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The role of gaze in everyday multiparty interactions: Building participation framework during dinners in signing and speaking families

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Family dinners constitute ritualized and ideal loci for the study of F-formation (Kendon, 1990). Different arrangements may be observed in the kitchen and in the dining room. Within a family some participants may face each other, others may sit side-by-side and they also may move during dinners. Despite these variations, family members orient themselves for an amount of time both towards a space and towards each other.

Family dinners involve several simultaneous activities, among which eating and languaging are central. In this multi-activity setting (Haddington et al., 2014), the different body parts and the gaze of the participants can be oriented either towards objects or towards others. In family dinners particularly, participants call on those very same resources to conduct multiparty interactions and dynamically build various participation frameworks

(Goffman, 1981). Among verbal and non-verbal resources, gaze plays an important role to (dis)engage others or oneself in a conversation. This study aims at investigating the functions of gaze in such a challenging context in both signing and speaking families.

We analyzed data from dinners in four families composed of two adults and two children. Two families used French and two families used French Sign Language (LSF). The participants often switch to discourse that spans beyond the dinner time and talk more specifically about school (Morgenstern et al. 2021). The data was systematically coded for 1) audible or visible languaging or acting produced by all participants, 2) which participants the acting or languaging was oriented to, and 3) gaze orientation of all participants (towards participants or objects).

We focused on talk about school which is characterized by question and answer sequences and the emergence of word searches. Children bring to the table topics and related notions that can be new to them, and parents actively participate in the construction of the discourse about past events. In this context, gaze interactions fully participate in the parent-child interactions.

Our quantitative and qualitative analyses underline differences in gaze distribution patterns according to the varying status of the participants, as they conduct eating actions that require moving objects and bodies. We highlight differences according to whether the participants use a spoken or a signed language and we show how parents adapt to and scaffold their children's management of gaze as they need to orient their visual attention.

We discuss the impact of spatial and social arrangements as well as children's age and discursive topics on the distribution and functions of gaze in family dinners.

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