual, the studies assembled in this special

issue remind us to stay alert to the social dimensions of sensorial “sense-making” in interaction. Along with visual, auditory, haptic and tactile, gustatory and olfactory as well as kinesthetic, equilibrioceptive and proprioceptive dimensions, that are now, at least partly, investigated, further possible dimensions to be studied include thermoception, chronoperception, and the perception of (the presence or absence of) body-internal aerial, liquid, or solid “objects” (e.g., perceptions of abdominal fullness, suffocation). Ultimately, if we put the socio-practical and interactional, co-sensorial “work” of achieving these perceptions into the center of our research, we might also think of such blurrier notions as “moods” and “atmospheres”, or the perceived “sense of agency” and “self-efficacy” as possible fields of inquiry into sensorialities in social interaction.

At the same time, as it appears, all the studies on embodied multimodal and multisensorial interaction, welcome as they are, also show that the more we know about the importance of the different senses in interplay for social interaction, and their organizational, witnessable details, the more we face empirical and theoretical complexities. Co-sensoriality is only one factor that contributes to these complexities. Two further factors—con-sensoriality and common-sensoriality—will be explored in what follows.

2. Con-sensoriality

Some of the recent work on tactile and haptic co-sensoriality has drawn on Merleau-Ponty, which I will introduce here to illustrate another point relevant for the understanding of both multi-sensoriality and co-sensoriality, namely *con-sensoriality*, or, as Merleau-Ponty himself puts it, *synesthesia*. Merleau-Ponty positions synesthesia not as an extraordinary individual endowment but as a primordial human condition, since for him, generally, “the senses intercommunicate by opening on to the structure of the thing”, so that “synesthetic perception is the rule” (1962, p. 229). He writes:

One sees the hardness and brittleness of glass, and when, with a tinkling sound, it breaks, this sound is conveyed by the visible glass. One sees the springiness of steel, the ductility of red-hot steel, the hardness of a plane blade, the softness of shavings. The form of objects is not their geometrical shape: it stands in a certain relation to their specific nature, and appeals to all our other senses as well as sight. The form of a fold in linen or cotton shows us the resilience or dryness of the fibre, the coldness or warmth of the material. Furthermore, the movement of visible objects is not the mere transference from place to place of coloured patches which, in the visual field, correspond to those objects. In the jerk of the twig from which a bird has just flown, we read its flexibility or elasticity, and it is thus that a branch of an apple-tree or a birch are immediately distinguishable. One sees the weight of a block of cast iron which sinks in the sand, the fluidity of water and the viscosity of syrup. In the same way, I hear the hardness and

unevenness of cobbles in the rattle of a carriage, and we speak appropriately of a “soft”, “dull” or “sharp’ sound” (1962, pp. 229-230).

Thus, Merleau-Ponty claims that we experience the outer world more fully than with individual senses, since our senses not only interact but overlap and complement one another so that in our perception they actually merge. As primordially synaesthetic beings we are existentially related to the world. We are, as Merleau-Ponty (1968, p. 84) expresses it, “flesh of the world”. The idea of strictly isolating the perception of each individual sense is a result of a “scientific attitude” rather than an experience of everyday life. Jean-Paul Sartre gives a literally demonstrative example:

In fact the lemon is extended throughout its qualities, and each of its qualities is extended throughout each of the others. It is the sourness of the lemon which is yellow, it is the yellow of the lemon which is sour. We eat the color of a cake, and the taste of this cake is the instrument which reveals its shape and its color to what we may call the alimentary intuition (Sartre, 1990, p. 186).

Merleau-Ponty and Sartre both refer to the phenomenological principle of *appresentation*: When we perceive an object in a given sensory modality, we experience it by complementing our mode of perception with further cross-sensorial stocks of knowledge and of experience that we possess about it. Dreyfus and Dreyfus give an example:

For example, when I perceive an object, such as a house from the front, the back is involved in this perception not merely as a possible perception which I judge could be produced if I walked around the house, nor as a necessary implication of the concept ‘house.’ Instead, the back is experienced as actually co-present—concealed but suggested by the appearance of the front. Philosophers of ordinary language such as Gilbert Ryle have made a similar point by noting that under ordinary conditions we do not say that we see the front of a house but say that we see a house from the front. Both Merleau-Ponty and the Oxford philosophers would go on from such considerations to suggest there is something wrong with the traditional view that we experience ‘sense data’—isolated units of experience, which must then be organized by the mind (1964, p. xi).

Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, however, emphasize the deeply experiential sensory aspects of these kinds of perception and appresentation. Furthermore, as they emphasize, when we perceive an object, we perceive it as “ready-to-hand” for our possible actions towards it: We see a piece of glass, and our hand immediately knows how it must grasp it to raise it. We see its hardness and brittleness, and the same holds for other properties of materials. Tactile and

haptic experiences do not have to be translated into visual terms or vice versa. Rather, there is a tactile dimension to seeing and a visual dimension to touching. The same is true for all the other senses. Thus, our whole body is engaged in perception, preparing for taking up opportunities for action. “I perceive in a total way with my whole being; I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 50). The similarity of Merleau-Ponty’s body phenomenology to later conceptions of “affordance” and “enactivism” is not accidental (see Gallagher, 2017).

3. Common-sensoriality

If we share an environment of objects and a way of life, we also partly share sensorial experiences, we accomplish co-sensorial work, and institute co-sensorial presentations. This is what Hannah Arendt refers to with her sensorial conception of “common sense”: She denotes with it the pre-reflexive, pre-propositional and pre-linguistic familiarity with our life-world which is socially shared and which serves as a reservoir of “background practices” (Dreyfus, 2017) for co-operation.

For Arendt, common sense “is a kind of sixth sense needed to keep my five senses together and guarantee that it is the same object that I see, touch, taste, smell, and hear” (Arendt, 1981, p. 50). Common sense is “a mysterious ‘sixth sense’ because it cannot be localized as a bodily organ”; and yet, it “fits the sensations of my strictly private five senses—so private that sensations in their mere sensational quality and intensity are incommunicable—into a common world shared by others” (Arendt, 1981, p. 50). Therefore, through common sense, “man’s five animal senses are fitted into a world common to all men” (Arendt, 1998, p. 284). The consequence of this integrating function of common sense is that it conveys a sense of an objective outer world, since it “is the one sense that fits into reality as a whole our five strictly individual senses and the strictly particular data they perceive. It is by virtue of common sense that the other sense perceptions are known to disclose reality and are not merely felt as irritations of our nerves or resistance sensations of our bodies” (Arendt 1998, 208-209). Thus, the “sixth sense’s corresponding worldly property is *realness*” (Arendt, 1981, p. 50; original emphasis).

In other words: Common sense, for Arendt, is a typical human phenomenon which results from the characteristic dilemma of being affectable by the world on one hand and yet being able to transcend, and reflect upon, this relationship on the other. The common sense is the social means to maintain two fictions necessary for our social existence of, at the same time, being distanced observers of a putatively objective outer world and being fellow-persons who share this objective outer world.

4. Co-sensorial, con-sensorial, and common-sensorial phenomenal fields

As Harold Garfinkel has insisted time and again, these two ideas of the givenness of an external objective world—especially of one that is populated by social objects—and of the social sharedness of meanings are fictions that, in reality, are ongoingly accomplished through our, as he characteristically expresses it, “lived, immediate, unmediated congregational practices of production, display, witness, recognition, intelligibility, and accountability of immortal ordinary society’s ordinary phenomena of order, its ordinary things, the most ordinary things in the world” (2002, p. 93). Both fictions are based on “a serious, situated, and prevailing accomplishment that was produced in concert with others by activities” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 182), thus continuously producing what Merleau-Ponty (1968) has called the “*préjugé du monde*”: The “prejudice of the world”—our belief in an objective, external (social and other) world—results from the fact society hides from its members its activities of self-organization—the inexorable, organizationally located work of producing social reality. Society thus leads its members to see its features as determinate and independent objects even though these features are accomplishments achieved by co-sensorial, co-perceptual and, generally, co-operative work of these members.

Therefore, with his “identity theorem”, Garfinkel claims that the “local, endogenous workings of the phenomenon [...], the social fact—freeway traffic jams, walking together, the exhibited order of service in formatted queues, turn taking in conversation—exhibits among its other details the coherence of its identifying orderlinesses as the population that staffs it” (2002, p. 66). That is, there is an essential identity between practices that constitute meaning and practices that interpret meaning (Garfinkel, 1967, pp. 77-79). “Phenomena of order are identical with procedures for their endogenous production and accountability” (Garfinkel, 2002, p. 72).

How is this achieved? In regard to this question, Garfinkel refers to Aron Gurwitsch’s philosophy, especially his “Field of Consciousness” (1964) to describe the “congregationally organized, endogenously coherent embodied phenomenal field properties of objects” (2007, p. 38). These “phenomenal field properties”, or “details”, are at the same time produced in “incarnate” and “reflexive” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 1) manner by the co-interactionalists, and perceived by them co- and con-sensorially as “coherent gestalt contextures”, in which each component has its meaning only within the totality of the gestalt in the here-and-now. The endogenous gestalts of a phenomenal field are therefore at each moment constituted anew, interacting with the ever-changing phenomenal field as it, for the given situation, allows for (co-, con-, common-) sensorial experience. The phenomenal field and its details mutually elaborate one another, and each is used to understand the other. Thus, from an ethnomethodological perspective, the lived work of co-participants accomplishes perceptions and sensations as external environmental and objective “conditions”.

In phenomenal fields, all three social sensorialities—co-sensoriality, con-sensoriality, and common-sensoriality—interrelate and interact. It is the complex, ever-changing, and haecceic interrelation between co-sensorialities (sensing together and in mutual elaboration), con-sensorialities (sensing objects in the external world as synesthetic wholes) and common-sensorialities (sensing the external world as reality shared with our fellow persons) that makes studies on sensoriality in social interaction so complex—theoretically and methodologically. In order to fully understand the “*conditio humana interactiva*”, we need to study them within the situatedness of phenomenal fields and by focusing on their organizational details that mutually elaborate and contextualize one another, as accomplished in this special issue. If not, it is as Baudelaire (op. cit.) says in his last two paragraphs: The harmony of the various sensorialities that, at each moment anew, constitutes the whole gestalt as a unity is exquisite (“artful”, Garfinkel 1967: vii); and in view of the many chords to be noticed, any analysis that intends to dissect and detach the individual indexical details remains powerless. As Garfinkel (2007, p. 31) expresses it: Analysis then “loses the phenomenon”.

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i Completely One

The Devil and I had a chat
 This morning in my snugery;
 Trying to catch me in a lapse,
 'Tell me', he said beseechingly,

'Among the many charming things
 Of which her body is composed
 That make her so enrapturing,
 Among the objects, black or rose,

Which is the sweetest.'—O my soul!
 You foiled the Tempter with these words:
 'Since all is solace in the whole
 No single thing may be preferred.

I can't, when all is ravishing,
Say some one thing seduces me.
She is the Daybreak's dazzling,
The Night's consoling sympathy.

And the exquisite government
The harmony her grace affords,
Makes analytics impotent
To note its numerous accords.

O mystic metamorphoses
In me, my senses all confused!
She makes a music when she breathes,
Sounds of her voice are sweet perfumes!