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Stance-taking functions of multimodal constructed dialogue during spoken interaction

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Abstract

Based on qualitative analyses of spontaneous interactions between native speakers of British English, this paper argues that speakers' use of multimodal enactment during constructed dialogue can be motivated by stance-taking processes. Speakers use multimodal enactment (i.e. change in voice pitch, pantomime) when *dis(s-)tancing* themselves from a stance attributed to an absent subject. When *endorsing* an absent subject's stance, they don't use multimodal enactment, thereby iconically representing the outside stance as their own. Theoretically, this study re-evaluates Du Bois's (2007) Stance Triangle as a Stance Tetrad: speakers simultaneously position themselves with respect to an object and *both* present *and absent* subjects.

Index Terms: multimodality, enactment, stance-taking, constructed dialogue, interaction

1. Introduction

As remarked by Tannen [1], reported speech is an inaccurate term to describe direct discourse attributed to another source than the speaker here and now. There is no point, she explains (among other scholars), in assessing the truthfulness of the representation of speech by direct discourse: the original discourse can usually not be accessed and the direct discourse is nothing but a production of the speaker here and now. When using direct speech, the speaker is not so much representing somebody's speech as presenting discourse in the form of "constructed dialogue" [1]. Constructed dialogue can be used for a much larger range of pragmatic functions than just referring to speech, just as direct speech can sometimes be used to characterize non-speaking entities, like objects, through fictive interaction [2].

Direct speech dissociates the speaker's voice from his responsibility: almost paradoxically, the speaker uses his own voice to present speech as not being his own. This aspect of direct speech has been studied from a rich variety of approaches. Goffman's [3] sociolinguistic description of institutional speech distinguishes *author* (the source of the speech), *animator* (the person who is voicing the speech) and *principal* (the person or entity that is responsible for the speech). A large body of research in French enunciative linguistics has accounted for such polyphony with a distinction between *locutor* – the speaking voice, and *enunciator* – the origin of the speech, which can be distinct from the speaker himself ([4], [5], [6] among others). A locutor's utterance can hence contain multiple enunciators. This distinction has a lot in common with Martin & White's appraisal theory (anchored in systemic-functional linguistics) [7]. Martin & White's Bakhtinian approach considers that a speaker's utterance always exists against a backdrop of other possible utterances on the same theme. Since "whenever speakers (or writers) say anything, they encode their point of view towards it" ([8]: 197), any utterance makes a speaker agrees or disagrees with the explicit or potential perspectives of present interlocutors and/or absent parties. From this perspective, direct speech is only a case where the inherently dialogical nature of discourse is made explicit.

In the course of spoken interaction, constructed dialogue can be supplemented by non-verbal components, such as a change in voice pitch and/or coordinated body movements: constructed dialogue can turn into *multimodal enactment* ([9], [10], [11]). Indeed, if gestures are often used to represent objects, one of the most familiar things to represent with a talking body is another talking body ([12]: 16).

Enactment is a well-documented phenomenon in Sign Languages, under the name of *role shift* ([13] on ASL), *personal transfer* ([14] on LSF) or *constructed action* ([15] on Auslan), but has received less attention in spoken languages (apart from [10], [16]). This paper aims to show that multimodal enactments during constructed dialogue in the course of interaction do not only fulfill representational functions but also stance-taking ones. More specifically, a speaker's use of voice change and bodily enactment can be used as a resource to take a stance simultaneously with respect to present subjects (interlocutors) and absent ones.

Stance has been studied from various approaches in corpus linguistics, and broadly corresponds to "a display of a socially recognized point of view or attitude" ([17]). When speakers take stances, they simultaneously position themselves with respect to a discourse object and an interlocutor: "stance is a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field" ([18]: 163). Studying stance is hence fundamentally concerned with how propositional content is always intermingled with the expression of intersubjective, interpersonal relations. More particularly, this paper argues that agreeing or disagreeing with *absent* subjects is another basic dimension of stance-taking.

Based on qualitative analyses of spontaneous interactions between native speakers of British English, I analyze how speakers' use of multimodal enactment during constructed dialogue is motivated by stance-taking processes as follows. (i) Speakers use multimodal enactment (i.e. change in voice pitch and pantomime) when they *distance* themselves from a stance attributed to an absent third party by constructed dialogue. (ii) Speakers don't use multimodal enactment (i.e. keep their usual gesturing style and default tone of voice) when they *endorse* a stance attributed to an absent third party by constructed dialogue.

2. Corpus and Method

2.1. Corpus

The corpus under scrutiny is a collection of videotaped semi-guided discussions between pairs of friends (2 hours and 20 minutes in total), recorded in Spring 2011. All 16 speakers (7 male, 9 female) are university students (aged 18-30) who

are native speakers of British English. During approximately 15 minutes, the participants pick and discuss questions bearing on environmental issues, a classical topic in applied ethics ([19]) that invite them to take stances, evaluate, and position themselves with respects to norms and knowledge. All participants signed informed consents before participating in the data collection ([20]), and are anonymously identified by trigram code names. Speakers sat in the familiar setting of a college supervision room and were free to skip a question if they wished. Recording pairs of friends made the conversation spontaneous and familiar and sitting on chairs did not prevent them from moving and gesturing freely from the waist up. Although using multiple cameras allows for collecting visual information ([21]) these naturalistic conversations were filmed with just one camera, which is less intrusive.

2.2. Method

The chosen approach is founded in multimodal interaction analysis ([22], [23], [24]). For each occurrence of constructed dialogue in the corpus, voice pitch is analyzed in PRAAT ([25]) and the following features are coded in ELAN ([26]):

- Affiliation/ disaffiliation ([27]) with the absent subject: based on the analysis of the sequential context, does the speaker agree or disagree with the absent subject to whom the speech content is attributed?
- Affiliation/ disaffiliation with the interlocutor: based on the analysis of the sequential context, does the speaker agree or disagree with his interlocutor on the topic?
- Vocal features: does the speaker keep or markedly change his or her usual voice pitch range during constructed dialogue?
- Gestures: does the speaker gesture the usual way or is there observable change in the gesture's quality (e.g. more ample, faster gestures?)
- Gaze and posture: is there a shift sideways indicating the creation of an imaginary story space and multimodally expressing mixed viewpoints ([28])?

The results presented here focus on the qualitative study of three sequences, which exemplify processes at work in the data as a whole. The analyzed passages are transcribed in intonation units ([29], [30]), in which punctuation reflects intonation, not syntax. Specific gestures are shown after each transcript in screen captures. For the sake of clarity, turns at talk are numbered and instances of constructed dialogue are transcribed in bold.

3. Results

3.1. Endorsing an absent subject's stance

In a previous study, we showed how absent subjects are sometimes quoted as experts to serve as warrants for the speaker's discourse ([31]). But endorsing an absent subject's stance can have other forms and functions. In Excerpt 1, ANT tells his interlocutor ELI a side anecdote from his adolescence, in which a homeless man who smelt bad used to regularly visit his local library. Each time he left, the librarian sprayed the library with an air freshener, perplexing some library users.

<u>Excerpt 1</u>

1 ANT: and er she'd literally just like as soon as he left she kind of like,
right I'm gonna go round with the febreze now,
and everybody else was like,
why why is she like going round with the febreze?
and she was like,
well you know the smelly guy's been round again.
2 ELI: (laughs) oh god,
3 ANT: (laughs) it was quite common knowledge.

In the passage, ANT presents both the library users' incomprehension and the librarian's justification of her action in the form of constructed dialogue. His attribution of direct discourse to the library users (*why is she going round with the febreze?*) and to the librarian (*well you know the smelly guy's been round again*) is probably a reformulation rather than a quote: in the silent environment of a library, they would more likely have expressed their incomprehension by silent visual displays (e.g. raised eyebrows) rather than voiced utterances. Presenting their reaction in the form of direct discourse is hence rather a strategy to stage the anecdote and create humor. ANT represents the two points of view by relying on his usual gesture style and usual voice pitch. In none of the three occurrences of constructed dialogue (ANT, turn 1) does ANT resort to a shift of posture and/or gaze to create a visual story space. Rather, he keeps the same body orientation towards ELI and his gaze fixed on her throughout constructed dialogue, even though he embodies the mentioned absent subjects to some extent. For instance, on *right I'm gonna go round with the febreze now*, he keeps the same gaze and body posture orientations as when he was speaking in his own name, but combines them with an enactment of the librarian spraying febreze in the library (Fig. 1). Enacting an absent subject's actions without explicitly marking the difference between self and other, between real space and story space ([30]), is a way for the speaker to iconically express his endorsement of the absent subject's attitude.

Figure 1: ANT (left)'s enactment of right I'm gonna go round with the febreze now.

Likewise, ANT uses the upper range of his usual voice pitch to voice the library users' reaction as questioning an observable state of affairs ([32]), the way he would do to ask a question himself. He also maintains his usual pitch range during both the quotative utterance ([33]) *she was like* and the direct discourse itself *well you know the smelly guy's been round again*, which iconically suggests that he puts himself in the absent subject's shoes when voicing her stance. The visual modality anticipates on the verbal content: the quotative utterance is synchronized with a small palm-up shrug (lifted shoulders, palm-up flip of the left hand, in Fig. 2) expressing shared knowledge ([34]), which is later taken up verbally by the discourse marker *you know* in the utterance attributed to the librarian. The small amplitude of this shrug is typical of this speaker's way of gesturing.

Using his usual voice pitch range and gesturing style to represent points of view that originally did not involve speech in the form of constructed dialogue allows him to achieve several effects. Two different points of view (the library users' and the librarian's) on the same event are presented on an equal footing. By lending his own voice and gesturing style to both of them, he endorses each viewpoint in turn. More

precisely, his whole talking body is mobilized to lend a voice to each of them, thereby suggesting that he could well have reacted the same way in their place. ELI aligns with ANT, empathetically laughing at the incongruous situation he has just described, and their shared laughter (turns 2 and 3) indicates their aligned stances (i.e. shared perspectives) on the story.

Figure 2: ANT's palm-up shrug on and she was like

3.2. Dis(-s)tancing oneself from an absent subject's stance

In the data, distance with respect to an absent subject's stance presented as constructed dialogue is largely expressed by non-verbal resources. Excerpt 2 is taken from the conversation between SIM and DAN. DAN presents the opinion of geographers about climate change in the form of constructed dialogue. He heard them speak at a debate organized by a geographical society, and was surprised by their position on combating climate change: they argued that a country should develop either renewable energies or nuclear power, while DAN thinks that both should be developed together. SIM joins him in questioning the absent subject's stance and DAN eventually confirms that he rejects it too.

<u>Excerpt 2</u>

1 DAN: like people I went to this debate,
they were a geographical society,
and they were saying,
oh it's it's either one or the other you know,
we can't direct our attention to both.
but I definitely think we can,

2 SIM: really,
why not?

3 DAN: well this is what I didn't understand,
none of them gave a good argument.

In this passage, the main function of direct discourse cannot be truthfully quoting an absent subject: the source of the direct discourse is explicitly identified as a group of people (*they were a geographic society*) during a debate. DAN uses multimodal constructed dialogue to sum up a collective stance on a given topic, and makes extensive use of multimodal resources to enact it. A first striking aspect is the use of a change in voice pitch range in synchrony with the direct discourse attributed to the geographers. On *and they were saying, oh it's it's either one or the other you know we can't direct our attention to both*, DAN uses a markedly low voice pitch (around 100Hz, see Fig. 3) that reaches far lower than his usual pitch range. His own voice pitch (around 200 Hz) reappears when he starts speaking in his own name again, on *but I definitely think we can*. This contrast in voice pitch iconically marks the introduction of an outside enunciator, whose voice is perceptually different from his own. He uses his own voice as a medium to present an absent subject's stance while simultaneously reminding his interlocutor that this outside voice is distinct from his. The difference in voice pitch iconically represents the speaker's disaffiliation with the absent subject's stance. The transition from self to other is also marked on the verbal level: the direct discourse opens with the utterance-initial discourse marker *oh*, which usually indicates a change of state for the speaker ([35]). *Oh* is highlighted by a low initial pitch, marking a shift from the speaker's viewpoint to the absent subject's viewpoint.

The visual modality reinforces the speaker's distance: DAN accompanies the constructed dialogue utterance with pantomime including exaggerated head movements and facial displays ([36]), and a shift in posture and eye gaze (Fig. 5). These visual changes are timed with the vocal distanciation and all begin on the quotative utterance (*and they were saying*). In that respect, the non-verbal components slightly anticipate the verbal one. In contrast with his previous physical attitude (Fig. 4), the use of visual markers borders on caricature (Fig. 5), informing the interlocutor that the stance presented by the speaker has nothing to do with what he believes here and now.

Using a markedly lower voice pitch (Fig. 3) adds to the caricature, as it mimics the voice of a phlegmatic old professor. Furthermore, DAN's simultaneous shifts in gaze and trunk posture (Fig. 4) suggest that the rejected stance is positioned in another, abstract dialogue space different from the real dialogue space ([30]) of his conversation with SIM (Fig. 5). In this specific context, creating a virtual dialogue space does not only serve a narrative purpose. Locating the constructed dialogue outside the here and now is another way for the speaker to iconically represent disaffiliation with the absent subject's stance. In all, verbal strategies (direct discourse, *oh*) as well as vocal (marked change in voice pitch range) and visual ones (exaggerated pantomime, gaze sideways) are carefully timed and combined in the sequential unfolding of actions to multimodally construct the rejection of an absent party's stance.

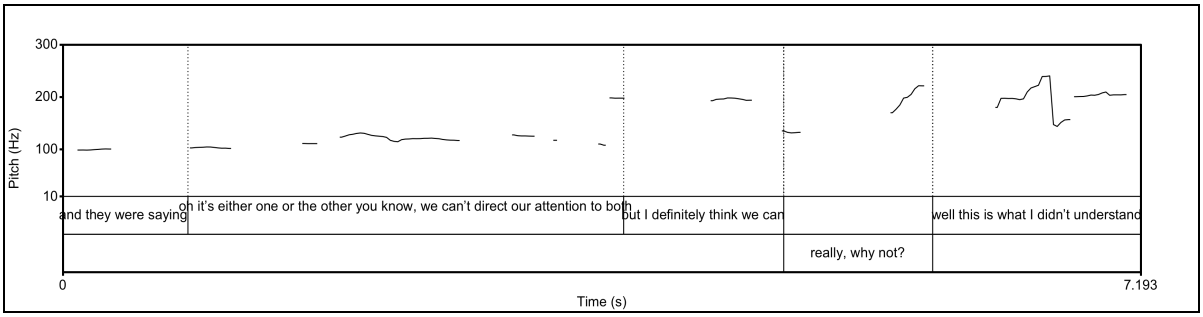

Figure 3: DAN's change in voice pitch between constructed dialogue (and they were saying) *and his own voice* (but I..)

Figure 4: DAN (right) gazing at SIM (left) before constructed dialogue

Figure 5: DAN (right) multimodal enactment on and they were saying*: trunk back, gaze away, exaggerated facial expression*

There is a meta-pragmatic ([11]) quality in the speaker's use of multimodal constructed dialogue. By using a full range of verbal, vocal and visual resources, he reminds his interlocutor that *this is only an enactment*, i.e. that his words, voice and body are only temporarily used to display another subject's stance and in no way represent his personal beliefs. His interlocutor SIM immediately aligns with him by questioning the absent subject's stance described with a rising intonation on *why not*, and DAN sides with him in verbally questioning the absent subject's stance by presenting it as incomprehensible (*this is what I didn't understand*). DAN's multimodal enactment has allowed him to put the absent subject at a distance, while simultaneously fostering agreement with his interlocutor.

3.3. An in-between, more complex case

In Excerpt 3, AMY has just picked up the question *how can we solve climate change* as part of the semi-guided conversation protocol, and asks it to her interlocutor JOE. As an answer, JOE develops the following stance: nuclear power is a relevant solution to combat climate change (e.g. it replaces polluting coal stations) and it is safe technology since accidents like Fukushima remain rare. AMY's stance in response to his is two-fold. She starts with a concession that is compatible with JOE's stance, thereby partially aligning with him (anti-nuclear activists can oversimplify matters), but eventually disagrees with him (one huge nuclear accident is already one too many).

<u>Excerpt 3</u>

1 AMY: ok er how can we solve climate change?
2 JOE: er pff lots of nuclear power. (small laugh)
3 AMY: mmh, (small laugh)
4 JOE: I know that's a bit controversial at the moment,
but I th… I think it's still a valid point.
(argues in favor of nuclear power for 21 seconds)
5 AMY: I think like a lot of em a lot of anti nuclear sentiment
is really not informed at all,
and rather kind of like,
nuclear stuff's poisonous and that's bad,
6 JOE: yeah,
7 AMY: em,
8 JOE: yeah I I think it' a real shame with the with the thing
in Japan,
9 AMY: mmh,
10 JOE: er from the point of view of nuclear power as well,
11 JOE: cause it's sort of the,
12 JOE: actually what happened in Japan was this really big
exception,
13 AMY: mmh,
(*JOE argues in favor of nuclear power for 8 seconds*)
14 JOE: and then sort of well actually if we if we're just
careful,
then then nuclear power is fine.
15 AMY: I guess like the the problem is,
a lot of people understandably will say like,
even if it happens once it's once too often,
but,

Expressing disagreement is a sensitive phenomenon that involves face work ([3]), and agreement is usually preferred to (i.e. is more frequent than) disagreement in interaction ([35], [37]). Owing to politeness mechanisms ([38]), speakers tend to attenuate the potential threat posed to their interlocutor's face thanks to diverse strategies. As exemplified by Excerpt 3, agreement prefacing disagreement, in the form of concession, is one way of downplaying disagreement. AMY starts by adopting a stance that is compatible with JOE's as she criticizes the oversimplified criticisms of anti-nuclear activists. To do so, she uses constructed dialogue introduced by a quotative utterance (*I think like a lot of em a lot of anti nuclear sentiment is (...) kind of like*) to reject the absent subjects' stance just as she provides them with a voice. Her critical distance with respect to them is marked in the verbal modality (*really not informed at all*) as well as vocally. On the direct discourse attributed to the absent subjects, *nuclear stuff's poisonous and that's bad*, her voice pitch markedly shifts to a very high range which is not common at all in her usual way of speaking (Fig. 6).

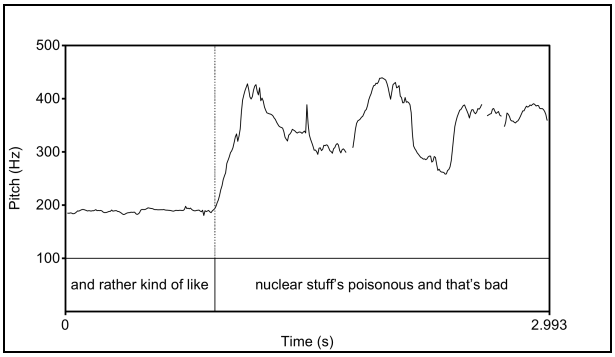

Figure 6. AMY's shift in voice pitch range on nuclear stuff's poisonous and that's bad *(turn 5)*

Yet when using this high-pitched voice, iconic of the scatterbrain attitude she is criticizing, she does not gesture at all. This comes out as slightly incongruous. Indeed, prosody and gesture usually work hand in hand ([39]), with heightened intensity in the vocal modality being simultaneously expressed in some way in the visual modality, and vice versa. The larger stance-taking processes at work here are a plausible

explanation for this partial (vocal not visual) enactment of a criticized absent subject's stance. This critical instance of constructed dialogue is not the core of her stance, but only a concession and preface to her real (i.e. anti-nuclear) stance. She is not using the full range of multimodal resources to caricature the absent subjects to the full, because that is not her main point and she partially agrees with them.

To formulate her disagreement with JOE (turn 15), AMY uses oblique strategies that allow her to express a divergent opinion while preserving her interlocutor's face. Her dissent is expressed by a turn-initial *I guess*. As Kärkkäinen ([40]) remarks, when *I guess* is used in second position in a sequence (i.e. in responsive actions to some other actions), it usually indicates some "degree of disagreement and disaffiliation between the participants", as "the current speaker wishes to modify, withdraw, and redefine his or her original stance at this point" ([40]: 197). Disagreement with the interlocutor is also marked on the vocal level: AMY uses a distinct pitch reset on *I guess*: this break in intonation is iconic of a break away from her interlocutor's stance ([41]).

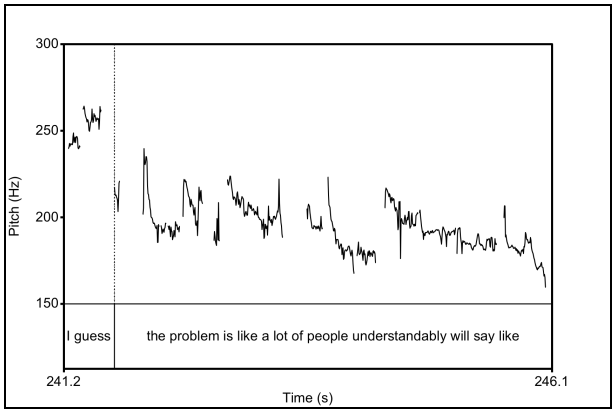

Figure 6: AMY's initial pitch reset on I guess *(turn 15)*

Then AMY presents her discordant stance in an indirect way, resorting to constructed dialogue as an intermediate to express her opinion. She attributes a stance (*even if it happens once it's once too often but*) to the underdetermined, generic absent subject *people* and positions herself as endorsing this outside point of view by way of the stance adverb *understandably* in the quotative utterance (*a lot of people understandably will say like*). Her endorsement of this utterance is vocally and visually indicated by the continuity in her vocal pitch range and personal gesturing style. This supposedly outside voice cannot be traced to anyone in particular: more likely, it is hers in disguise. In this example, direct discourse works as a hedging technique to avoid disagreeing with the interlocutor too bluntly. AMY's cautiousness in taking an adversative stance is confirmed by a final shoulder shrug, an epistemic emblem expressing uncertainty and disengagement ([34]) just before her final *but*.

4. Discussion

This qualitative study has evidenced that speakers do not use the multimodal potential of constructed dialogue only to represent interactions that have taken place or to narrate past events. Constructed dialogue can often not be traced to a speaker's original utterance at another time and place. It is also a pragmatic strategy that allows the speaker here and now to present a person or a group's stance in a more vivid, embodied way. Constructed dialogue allows speakers to articulate two levels of intersubjectivity: they position themselves with respect to both present subject (interlocutors) and absent ones (brought in by constructed dialogue). More specifically, positioning themselves with respect to absent subjects is one way of positioning themselves with respect to present ones. Many combinations are possible: the speaker enacts the absent subjects' stance to take on their perspective, and the interlocutor aligns, empathetically sharing the experience put on display by the speaker (Excerpt 1). In other cases, the speaker can mobilize his own talking body as a medium to ridicule an absent subject, thereby inviting his interlocutor to side with him on the topic at stake (Excerpt 2). The enactment of an absent subject's stance to put it at a distance can also be partial (verbal and vocal only, not visual) when the speaker caricatures this absent subject's stance to side with the interlocutor only temporarily and partially in a movement of concession, just before disagreeing with him (Excerpt 3). Constructed dialogue can be used as a hedge to downplay disaffiliation with the interlocutor, so as to ensure the politeness of the exchange: the speaker lessens her endorsement of the disagreeing stance by attributing it to an absent subject and agreeing with it (Excerpt 3).

There is a continuum in the multimodal intensity of constructed dialogue: not all instances of constructed dialogue include enactments of the absent subject's body or voice. Non-verbal resources, and most strikingly voice pitch, seem iconic of the speaker's stance with respect to the absent subject. When speakers make a distinction between they own voice and the other voice through a marked change of pitch, they distance themselves from this other voice/stance by marking it as different. Conversely, using one's usual voice pitch to present another voice can indicate the speaker's endorsement of that voice/stance. Likewise, keeping one's usual gesturing style can mark the speaker's endorsement of the absent subject's stance, while suddenly using more ample, faster gestures can express distance through pantomimic caricature. In all, constructed dialogue takes on different stancetaking functions in context, depending on the kind of multimodal resources that are mobilized.

5. Conclusion

On a theoretical level, this qualitative study invites to a re-evaluation of Du Bois's ([18]) model of stance as a triangle between two subjects (the speaker and the interlocutor) and a (discourse) object. Constructed dialogue makes explicit not only the backdrop of possible perspectives ([7]) on a given topic, but also the other, absent subjects who take on these stances. The Stance Triangle could be redefined as a Stance Tetrad, where speakers position themselves with respect not only to an object and a present subject but also to absent subjects. This in turn invites a redefinition of the interaction context. As the speaker positions himself with respect to absent subjects as well, the interaction context becomes indexical of the larger social context ([42]).

This qualitative study opens up further research perspectives. A larger corpus and quantitative methods could permit to operationalize "self" and "other" voice pitch and gesturing style according to a set of specific features. This in turn could help show whether changes in voice pitch range and/or in the quality of the speaker's gestures function as statistical predictors of endorsement or distance vis-à-vis an absent subject's stance presented as constructed dialogue.

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