Making meaning with objects: A multimodal analysis of children’s reasoning

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This qualitative study presents how 9-year-old Hungarian students negotiate power relationships between each other through their relation to objects. In the context of a video-recorded experiment, pairs of students were asked to choose 7 objects out of 14 to take with themselves to a deserted island. The presentation will provide insight into how object appropriations (i.e., children taking away objects from each other or replacing an object their partner had chosen) were used to create power relations between the interactors.

Although the interactional view of power is known in psychological literature, a little is known about how the power relations evolve at the micro-level of communication. To investigate this, multimodal interaction analysis is applied. Although information has already been collected about gestures, it can be argued that a wider range of kinetic activities is in use in everyday interaction and working with material artefacts is an important dimension. It is already known that students better solve mathematical problems and create justifications with the help of tools, but there is a lack of information on how kinetic practices contribute in social meaning-making. To fill this gap, this study explores 1. how object appropriation is involved in children’s argumentation and 2. how these practices contributed in the consensual formation of power relations between the partners.

The microanalysis suggested that taking away an object could be used in opposite meaning, either as an acceptance or a rejection of the partner’s choice. Therefore a mere listing of the object-related movements did not seem sufficient in interpreting their situated meanings and role in argumentation. The findings indicate that in further research the multimodal analysis of action sequences should be extended to the complete range of sensory-motor activities in order to understand how meaning making takes place in everyday situations.

Keywords: embodied meaning making, children’s argumentation, multimodal interaction analysis.