92. Proxemics and axial orientation

1. Introduction
2. A selective and critical overview of the research
3. Outlook
4. References

Abstract

The regulation of distance and the body orientation of communicating partners is a semiotic resource, which is relevant, or can be assumed to be relevant, in every co-present interaction situation. As this overview of the research shows, this is borne out by a systematic study of the correlation between proxemic activities and axial alignment, and the development of specific interactive tasks.

1. Introduction

An elaborate and secret code that is written nowhere known by none, and understood by all.

(Sapir 1928: 137)

Non-verbal signals such as facial expressions, gestures, and physical movements that are learnt or acquired in the course of socialization, and enculturation frequently occur in communicative situations in conjunction with verbal signals. However, whilst the structure of a language involves discrete units (sounds, words, phrases, constructions, and expressions among others), non-verbal signals must first be identified as such, in order to be able to interpret their meaning in context — if they are not grasped intuitively as a result of strong conventions (see Grammer 2004: 3448–3449). Thus non-verbal, as well as verbal, signals act as a signifier: they can be perceived and interpreted and therefore lead to conclusions (inferences) of a contingent (index), causal (symptom), associative (icon), or rule-based type (symbol) (see Keller 1995: 113–132). Relevant components of the context for interpretation of non-verbal signals are, firstly, aspects of the com-
municative situation (including the characteristics and features of the interlocutors), as well as the verbal signals always involved a concurrent understanding of non-verbal signals (see Grammer 2004: 3474).

In this way, the production of a structure of interaction order comprises different types of signals and signs and is also involved in their mutual interaction. Non-verbal signals are therefore not just interpretable due to a given context, but at the same time they provide the conditions of the context under which the verbal part of the communication is interpreted. Non-verbal signals are also understood correspondingly as contextualization cues (see Auer 1986; Auer and di Luzio 1992; Gumperz 1982, 1992).

Until recently, studies of the connection between verbal and non-verbal signals in the comprehension process have been carried out principally within the field of kine


In contrast, two aspects of non-verbal behavior, as related to the verbal part of communication, have rarely been studied specifically: proxemics behavior (see Hall 1969, 1974, 2003), that is, the spatial relationship between interacting participants (for an overview, see Aiello 1987) and axial orientation, that is, leaning towards or away from the communicating partner with the head or body. Contributions to research in this area stem mainly from sociologists, anthropologists, ethnographers, or psychologists. They can be distinguished, in that they focus more on the identification and categorization of non-verbal activities and the development of new concepts, and less on the interplay with the verbal aspects of communication.

The reason for this is that many of these pieces of research are based on a working definition of the research into the non-verbal (explicitly or implicitly) that can be attributed to the most prominent researcher in proxemics behavior, Edward T. Hall: “Non-verbal communication, defined (by Hall) as communication that does not involve the exchange of words” (Rogers, Hart, and Miike 2002: 10). From this perspective, it is the emotional and interpersonal attitudes expressed in proxemics and axial behavior, above all, that have come to the fore.

In case studies, however, it is the interaction of distance and axial orientation with other non-verbal components that has been investigated (Argyle and Ingham 1972; Kendon 1973). Nevertheless, there are few in-depth studies of the link between such non-verbal activities as regulating distance and forward inclination concurrently with verbal activity, in terms of the organization of discourse or thematic control. More recently, however, a concept of discourse analysis has been established under the term multimodal interaction, in which the observation of participants focuses equally on verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication, in terms of the construction of an interactive order by all those involved and this anthroposemiotic term also encompasses proxemics and axial orientation (see, e.g., contributions in Schmitt 2007).

How the relationship between non-verbal and verbal signals is to be evaluated in principle remains controversial: are non-verbal activities such as the regulation of interactive distance and forwards inclination — analogous to the differentiation in the func-
tions of hand gestures in connection with the spoken language, according to Ekman and Friesen (1969) – complementary to speech (or contrastive) or do they also function as substitutes for verbal activities (as emblems)? In general terms, the question is: what possible communicative functions do non-verbal behaviors like interactive distance and inclination regulation fulfill?

The following selective and critical overview of research seeks to ascertain if, and to what extent, distance behavior and axial orientation are considered in research that also considers the verbal element of communication. In so doing, the focus rests on studies in which conclusions are made, or at least inferred, about tendencies or preferences in the body positioning of interlocutors in two or more person discourses. The presentation is only an approximate organization according to discipline and methodological approach to the phenomena. A clear delineation of the disciplines involved is not always possible, because of the interconnection of scientific theories.

2. A selective and critical overview of the research

2.1. Semiotics

Rauscher (1986) outlines the intentional use of non-verbal signals as an example of distance regulation. From the semiotic perspective, interactive distance is portrayed as a sign system that not only uses signs (products) intentionally, but whose intentional use, in hindsight, is also the subject of reflection (see also Ravelli and Stenglin 2008). The "language of space" as proxemics communication schema can be reconstructed as follows: “Sender A, at an interactive distance \( D_x \), as opposed to other possible interactive distances \( D_1 \ldots D_n \), represents \( D_1 \ldots n \neq D_x \), intends to communicate an item \( E \) by \( D_x \) to Receiver B, to which \( E \) attributes conventional meaning \( D_x \). The intention of A involves that B recognizes this intention” (Rauscher 1986: 449). (All German direct quotes were translated into English in order to ensure a more even flow of language). The problem here is that the “distance-meaning-pairing” (\( D_x \rightarrow E \)) is assumed to be conventionally established – expressed in the construction grammar paradigm, this would correspond to “proxemic constructions”. The phenomenon of distance, in particular, leads to the assumption that the measurable element (distance) could result in specific meanings being attributed. Since distance between interacting partners cannot be proved fundamentally in terms of fixed classifications and boundaries, and is much more negotiated and assigned relevance interactively, models of interaction distance as a signal system with physically measurable elements is not an accurate representation of the relational or dynamic character of personal space behavior. A “semiotic” use of proxemics relationships can be explained, similar to the cited reconstruction of Rauscher, but primarily with the aid of the so-called Grice’s Basic Model (see Grice 1979; Meggle 1981; Rolf 1994). This would have the advantage that the same model could be applied to both verbal and non-verbal behavior in describing how meaning is attributed.

2.2. Anthropology and social psychology

The existence of four distance zones, first described by Hall (1969), which regulate proximal behavior and reflect or determine the combined roles and status of the interlocutors is undisputed. As a result of work by the anthropologist Hall, the various culturally
conditioned dimensions of the zones of intimate proximity, personal space, social space, and public space can be distinguished. With the exception of public space, these distance zones have biological origins to a certain extent, ethological findings indicate that they are a part of all specific forms of territorial behavior (see for example, the difference between flight, defense, and critical distance of Hediger 1934). The respecting of these distance zones is mutually required by the interlocutors; deliberate encroachments are either sanctioned or a part of verbal discussion. In order to discover more precisely how the interlocutors handle these distance zones when they are part of a two or more person discourse, it should be observed that, dependent on the cause of the interaction, the role and status of the interlocutors, the physical spatial arrangement is either accepted as a pre-established rule (and generally observed in the course of the interaction) or negotiated. The latter is particularly valid in communicative situations in which the interacting partners have the possibility of adopting a (physical) position for discourse freely, or change position, such as communicating while standing. It can be deduced from these cases that certain positions (distancing or leaning towards or away from) are favored in certain constellations and that this also correlates, in part, with particular interactive tasks, i.e., that interactive distance behavior and axial orientation interact systematically with the respective verbal aspect of the communication.

Argyle (1975) also highlighted that this spatial aspect, particularly forwards or backwards inclination, plays a significant role in communication when he linked the knowledge of behavioral research, ethnology, and experimental social psychology. Thus, he indicates that the distance between interlocutors is also controlled by the extent to which they are able to perceive auditory and kinetic signals: “If another person is too close only part of him can be seen; if he is too far away his facial expression cannot be seen. Orientation also affects how much can be seen; however, if he adopts the best orientation for seeing – head-on – the looker is also fully exposed himself, perhaps more than he wants to be” (Argyle 1975: 155). This last remark makes it clear that it is assumed, of course, that not just physical, but also cognitive and social psychological factors could be responsible for the adopting or changing of certain physical positions during discourse. Spatial behavior is always “encoded and decoded in terms of interpersonal attitudes, and in other ways, […] though it may not be intended to communicate at all” (Argyle 1975: 312; see also Kalverkämper 1998: 1341). Argyle (1975: 300–306) also observes that distance behavior and axial orientation are connected by a kind of inverse relationship: a frontal orientation is linked to a greater distance, a side-by-side orientation to a smaller distance. Experiments confirm the preference for certain axial positioning in different social relationships with the interacting partner: competition with a face-to-face orientation, cooperation with a side-to-side orientation (see Cook 1970; Sommer and Becker 1969). Incidentally, the latter can be used, to a certain extent, as a somatic explanation of how the expression of solidarity (“to stand shoulder-to-shoulder”) may have arisen. The favored conversation position when sitting at a triangular table is a ninety-degree orientation (except for culturally determined special conditions, see Argyle 1975: 307–312 on this topic). Thus the positioning “across the corner”, which suggests both cooperation, as well as competition, and which enables a shared perception of events and processes external to the discourse, and moreover, is open to further potential interlocutors. These are important indicators that certain formations are influenced by both the type of social relationship and the opportunity for verbal communication.
2.3. Psychology

In psychology, the regulation of distance and axial orientation as articulated elements of speech-related behavior within the parameters of research into emotion has been studied mainly for diagnostic purposes (see Wallbott 2003: 561). According to the well-known functional classification of Ekman and Friesen (1969), non-verbal behavior can be divided into five categories (illustrators, adaptors, emblems, regulators, and affect representations). It is certain body postures that are adopted above all within the category of affect representations, however, it can be assumed that distance and axial orientation as “dynamic body postures”, as understood in the interactive role, can also be adopted by the role of regulators. Salewski (1993) considers in depth the spatial distance behavior in interaction, as it is developed within the concept of “personal space” (Hayduk 1981a, 1981b, 1983). The concept of personal space describes the existence of an intra-individual constant, but an inter-individually different personal sphere, which has the value of a personal trait. According to the justified criticism of Patterson (1975, 1976), the personal space concept should be re-categorized as an interpersonal space concept. Personal space is only visible because it is damaged at its boundaries; however, such a crossing of boundaries can only be initiated by others (by the bordering or overlapping of the personal space) – but probably also by representatives of others like cameras, as might be studied experimentally. Recently, Salewski proposed a model which might explain the adoption of a particular interaction space that can be measured. Knowles (1980) affiliative conflict theory appears to be a suitable candidate. At its core this theory is based on the equilibrium theory of Argyle and Dean (1965), which says, that eye-contact and interaction space behaviors arise from a need to balance affiliation and keeping distance. Knowles (1980) considers the tendency to approach as fulfilling the desire for contact and feedback above all, whereas the tendency to keep one’s distance is motivated by the fear of rejection by others or of the unwilling and public exposure of inner states. The motives for approaching and keeping distance mentioned here probably explain not just the maintaining of particular interaction zones, but go some way to explaining that observable actions of the interlocutors are responsible for their positioning. With respect to the above empirical study and its criticism of the personal space concept, Salewski (1993: 71–96) concludes that personal space behavior is not only an interpersonal phenomenon, but also that even “the expectation of one interlocutor causes the other to display a particular personal space behavior”. This correlation between the interpersonal relationship and its assumption and interaction space behavior respectively has already been documented by Leipold (1963). He was able to prove that interaction space behavior correlates systematically with the expected attitude of the other: if one interlocutor believes that the other has a negative attitude towards him, he will maintain a physical distance (independently of how the other behaves towards him in an actual communication situation); if he/she believes that the other has a positive attitude, he/she will seek physical proximity. Leipold designed his experiment using the roles of teacher and pupil. However, it cannot be ruled out that, even under non-institutional and outside laboratory conditions, personal spaces are linked systematically to the ideas and constructions that the interlocutors mutually assume, in relation to the presence or absence of affinity – independently of whether these are justified or not. With regard to axial orientation, Knapp (1979: 324) expands on Leipold’s findings, by observing that if communication takes places while standing, the shoulders of the
person with higher status tend to be directed towards the person of lower status. However, this occurs independently of the quality of the attitude towards the person of higher status. The findings identified here indicate a fundamental assumption that interaction space and axial orientation are influenced and directed by various factors, which can strengthen or hinder potential outcomes. Such factors include cultural norms and conventions, situational elements (cooperation and competition), personality variables (gender, age, status, popularity etc.), as well as non-proxemic, non-verbal behaviors (facial expression and gestures among others) and, of course, verbal communication elements (see Hayduk 1983, for a structured overview of this topic).

2.4. Psychotherapeutic research

In the field of psychotherapy, Scheflen (1964) in particular, has drawn attention to the “significance of posture in communication systems”. Scheflen adopts Birdwhistell’s view that “the communication system as a whole [is] an integrated arrangement of structural units, originating from kinesic, tactile, verbal and other elements” (Scheflen 1964: 320). That elements appear next to each other is by no means coincidental, indeed the interaction between individual elements is coordinated or synchronized, as, for example, the movements of the head, eyes, and hands with the change in intonation at the end of verbal phrases. In this context, Scheflen also describes aspects of posture that are used analogously in larger units of communication. In addition to the standardized configurations of posture, he includes markers for “points, positions and presentations” (Scheflen 1964: 320–324), as well as indicators for the relationships between interlocutors. If the interlocutors form a group, they define themselves through their body position and the placing of their limbs. “If group members are standing or are able to move the furniture, they will tend to form a circle” (Scheflen 1964: 326), in order to demarcate a territory within which to interact. The group action to create such an “enclosure” is directed towards the equilibrium of the group. It serves to maintain social control within the group (see Scheflen 1976: 38–50). By adopting particular (body) positions for discourse, access to the group and availability within the group is regulated. Scheflen (1964: 326) sees this as the realization of the inclusive and non-inclusive function of (body) posture (in relation to others). He differentiates further between interactive (face-to-face orientation) and complementary (side-to-side orientation) types of activity, although here he only considers particular seating arrangements and no forms of discourse in which positions are freely adopted. In this context, Scheflen makes the pertinent observation, that if particular postures are imitated directly or reproduced as a mirror image by the interlocutors, this reflects viewpoints or roles — further evidence that non-verbal signals can function as cues or aids to contextualization or interpretation of the “uptake”. If we consider the focus of the most recent studies of non-verbal processes in psychotherapy, it can be noted that other non-verbal elements (for example, smiling, touching, or various modes of expressing emotions) are emphasized, and interaction space behavior and axial orientation have been relegated to a place of medium interest (see, for example, Hermer, and Klinzing 2004).

2.5. Non-verbal communication

In his study of the role of visible behavior in the organization of social interaction, Kendon (1973: 35–37) states that there are two significant conditions for the spatial arrangement of groups of people: the adoption or maintenance of a particular distance
away from the other interacting participants, as well as an axial orientation, which means that leaning towards the other interlocutors is only enabled by turning the head at an angle of less than 90 degrees. Such “configurations” indicate the status of those involved. “The particular form that the configuration as a whole assumes reflects the type of occasion and the kind of role relationships prevailing in the gathering” (Kendon 1973: 37). Circular configurations often indicate equal rights. Triangles, semi-circles, or parallelograms “tend to have a ‘head’ position at which the member with the most rights to participation is usually located” (Kendon 1973: 39). At the same time, the distance between the interacting participants in similar configurations can vary according to the environment. Thus, groups in public spaces often move closer together than in private spaces, because in “open” spaces the territory demarcated for interaction by the group has to withstand potential intruders (see Kendon 1973: 37–38). Exactly how such configurations originate, what dynamics they exhibit and how they disband — is the desired research focus, following Kendon’s work. With respect to the roles of the participants in multi-person discourses, Kendon distinguishes between speakers, active listeners, non-axial listeners, and those that have temporarily withdrawn from the interaction (see Kendon 1973: 52–54). Speaker and active listeners are connected by a so-called axis of interaction (this term can be traced back to a work by Watson and Potter 1962), whose origin is the coordination of movement and interactive synchronicity, which is regulated, above all, by a change of speaker (see also Condon and Ogston 1966, 1967). In a detailed study, Kendon and his colleagues, using analysis of film footage of a seated, multi-person group, were able to establish that interacting participants demonstrate responsiveness or general communicative availability in an impersonal way to the dominant or current speaker in a group, by the synchronized movements of the interacting participants (this may only be the rhythm of performing particular head, hand, or body movements). Comparable observations of actions and behavior patterns of interacting participants who are standing and therefore less restricted in their movement have indicated that synchronizing sequences of movement is the key communicative function — apparently independent of which form of behavior is affected. According to the classification of functions by Ekman and Friesen (1969), patterns of interactional synchronized behavior are classified as regulators. In this respect, Kendon (1990a) stresses that body positioning and axial orientation in the formation promotes a focused interaction, which the joint action both frames and structures: “there is a systematic relationship between spatial arrangement and mode of interaction” (Kendon 1990a: 251).

2.6. Linguistics

In her search for a linguistic explanation for non-verbal communication, Kühn concludes that “from the correlation of the multi-dimensional nature of physicality and the multimodality of the response to physicality” (Kühn 2002: 208) there are three basic principles of the fundamental structure and organization of non-verbal communication: the coordination principle (temporal coordination of body and language), the choreography principle (the relationship of body movements to one another), and the proxemics principle (personal and shared communication spaces). With regard to the coordination principle, Kühn points out the interesting fact that, next to the synchronized interaction of language and body, asynchronous cases can also be observed, for example, when gestures precede speech (see also anticipatory gestures as noted by McNeill 1985; Streeck and Knapp 1992). Comparable explanations can be assumed for some of the actions in con-
nection to proxemics and axial orientations: in addition, coming towards or moving away, forwards and backwards inclination can precede and anticipate speech. As far as the choreography principle is concerned, Kühn (2002: 216–231) stresses that any attempt at a reproducible analysis of inter-subjective movements has been unsuccessful. The spectrum of research here stretches from the meticulous measurement of physical size to psychological or liberal artistic interpretations. What can be confirmed is that “choreographic” body movements, coordinated with speech, make the process of reception on the part of the communicating partners easier, since these structural aspects of verbal communication help the interlocutors to clarify or explain the tasks and requirements of the way in which discourse is organized. Kühn sees the proxemic principle, above all, as bringing about the defense of personal space and in the take up and release of interactional space. In this way, the proxemics principle, in concrete terms, depicts the fundamental acceptance of research into politeness, as expressed by Brown and Levinson (1978) for example. The need for proximity and forwards inclination, as well as the need for distance and backwards inclination can all be seen as realizations of ambivalent interest, that Brown and Levinson (1978: 66–70) attribute to each interlocutor: on the one hand, the need to be acknowledged and valued by others, on the other, the desire to remain undisturbed and unimpeded in one’s own actions.

The empirical basis for Kühn’s study is a discourse group with a fixed, semi-circular seating position, opened towards the camera. In this way she takes the penetration of the gesturing space of the other (e.g., to negotiate the right to speak) and changes in the axial orientation (for example, to address the group or for thematic positioning) into account. Thus personal space in interactive situations, in which the interlocutors are able to adopt their body positions freely, the specific sequence of movements agreed together and the “dancing” with or against one another, cannot be observed. In all, Kühn’s observations demonstrate clearly that distance regulation and axial orientation can be used as contextualizing cues, along with other indicators.

2.7. Multi-modality

Originating from the idea of interaction as the multi-modal production of an interactive structure by all those involved (see Deppermann and Schmitt 2007: 16–20; Hausendorf, Mondada, and Schmitt 2012), non-verbal elements of communication have become an increasing focal point in recent years — doubtless due to the technical advances made in the collection and processing of empirical data (the focus on so-called context analysis can already be seen in the work, for example, of Kendon 1990b and of Kress and van Leeuwen 2001 and Norris 2004 among others). In order to do justice to the now complex documentation on interaction processes, it is worth moving beyond the focus placed on the verbal: “prosody, facial expression, eye contact, gestures and body posture should be afforded the same methodological standing in future, that the analysis of verbal expression currently enjoys” (Schmitt 2004: 1). In this connection, some studies of interaction in multi-modal forms have taken as their theme specifically the interaction distances, the spatial arrangements of the bodies of the interlocutors and their axial orientation, also as regards the relevance for the concurrent verbal communication. With respect to establishing an interaction order (in the sense of Goffmann 1983), Mondada (2007), in comparison with other detailed studies, showed that verbal actions are suspended, slowed down, or delayed, in order to shape the shared interactive space by reorganizing the physical positioning, such that an appropriate continuation of communication is
enabled (for example, producing a shared line of sight when giving directions, including corresponding pointing gestures). The results of the cross-sectional studies show clearly that body positioning in the interaction space is the product of both an interpersonal and an intrapersonal coordination. The latter is particularly evident, in that the formatting of the corresponding remark indicates signs of the demands of the non-verbal actions occurring at the same time. Mondada concludes that: “the orientation of participants in the interaction space is not a given, simply existing, already present, but rather, it must be actively created by them” (Mondada 2007: 84). It can be assumed, that even these acts of formation can generally be correlated systematically with the (verbal) interaction tasks present at the time, i.e., that not only linguistic expressions demonstrate signs of the creation process of an appropriate interaction space, but that proxemics and axial behavior are also actions that result in the production of expressions related to interaction tasks and only then can continued communication be facilitated. Tiittula (2007) studied the organization of glances in a side-by-side position with three interlocutors during a business dialogue and concluded that: “different interaction constellations and the status of those involved are initiated and terminated through the organization of looks and body postures” (Tiittula 2007: 248). In this situation, a change to the axial orientation also proves to be closely connected with the different task-specific verbal requests, (in the above study, products are presented, checked, orders are taken, etc.). Furthermore, the changes in the physical orientation correlate with the exchange of phases of business-motivated actions and non-business related types of orientation (for example, the explanation of certain words in the other language), which is accompanied by a change in the mode of interaction. The focus of the analysis carried out by Tiittula, though primarily concerned with how looks are organized, is nevertheless evidence that the physical orientation of the interlocutors is also systematically linked to verbal interaction tasks and demands. Taking the example of dance teachers, who observe individual pairs during the dance lesson and briefly interrupt and correct them, Müller and Bohle (2007) propose a prototype for the preparatory steps in establishing an interaction space. They are making a detailed study of how the pre-conditions for a focused interaction are created together by those involved, through body orientation and positioning within the space. Müller and Bohle identify the positioning and orientation of the pelvis and the feet as the physical actions, by which the three interlocutors in the above example established a triangle formation together, to which all have equal access. The task for the third person (dance teacher) is formulated as follows: “How do I gain entry into an existing interaction space for two people and in a face-to-face orientation?” (Müller and Bohle 2007: 133). Opening up focused interaction as a structural principle of social interaction is also valid in everyday situations. If people standing start a discourse in an unstructured open space, they form polygons, depending on their number. In this way, it can be seen that the tendency to re-shape the established interaction space to facilitate the entry and exit of those involved, i.e., by ensuring that accessibility for all is guaranteed by creating the new formation together (Müller and Bohle 2007: 151—160). Müller and Bohle consider the role of the verbal element only in as far as they show that the production of a “fundament of focused interaction” (the title of their text) is the shared, coordinated action of those involved, which precedes and facilitates verbal exchanges. The transition between physical action and individual, concrete linguistic utterances in the interaction space is not studied in detail, however.
2.8. Conclusion

This overview of the research indicates that results or simply incidental comments of proxemic behavior and axial orientation are spread over various disciplines and embedded in different methods of investigation and key questions. Research addressing the question as to what connection there is between non-verbal and verbal actions is not yet concluded. The trend in current research seems to be to perceive both as elements of the same process (Wallbott 2003). In order to analyze how verbal and non-verbal communication mesh together, however, it is also necessary to understand and classify non-verbal signals specifically. To do this, as Wallbott (2003: 579) highlights, it is essential: “not only to observe non-verbal behavior and language at a macro level, but to attempt to study in ‘micro-analyses’ the point-by-point relationship between both behaviors over the course of time”. The basis for this must be an appropriate transcription of the non-verbal behavior (see for example, Hausendorf, Mondada, and Schmitt 2012, for more recent analyses).

3. Outlook

In studying personal space or proxemics actions and axial orientation as part of human communication systems, it is evident that related behavior and action are both significant. As behavior, these non-verbal elements of communication are symptoms; as actions they are symbols. Rauscher (1986) argues that only in cases of intentional use can proxemics be part of a semiotic study: “as far as our actions are affected, the conscious application of proxemics relations, as a signal for the receiver to use socially established paradigms with regard to space, or for which the receiver accepts the sender’s intention in this situation, on the basis of such paradigms” (Rauscher 1986: 441). If we disregard the problems behind them what count among semiotics, it becomes clear that in the intentional use of proxemic and axial symptoms, a metamorphosis of signals can be demonstrated, as construed by Keller (1995: 160–173). Particular (physical) discourse positions can be adopted intentionally and consciously in relation to specific communication states or interaction functions. Behavior as a natural, qualifying adaptation to the physical and socio-cultural environment is instrumentalized, that is, used intentionally, in order to be recognized and understood as such. In this context it concerns a symbolizing of symptoms, as a result of which Keller (1995: 165–167) insists that: “the assumption of communicative intentions, which in particular cases do not need to be present, including the development of collective knowledge, enables a symptom to become a symbol” (Keller 1995: 167). Thus, for example, the integration of a person in an already formed circular constellation is a sign of group membership and a symbol of social success in the collective knowledge. Should integration in a discourse circle be forced, with the aim of making social success apparent, this can also be termed a staging of symptoms (Keller 1995: 166). If a someone places himself in a discourse circle in order to be accepted as a potential interlocutor (see Sager, central trunk orientation, 2000: 557), this indicates that he is adopting the role of an interlocutor in that particular group, with which rights, but also duties, are associated (see also Kendon 1973: 37–38). Principles of courtesy are valid here, for example, that a person answers when a question is posed, and also the communicative demands, for example, the principle of conditional relevance, which limits the spectrum of possible replies (see Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974). If a person is accepted physically, in this sense, into a discourse circle, however without the intention of taking advantage of the corresponding rights or fulfilling his obligations, benefits
from the communicative function of a symptom that has become a symbol. It allows social success to be recognized, which still functions, even if he disqualifies himself, in whatever way, within the discourse circle.

From an intercultural perspective, a distinct and further area opens up for considering connections. An intercultural comparison of the preferred (physical) discourse positions could provide information on the extent to which personal space behavior and axial orientation in intercultural communication causes irritation or misunderstanding. Hall already remarked that: “One of my earliest discoveries in the field of intercultural communication was that the position of the bodies of people in conversation varies with the culture” (1969: 150). He goes on to describe how an Arabic friend found it impossible to talk to him while they were walking side by side (see also Schmitt 2012 on walking as a cultural practice), as it was deemed impolite in his culture to look at the partner in the conversation out of the corner of the eyes. Culturally specific differences of this type, in intercultural communication situations in which discourse positions are freely adopted and can be altered, are particularly evident, when irritations or misunderstandings arising from the negotiation of “somatic” discourse formation are implicitly evaluated or have an explicit verbal theme (see Kühn 2002: 289 on the status of so-called reception indicators).

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4. References


VII. Body movements – Functions, contexts, and interactions


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