

The role of enactment in language and interaction

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He could sign beautifully. He was tall and thin, with long arms and wide, long fingers, and when he told the rest of the class stories, his arms would become whatever he was telling the story about.

-- Louise Stern, The Deaf School

Enactments are the improvised and tightly coordinated multimodal ensembles we use to mimetically quote the actions, utterances, thoughts, and feelings of ourselves and others. As illustrated in the epigraph above, people use enactments to momentarily embody or “become” something or someone within their interactions; a modality-agnostic interpretation of what Vološinov described as “speech within speech, utterance within utterance, and at the same time also speech about speech, utterance about utterance” (1973: 115). Enactments can be identified by three heuristics, there being: i) a depiction of an action and/or dialogue event; ii) an indexical relation between the alleged or proposed event and the current moment; and iii) an epistemic evaluation of the event, whereby the person selectively imbues their personal values or stances into the depiction (Tannen, 1989; Clark, 1996).

A broad church of (socio)linguistics literature has interrogated how enactment works across a range of languaging contexts using different theoretical perspectives and analytical angles. This includes understanding how sighted hearing speakers, deaf signers, and deafblind signers recruit different bodily articulators into their enactments, especially how heavily conventionalised forms such as spoken words and/or manual signs are coordinated with more improvised actions which depend on context for interpretation. It also includes how we use enactments to adopt different character perspectives or viewpoints while also colouring the narrative peaks of discourse, and how enactment varies across language users according to different genres and demographic variables. More recently, scholars have looked at how enactment facilitates stance-taking and how multimodal preferences for doing enactments can be compared cross-linguistically.

In this talk, I draw on this body of work to elaborate the mechanical, semiotic and social aspects of enactment in relation to language variation and change. My aim is to consolidate what we know into a bigger, overarching question: Why do we do it? What is the social role of enactment and what power does it afford?

References

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