



The Analysis of The Elimination of Communication Barriers From the Perspective of Multimodal Synergy Theory

RUAN Xue^{[a],*}

^[a] Foreign Language College, Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, China.

* Corresponding author.

Received 28 September 2020; accepted 1 December 2020

Published online 26 December 2020

Abstract

Multimodal conversation analysis has received more and more attention in recent years. This paper uses two videos as analysis materials, focusing on how the conversationalists in the video use multiple modal communication resources to achieve intrapersonal coordination and inter-personal coordination in the case of language communication barriers, thereby solving the obstacles in communication. There is currently no analysis of focusing on the elimination of communication barriers from a multimodal perspective in China, so this article hopes to provide some ideas for later researchers.

Key words: The synergy of multiple modes; Conversation analysis; Interpersonal coordination; Intrapersonal coordination; Communication barriers

Ruan, X. (2020). The Analysis of The Elimination of Communication Barriers From the Perspective of Multimodal Synergy Theory. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 21(3), 22-26. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/11934> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/11934>

1. INTRODUCTION

Either in daily life or in film as well as television works, it is difficult to only use language to fully and exactly express one's thoughts and the mood that speakers really want to express. Therefore they are likely to consciously or unconsciously make some complement, reinforcement, adjustment and coordination in some nonverbal way, so as to fully express their own ideas and at the same time to

let the listeners can more easily understand their thoughts and mood. Like, Zhang Delu (2009) divides these non-verbal factors into two categories. One is related to the body, which can be further divided into three categories. They are movement, facial features and body posture. The facial features include expression, eye expression as well as the five most important facial organs; and the body posture contains the gestures of the hand and the whole body. The other is non-physical, mainly environment and tools like, Internet, PowerPoint, lab, simultaneous interpretation and so on. In addition, he has also divided the linguistic factors into two parts: one is only concerned about language itself, the two pure linguistic forms, respectively the word and the speech whereas the other is considered as the accompanying linguistic forms, such as soundness, phoneme, tone, font and layout. Traditionally, the study of discourse in linguistics is mainly explained from the perspective of language, and non-linguistic expression is regarded as a system of auxiliary expression, thus ignoring the significance and research value of non-linguistic media. Fortunately, in recent years, scholars have found that it is no longer possible to conduct in-depth and comprehensive analysis and research on utterance from the perspective of language alone. These accompanying nonverbal features actually may sometimes play a very crucial role in the expression of the whole meaning or they can even cause the change of the whole meaning. Therefore, in order to make up for this defect in the field of discourse analysis, scholars expand the conversation analysis and put forward the idea of taking a conversation analytic approach to study the multimodal interaction.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of multimodal interaction through a conversation analytic approach has a longer history in the foreign countries compared with China. Schegloff (1991)

mainly focuses talk and social structure. The Goodwins (Goodwin, 1979, 1980, 1981; Goodwin, 1980) find that gaze and body language play an important role in the social interaction and they can impact the construction and conversion of the turn. Lorenza Mondada takes the conversation analytic sequential perspective to investigate how multimodal resources are used by participants to organize their action in the institutional and ordinary settings, like the deixis and space in interaction (2002), attention and interactional space (2009). And Deppermann and Schmitt propose the multimodal synergy theory and interpret how participants of conversation interact through multimodal collaboration in the setting of emergency drills. With the development of technology, people later are able to record the real scenes by making audios or videos. In fact, in the mid-1970s, scholars from the field of conversation analysis have already turned their attention to explore the role of nonverbal modes in the interaction through video materials. Sack and Schegloff start to use videos to analyze the multimodal aspects of interaction, like the hand gestures. By using videos, Christian Heath et al. are probably the first ones to combine the detailed sequential analysis which belongs to the conversation analysis with some specific workplace studies, like underground control rooms (1992), hospitals (1986), and galleries (2005) and fine art audition (2012) to study people's interaction. Lorenza Mondada (2008) use a videotape which is about institutional telephone calls to explore the social interaction from the perspective of sequential and multimodal perspective. In a word, more and more scholars in the foreign countries have already started to use videotapes to study the social interaction by taking a conversation analytic approach in an attempt to clarify the roles of verbal and nonverbal modes.

Compared with foreign countries, the research on multi-modal conversation analysis starts relatively late in China, with only a period of more than ten years. Moreover, scholars of discourse analysis have not yet carried out systematic research on multi-modal discourse analysis. That is, from the perspective of quantity, according to the data of CNKI, although the domestic multi-modal discourse analysis take place in 2003 but it is in 2007 that the number of it starts to increase and the growth rate is not very fast. From 2014 to now, the number of published studies has been between 160 and 200 and the number of published studies in core journals has been on the rise although the growth rate of high-quality studies is slow as well. The specific data is offered in the appendix 1. From the perspective of themes of these studies, the research topics are mainly related to teaching such as textbooks, classroom teaching, micro-courses, MOOCs and PPT (Hu and Dong, 2007; Zhu, 2008; Hu, 2011; Wang, Ma, 2019; Han, 2019), or related to movies, movie posters or public service advertisements as well as the relationship between graph and text of network

copywriting (Xie, 2011; Liu, 2013; Chang, 2019; Wen, 2018), and system functional linguistics (Zhang, 2009, 2018; Wei, 2008). The specific data is offered in the appendix 2. In addition, the visual grammar proposed by Kress, G. & Van Leeuwen (1996, 2006) is the theoretical framework for video materials such as movies, movie posters and public service advertisements to analyze how the three meta-functions of a particular discourse, namely, its reproducing meaning, interactive meaning and composition meaning, are constructed in video materials.

In a word, we can find that much of the applied analysis focuses on static text composed of text, images, and tables and so on. In contrast, there are relatively fewer studies on multi-modal discourse analysis of video materials. Schmitt (2007) pointed out that at present, the major defect in the field of discourse analysis is that the interaction events are only analyzed as the language interaction behaviors; what's more, audio materials are used as the material for analysis, ignoring that conversation participants often use a variety of interactive ways to complete the communication.

Therefore, this paper uses some videos as analyzing materials and pays close attention to the interpersonal interaction from these videos instead of the video itself in an attempt to analyze the elimination of the communication barriers from the perspective of multimodal conversation analysis, to explore the impact of the multimodal coordination, interpersonal coordination as well as the intrapersonal coordination on the produce and conversion of turns, and to prove the importance of nonverbal factors in communication, especially when the participants speak different dialects or languages. At present, there is still a lack of research in this field in China, so this paper hopes to not only add a strong evidence to prove the importance of nonverbal factors in communication, indicating its crucial and special role in eliminating communication barriers, but also expand the research scope of discourse analysis.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Using video as studying materials, conversation analysis pays close attention to both the temporally and sequentially organized details of actions and the talk. Deppermann and Schmitt (2007) proposed the multimodal synergy theory in the conversation analysis field, which emphasizing that there simultaneously exist different modes for communication during the interaction. Those multiple modes can be either related to language or not and they have the same importance for the whole conversation by coordinating with each other. The synergy requires the participants to cooperate in the interaction from the aspects of temporality, spatiality, multi-modality as well as some communication resources, including voice, gesture, eye expression, facial expressions, body

posture, body movement, spatial position, and so on. What's more, they state that there are two basic forms of the coordination, respectively the interpersonal coordination and the intrapersonal coordination. The interpersonal coordination means that each conversation participant understands others' behavior and responds to them during the process of the current conversation whereas the intrapersonal coordination refers to the behavior that each conversation participant makes the use of different modes to fully express themselves. Generally speaking, the intrapersonal coordination should be carried out under the framework of interpersonal coordination because the main aim of each conversation participant is to let others can have a better understanding of their real thoughts and the conversation can continue smoothly.

4. MATERIALS

Two video materials are used for this paper and both of them are considering the interaction among participants who speak different language or dialects. What's more, all the conversations between them occur naturally instead of being designed. The first video is about the conversation happens between three persons, two of them are from Taiwan, China and the other is from Shandong, China. The girl from Shandong needs to find a store to buy juice in Taiwan and the others are a couple who have a rest on the bench. The second video is about a Chinese traveler asking a Tibetan woman for some drinkable cold water to cook. The man cannot speak as well as understand Tibetan and the woman cannot speak as well as understand mandarin as well. Since these dialects cannot be transcribed and the non-linguistic modes can be observed intuitively, I myself make the record of the linguistic and non-linguistic modes for these two videos. What's more, some screenshots are provided.

5. THE ELIMINATION OF COMMUNICATION BARRIERS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MULTIMODAL SYNERGY THEORY

Example 1: A is a girl who comes from Shandong and speaks in Shandong dialect whereas B and C are from Taiwan and speak in Taiwan dialect.

A: Excuse me, where can I buy something to drink?(A: stares at B and C at the time as well as leans slightly toward B and C) (B: looks up to A) (C: turns his hand around, then looks at the front to listen for a while and finally look at A)

A: I'm just too thirsty. Where I can buy something to drink? (B: keeps looking at A) (C: smiles, turns the eyes, thinks and then looks at A)

A: the fruit juice. (B and C keep looking at A for a while and then look at each other)

C: I can't understand what you say. (C: puts his feet

down, smiles while turning his body around at the same time, then put his hands on his legs, and sometimes turns his eyesight toward A while smiling)

C: enenen.....English?(C: turns his eyesight toward A and raises his eyebrows)

(A: points her hands toward herself but speaks nothing)

C: No?

B: Is something for drinking? (B: draws a water glass with her hands and makes a gesture like drinking water, then turns her eyesight from A toward the front and thinks)

B: You want something to drink. (B: turns around and looks toward A)

C: What kind of thing to drink? (C: imitates drinking something, and then turns his eyesight toward the distance and thinks)

A: something made of fruits. (A: repeatedly switches her eyesight from B to C)

B: Vegetables? (B: touches her feet and then looks into the distance for thinking for a while)

A: fruits (A: looks at B)

B: Fruits? (B: moves her eyebrows, looks toward A and then turns her eyesight toward C)

A: enen! (A: nods her head and looks at both B and C)

In this example, when participants find that there exist communication barriers because of language, all of them use both verbal and nonverbal modes to realize intrapersonal coordination to better express meanings and let listeners have a better understanding and interpersonal coordination to show if they understand or respond to their questions.

For example, B still directly asks A whether what she needs is something to drinking but at the same time B uses her hands and body imitates the action of drinking. What's more, in this process, B stares at A to show that she is talking to A and later B turns her eyesight away from A and toward the front, indicating that B is thinking for A. The combination of action and speech finally makes A understand B's question and makes A think B has already understood what she says. B's speech belongs to verbal modes while her staring and her hand gesture as well as her body gesture belong to nonverbal modes. In this section, B's hand gestures and body gestures as well as staring plays a more crucial role than the verbal mode. The combination of both verbal and nonverbal modes successfully leads to the intrapersonal coordination. What's more, the pause and both B' and C's eye expression show that they are thinking what kind of drinks A need. After this, A feels that B and C have understood her to some extent but are still thinking for her. Therefore, A just emphasizes the thing she wants for one time and then just switches her eyesight from them to let them have time to think. Finally, when B asks whether it is made of fruits, A respond to B and C with a "yes" both through speech and actions, which realize the interpersonal coordination. With realization of both the intrapersonal

coordination and interpersonal coordination by using both the verbal and nonverbal ways, the conversation barriers come to the end one by one and the conversation successfully develops.

We can clearly see that the nonverbal modes like body postures, hand postures, body movement as well as stares plays the central role for participants to realize intrapersonal coordination and interpersonal coordination, especially when the language is the cause of communication barriers. And both the realization of these two types of coordination leads to the produce and conversion of the turn between conversation participants, the communication barriers die away and the conversation develop.

Example 2: In this example, A is the traveler who cannot understand and speak Tibetan. B is a woman who lives in Tibet and can only speak Tibetan but cannot understand mandarin.

A: I want to borrow some water.

B: sorry, I cannot understand. (B: nods her head)

A: Drinkable water. This! This! Water! Water! (A: looks at B, then comes close to her to point at the water ladle while speaking the word water, and then crosses the door to point the water and speaks the word water at the same time)

B: water? (B: imitates the action of drinking water)

A: enen! I want some water to cook. (B: listens carefully, then pauses for a while and goes into her house and then picks up the hot water bottle)

A: Not the hot water. Just the cold water. Just the cold water. (A: turns her body around and then points at a bucket of water at the door)

A: Not hot water. (A: swings his hands and he goes out to point the water on the ground)

A: this water. Do you have it?(A: walks toward a bucket of drinkable water)

B: enen (B: looks at A with smiles and then goes for the drinkable cool water)

In this example, we can see that the communication barriers are extremely heavy whereas the conversation still develops. In this example, the communication barriers are also due to the language; that is, A and B cannot understand each other's language. From this example, we can clearly see the extreme importance of nonverbal modes, like the tools, the hand gestures, the body gestures and the body movement on helping the realization of intrapersonal coordination and interpersonal coordination, leading to the produce and conversion of the turn. For example, when A points at the water ladle and then points to the water in the bucket, A clearly expresses out what he needs and B immediately understands what A want at the same time. In this small section, A manages to use the tools and gestures as well as body movement to realize the intrapersonal coordination and pave the way

for interpersonal coordination. By making the gesture of drinking water, B successfully uses action instead of the words which A cannot understand to respond to A, realizing the interpersonal coordination. In this example, by pointing to the water ladle, the bucket, and the water on the ground as well as shaking his head when B picks up the hot water bottle, A succeeds in showing B that he wants cold water instead of the hot water. In conclusion, in this short clip, both A and B repeatedly use nonverbal modes to realize the intrapersonal coordination, interpersonal coordination, and the produce and conversion of turn, which leading to the disappearance of communication barriers one by one and the development of the conversation.

CONCLUSION

As long as either speakers or listeners cannot understand or speak the other's language, communication barriers will arise. When language is the cause of the communication barriers, nonverbal modes begin to play the central role in communication and the elimination of communication barriers. For the worst situation that participants cannot understand each other's language and cannot speak the languages, language just works as a symbol which is used to tell others that I want to talk to you, and I can speak but I just cannot speak your language or dialect. Participants' facial expressions and body postures, like raise their eyebrows, shrug their shoulders, shaking hands or heads as well as the action of moving away tells the others that they cannot understand what you say and maybe even don't want to talk. However, smiles and some eye expression like looking at you or looking into the distance, nodding their heads and so on indicate that they are willing to talk to you and they may be thinking for your questions. What's more, during the communication, they use their facial expressions, hand gestures, body postures, the distance as well as some tools to express the key words. Combining those, the listeners finally can get across, indicating the communication barriers have gone.

For the worse situations, sometimes the combination of the key words and those nonverbal modes is the best way to realize the intrapersonal coordination and interpersonal coordination, successfully leading to the elimination of communication barriers.

In a word, when language leads to the communication barriers, both verbal modes like key words or language-related modes, like soundness or tone and nonverbal modes like facial expressions, body postures, hand gestures, body movement, and tools are good for the realization of both intrapersonal coordination and interpersonal coordination. The successful realization of these two kinds of coordination contributes to the elimination of communication barriers.

REFERENCES

- Dai, S. (2013). The origin and development of multimodal discourse analysis. *Foreign Language Research*, (2), 17-23. doi:10.16263/j.cnki.23-1071/h.2013.02.007
- Deppermann. (2013). Multimodal interaction from a conversation analytic perspective. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 46, 1-7.
- Jin, C. (2017). Research on Multimodal Coordination: From the Perspective of Conversation Analysis. *Foreign Languages in China*, (6), 35-42. doi: 10.13564/j.cnki.issn.1672-9382.2017.06.006
- Mondada, L. (2008). Using video for a sequential and multimodal analysis of social interaction: Videotaping institutional telephone calls. *Forum, Qualitative Social Research*, 9.
- Mondada, L. (2016). Challenges of multimodality: Language and the body in social interaction. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 20, 336-366.
- Norris, S. (2004). *Multimodal interaction analysis (1st ed.)*. doi: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203379493>
- Stivers, T., & Sidnell, J. (2005). Introduction: multimodal interaction. *Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies*, 156, 1-20. Doi: 10.1515/semi.2005.2005.156.1
- Xu, X. (2019). A review of research on multimodal discourse analysis. *Comparative Study of Cultural Innovation*, (29), 84-85.
- Yao, Y., & Chen, X. (2013). An analysis of multimodal video discourses: Taking a corporate television advertisement as an example. *Foreign Language and Literature*, (1), 86-91.
- Zhan, D. (2018). A systemic-functional synthetic framework for multimodal discourse analysis. *Modern Foreign Languages*, (6), 731-743.
- Zhang, D. (2009). On a synthetic theoretical framework for multimodal discourse analysis. *Foreign Languages in China*, (1), 24-30.
- Zhang, Z., & Hong, G. (2010). An analysis of the compositional meaning of the multimodal video discourse "You and Me". *Technology Enhanced Foreign Language Education*, 136(6), 20-24.