WATCHING TELEVISION: THE DILEMMA OF GAZE

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1 Introduction[1]

This paper describes the gaze behaviour of television viewers focussing on the way it differs from the gaze behaviour of conversationalists in 'regular' talk-in-interaction. Hence, it investigates to what extent the gaze behaviour of people watching TV is influenced by the specific setting of the talk, namely by the fact that the viewers have to decide between two options: gazing at a co-interlocutor or gazing at the television. After presenting the corpus and general rules for gaze in conversation, some non-linguistic factors will be compared quantitatively. This is followed by a close analysis of the contexts of gaze-redirections in the interactions of the television viewers concentrating on humour as a trigger for gaze.

The findings result from an ongoing project which is generally concerned with the reception situation (Gerhardt, 2006; Gerhardt, to appear) as "there have been virtually no studies of the social practices by which the discourses of the media are appropriated in common face-to-face interactions." (Scollon, 1998, vii) The larger context of this work thus lies at the hinge between mass media and everyday face-to-face interaction. The aim of this project is to give a micro-analytic description of what viewers do linguistically when they are watching television (in this case football). How do the conversationalists talk in a setting where spoken language is already present? What do they do with the talk (here: football commentary) emitted by the box? What kind of interplay is there between the primary media text and the conversations by the viewers? The analysis of the talk in this specific setting uses findings, concepts, and methodologies from ethnographic conversation analysis and interactional sociolinguistics. Similar descriptions exist for the German reception situation (Holly et al., 2001; Hepp, 1998; Klemm, 2000). However, as they are based on audio recordings, gaze in this setting has so far not been treated.

In regular everyday conversation, people tend to face each other, and gaze is used as a key cue for turn-taking and interactionality. However, telephone calls and the conversations of the blind show that gaze is not a prerequisite for verbal interaction (Goodwin, 1980). In this specific setting, the conversationalists face the following

[1] I would like to thank Neal Norrick and Susanne Ley for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I am also grateful to the conference participants for their lively feedback. Finally, I would like to thank heartily Anéla and the conference organisers in Groningen for the so called 'Junior Days,' which proved so valuable to me in many respects.

dilemma: they can direct their gaze at each other, but only at the cost of not being able to look at the screen.

In contrast to e.g. the news on television, which may be followed quite easily without the pictures, football is primarily visual. The main message *is* the pictures. These pictures are accompanied by commentary, i.e. talk. However, unlike radio commentary, one cannot reconstruct or follow the game with the help of the talk only. For this reason, in order to actually be doing 'watching football,' the fans need to direct their gaze at the television.

On the other hand, the viewers sit with friends and family. So besides drinking and eating, one main activity is talking to each other. Especially in those groups which meet explicitly for the purpose of watching the game together, talk about the game itself, but also about completely unrelated subjects is a fundamental component of the setting (Klemm, 2000, 219-274). When gathering with friends to watch a game, viewers are meant to talk while watching. Hence, while the fans talk to each other, they can, just as in any other conversation, use gaze as a resource for making meaning.

The question pursued in this paper is how the viewers solve the dilemma of being faced with two options: when do they look at the television and when do they choose to turn towards their co-interlocutors? Which linguistic or non-linguistic factors influence the viewers' gaze behaviour?

2 The data

The paper is based on the ATTAC (Analysing The Television Audience's Conversations) – Corpus, which consists of transcriptions of video recordings. Non-immigrant English families and groups of friends were filmed while watching football, games of the World Cup 2002 Japan/Korea, in their homes on television. The participants were not prompted to watch football, but they were asked to be recorded while watching of their own accord. The camera was placed as unobtrusely as possible and the researcher was not present during the recording (cf. Labov, 1972; Goodwin, 1981 for a discussion of the use of recording equipment in research). Some groups were recorded several times, others only once.

All in all, the corpus consists of five different groups, 15 persons aged 18 months to over 70 years. Seven women and eight men were recorded, albeit in terms of recorded talk, one third of the contributions are by women and two thirds are by men. Altogether, 14 half-times from eight different games and some recordings of the games proper, i.e. the commentary, the sounds in the stadium and the pictures, make up the ATTAC-Corpus.

The recordings were transcribed according to the conventions at the end of this paper. Generally, the focus were the conversations of the viewers at home and not the commentary on television. For this reason, the football commentary was only transcribed when it was oriented to by the audiences.

3 *Gaze*

Before giving a short outline of gaze in conversation, the following needs to be stated. It is not easy to actually see the eye-movements of the participants on the tapes. Ordinary video cameras were used and no special lighting arrangements made to make the recording as unobtrusive as possible. As a consequence, the video material is of average quality and does not provide such a high resolution as professional equipment.

However, generally eyes and heads move simultaneously, i.e. when humans redirect their gaze, they also move their heads (Barnes, 1979). Even if the targets of the gaze lie close together, which is not the case in the corpus, there seems to be a little head-turn. Even when reading books, people tend to move their heads slightly. Obviously, the opposite is also possible, i.e. one can move one's eyes without moving one's head. However, this kind of behaviour seems only present in very specific circumstances where someone does something surreptitiously for whatever reason (cf. the expression 'shifty eyes,' meaning "looking dishonest." (LDCE, 2003)) In the ATTAC-Corpus, there does not seem to be any ground for that kind of behaviour. Following on from this, I make the following assumption: If X's head turns away from the TV into the direction of Y, then X gazes at Y. Hence, when in the following 'gaze' is used, on the video, one essentially sees a head-turn only.

Furthermore, all other gaze redirections or head-turns besides 'from TV to other viewer' or 'from other viewer to TV' were excluded from the analysis. Examples include a gaze to the table when putting down a cup, or a gaze to the window when a sound is heard from outside. I consider those irrelevant to the question at hand. As the participants share their physical context, those gaze shifts are a priori considered meaningless for the interaction, although they could obviously acquire significance through diverse incidents.

For conversation in general, speakers follow two rules formulated by Goodwin (1980, 275): "Rule 1: A speaker should obtain the gaze of his recipient during the course of a turn at talk." "Rule 2: A recipient should be gazing at the speaker when the speaker is gazing at the hearer." (Goodwin, 1980, 287)

Conversation is generally hearer-oriented. It is a mutual achievement of both speaker and listener. To accomplish this understanding, a speaker should look at the listener from time to time. A recipient, i.e. the hearer, has to look at the speaker at the moment when the speaker chooses to look at the listener to show that he or she is following the talk. If the listener is not gazing at the speaker at the moment when the speaker chooses to look at the listener, the speaker breaks off his or her utterance and restarts because he or she does not know whether the hearer was actually listening. So the achievement of mutual gaze should always be in this order: first the hearer looks at the speaker and then the speaker at the hearer. Only then the speaker sees that the recipient has been attending to his or her talk. The opposite order (speaker looks, then listener) is dispreferred and oriented to by the participants in the following talk (Goodwin, 1980).

4 *Non-linguistic factors and a (tiny) quantitative comparison*

Some quantitative information and a short account of a few non-linguistic factors is called for before a micro-analysis of the gaze behaviour in the reception situation. These social and physical factors are dominant and come before any linguistic or interactional considerations. A comparison of three different groups of viewers, the contexts of their talk, and the number of head-turns towards one another will be undertaken in the following.

4.1 The more talk, the more gaze redirections

In the first group, transcript BB1R, a father, Richard, and his son Benjamin are watching the first half of Brazil – Belgium in Sheffield. The game can be rated as one of the more interesting matches of the World Cup due to the two nations competing. The two viewers seem absorbed by the game. As all families in the corpus, they produce 'islands of talk' ('Gesprächsinseln' Baldauf, 2001) only, i.e. they say a few words, remain silent for a longer period, talk a little, relapse back into silence… Also, they talk about the game and football related matters only. The number of head turns within this half-time augments to 17.

On the other hand, in transcript JR1T, two friends, Tom and Frank, meet for the purpose of watching a game together. They are in their thirties to forties and live in London. As is mostly the case with groups of friends in the corpus, their viewing is accompanied by more or less constant talk on diverse topics (the match, football-related matters, family, leisure, work…) Tom and Frank turn their heads towards each other approximately 200 times during this one half-time.

Hence, the data suggest that more talk triggers more gaze redirections towards one another and less talk entails less head-turns towards the co-interlocutor(s). There is not a single instance of a head-turn towards an interlocutor without talk in the ATTAC-Corpus, be the words preceding, accompanying or following the gaze. Hence one can state that gaze in this setting is truly para-verbal and not a separate independent phenomenon (as maybe in a game of poker when the players check out their opponents' facial expressions).

4.2 Age and seating position

In transcript AE1C, the first half of Argentina-England, watched by Darrell and Henry, two former referees, who are over 70 years old, there is also more or less constant talk on football and football-related matters. Due to this fact, we would also expect a high number of gaze redirections towards one another. However, there is only one head-turn of one of the viewers towards the other within the first forty minutes of watching football.

Considering the seating position of the two, two issues become apparent. They are sitting on a small two seat sofa and they face the television, which stands on the other side of a coffee table. Thus, turning their heads to each other would result in a position which lies in the sphere of "intimate distance" (Hall, 1966) (cf. these sofas are even called loveseats in American English.) As the relation of the two viewers, distant, male, old friends, does not allow for such close interaction, they do not only have to move their heads 90 degrees, a strain which may already represent an effort for the elderly,

but they would also have to twist their bodies into a leaning position away from their co-viewer in order to remove their faces from one another. The one head-turn that can be found in the data substantiates this claim. Henry does indeed screw his shoulders and his head away from Darrell as he gazes at him.

Interestingly, after 40 minutes, Henry's wife Wilma arrives. She sits down on a seat on the short side of the coffee table, closer to the television than the men, but at an angle, not facing the screen. The men can easily look at her by just moving their heads 45 degrees to the right. Hence, in the second half of the game, transcript AE2C, either one or both of the men direct their gaze 14 times at Wilma even though she has the floor less often than the two. Hence, if viewers are old and oddly seated, they may choose not to gaze at all as it represents a physical effort which does not seem to outweigh the gain that would arise from mutual eye-contact.

So the general rule for gaze in the ATTAC-Corpus, namely 'The more the participants talk to each other, the more often they direct their gaze at each other' can be overruled by such factors as age or seating position.

5 Humour as trigger for gaze

In the following, two excerpts from the ATTAC-Corpus will be presented to illustrate the context of the gaze re-directions by the viewers. It will become apparent that humour is one factor triggering gaze.

The transcriptions were kept as simple as possible (e.g. no precise transcription of the laughter) to lay the focus on gaze (cf. Ochs, 1979, 168 on selectivity in transcribing). Dots …. underneath an utterance represent the beginning of a turn of the head towards a co-viewer, crosses xxxx indicate the time one viewer gazes at the other, and, finally, commas „„„ depict the turn back towards the television. Italics represent a gaze redirection by a listener and regular print a head turn by the speaker. For easy reference, who (X) turns to whom (Y) is again transcribed in the same line with the help of the formula (X→Y). Hence, the default case, which is not marked in the transcriptions, is the gaze towards the television. For more information about the transcription conventions, please see the appendix.

5.1 Jokes by the viewers

The following example features Tom and Frank again. They are watching the second half of the game Japan-Russia, a group-stage game, which as such did not arouse as much excitement as e.g. Argentina-England. It is the transcript with one of the highest number of exchanges of gaze and also the most talk between the two viewers.

Example 1: JR2T Smirnoff

1	TV	Izmailov,
2	TV	corner.
		(2.6)
3	Frank	is his name REAlly Smirnoff.
4	Tom	{laughter} [{continued laughter}]
5	Frank	[{laughter}]=

6	Tom	=well he's not supposed to-	
7		what if he was,	
8		be called Smirnoff.	
9		who would do that.=	
10	Frank	={short laugh}	
		(0.9)	
11	Tom	{laughs}	
12		that's like there was people in Italy called Bacardi,	
		……*xxxxxxxxxxxx*	*F→T*
13	Frank	{laughter} [{continued laughter}]	
		,,,,,	
14	Tom	[I mean there ARE are there,]	
15	Tom	[Martini,]	
		……xxx	T→F
16	Frank	[{continued laughter}]	
		,,,,,,	
17	Both	{laughter}	
18	Frank	RON Bacardi.	
		….xxxx	F→T
19	Tom	and yeah- {laughter} Ron Bacardi {laughingly},	
		,,,,,	
20	Both	{laughter}	T→F (2x) F→T (1x)

In lines 1 and 2, the television commentator describes the ongoing action on the pitch: Ismailov, a Russian player, shoots across the goal line, which results in a corner. The fast and unstressed English pronunciation of the Russian name Ismailov [zmaɪlɔv] by the commentator triggers a succession of jokes based on its phonetic resemblance to the Russian vodka brand Smirnoff pronounced [zmɜ:nɔf] by the interlocutors.

In line 3, Frank starts the sequence with the interrogative "is his name REAlly Smirnoff.," albeit with a falling intonation, not the typical yes-no question pattern. The non-canonical intonation contour is not rare in conversation (69% in a sample by Hedberg & Sosa, 2002.) As the two viewers had generally been discussing names of foreign football clubs and as they had been trying to remember the members of the Russian and the Japanese teams, names had been mentioned repeatedly all through their watching. For this reason, Frank's utterance could conceivably have been interpreted as a request for information by Tom. However, Tom starts laughing (line 4) signalling that he interprets the utterance as humorous. 0.5 seconds later, Frank joins him (line 5). The mutual laughter marks the keying as non-serious. According to Goodwin's conversational gaze rules, there would be a gaze by Tom, the listener, in line 3, followed by a gaze by Frank, the speaker, to ensure that communication is running smoothly. However, they both choose to continue looking at the television. The subsequent laughter shows their mutual understanding. The lack of gaze is not oriented to in the talk.

The same holds for Tom's turn, lines 6 – 9, and for large parts of the corpus. As the participants gathered to watch football, the recipient's obligation to signal listenership through gaze is suspended. Irrelevant of non-linguistic factors such as age or the seating position, even in groups where gaze is regularly used, no markers of dispreference can be linked to the lack of gaze.

Line 12 represents the first gaze away from the television screen towards a co-interlocutor in the example. Frank here follows the rule that he should look at the speaker during the utterance. However, Tom does not reciprocate. Nevertheless, one may also consider the possibility that Tom notices Frank's head-turn from the corner of his eye but chooses to continue watching the game as he realizes that Frank has indeed been paying attention to his talk. Frank turns back towards the television after Tom finished his turn, and at the same time, he starts laughing (line 13).

The opposite happens in line 15: here, a gaze by the speaker (Tom) has not been anticipated by Frank, the listener. In conversation in general, one would expect some sign of dispreference such as a restart or a pause as the speaker would then assume that the hearer wasn't listening. However, Frank is still laughing (line 16), so the speaker joins him in his laughter.

In line 18, again the speaker, this time Frank, turns his head towards the hearer. Again, their eyes do not meet. However, in line 19, Tom, who means to continue in this joke pattern "and-," is overwhelmed by laughter and repeats Frank's joke. Hence, he also signals that he had been listening. The subsequent laughter by both (line 20) triggers two head-turns by Tom towards Frank and, afterwards, one by Frank to Tom.

To wrap up, the rule that the listener gazes first is neither followed in this excerpt nor is the violation of this rule oriented to by the speakers. Instead, the conversation flows effortlessly between the two, their mutual laughter signals understanding and pleasure in this humorous exchange, even though their gaze is being mainly directed at the television and no eye contact is established.

Considering the different instances where the interlocutors do use gaze as a resource in their interaction, it becomes apparent that jokes seem to invite gaze. In lines 12, 15, and 18, the speakers make a joke by giving family names based on alcoholic brands. Although it is at times the speaker who seems to check whether his or her joke is understood as such and at times the listener who is ascertaining the keying of the talk, in all three cases, gaze is averted at the end of the joke.

In this case, humour was created by the participants themselves without any humorous remark on television. The next example will show how a comment on television is being taken up by the participants as humorous and how that triggers gaze.

5.2 Humour triggered by the primary media text

In this second example, which features Gerard, the father, and his son Benjamin, the transcript consists of 'islands of talk' only. Some of them are accompanied by gaze towards a co-viewer; others consist of talk with the conversationalists incessantly looking at the TV screen. Again, in those 'islands of talk' which do include gaze redirections, often humour or laughter play a role. It is not quite clear in the example which follows whether the journalist actually means to joke about the goal-keeper or whether it is only the viewer(s) who find the remark humorous. In any case, it is the primary media text itself about which the viewers laugh.

Example 2: BB1R biggest keeper

1	TV	and he doesn't look the BIggest keeper going up for that,
2		and he just manages the air,
3		[{?}]

4	Gerard	[{chuckling}]	
		……xxxxxx	G→B
5	TV	from the kick-off {continuing commentary}	
		,,,,,,,	
6	Gerard	doesn't look the BIggest keeper going up for that,	
		……..xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx	G→B
		……..*xxxxxxxxxxxxx,,,,,,,,*	*B→G*
7	both	{laughter}	
		,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,	G→B

In line 4, Gerard's reacts to the commentary "doesn't look the BIggest keeper going up for that,." His turning towards his son during the chuckling may be interpreted as a first attempt at getting some kind of recognition for what he thinks is funny. However, Benjamin does not react. In line 6, Gerard repeats the commentator's utterance thereby explicating his chuckling, drawing attention to the humorous part in question, and inviting a reaction from his son. Here he is successful: Benjamin turns his head, looks at his father, their eyes meet, and they both laugh. This shared laughter (line 7) gives them a feeling of mutual understanding and reinforces their family ties.

In this second pattern for gaze and humour, the speaker gazes at the hearer waiting for a sign of shared humour. This seems to be in line with Klemm's (2000) macro-function 'Vergemeinschaftung der Zuschauer,' which he found for talk in front of the television. 'Vergemeinschaftung' means the process which makes a group out of individuals; i.e. a feeling of belonging and of being part of the group that watches TV is being created. Although the order of gaze re-directions in this pattern is 'first speaker, then listener,' again, no markers of dispreference can be found in the data.

6 Discussion

The lack of gaze over long stretches of talk in the corpus suggests that Goodwin's gaze rules are suspended during the reception situation. Immersed in the games, the football fans choose to waive gaze as a resource in talk. One context in which they do decide to use gaze in their interactions is humour. When the participants joke, one of the interlocutors, be it the listener or the speaker, may turn towards the other viewer to ensure that they are (still) in a joke frame. It may be sufficient for one of the conversationalists to turn as the other notices the movement from the corner of his or her eyes and interprets it as a marker for (continuing) humorous keying. At the end of the joke, they turn back at the television.

Hence, gaze here seems to have a similar function as 'lol' (acronym for 'laughing out loud') or emoticons such as :-) in computer-mediated communication. They mark the keying as humorous and activate the play frame. This underlines the finding that in CMC, they are interpretable as compensation for the lack of non-verbal cues such as gaze (del-Teso-Craviotto, 2006).

In the second pattern, the speaker uses gaze to invite a reaction towards the primary media text by the other viewer present. It marks part of the text as noteworthy and humorous. Hence, to make humour a binding force between interlocutors, extra-linguistic reinforcement seems called for. In contrast to Goodwin's 'hearer first' rule,

here, the speaker gazes first waiting for an uptake by the listener. This order is maintained without any restarts, delays or other displays of a dispreferred orientation.

Another context triggering gaze, which for lack of space cannot be fully discussed here, is evaluation. First, regarding the primary media text, utterances such as "good pass that was" or "foul for sure," where participants take an evaluative stance against the media text, are accompanied by gaze. Also, when the participants tell stories, instances of evaluation (Labov & Waletzky, 1967) are marked by gaze. Hence, when viewers open themselves up and give personal opinions or invite in criticism, gaze is used. Taking these examples together with the gazes in the context of humour, the umbrella for all these instances is apparently that the selves of the viewers become instantiated or foregrounded at these points. Hence, further inquiry may yield that gaze in this setting is primarily a marker for identity work.

To wrap up, on the one hand, this inquiry sheds more light on the micro-interactions during the reception situation, how conversationalists manage turn-taking and interactionality in this specific setting. Generally, a qualitative analysis of the viewer's conversations in front of the television seemed impossible without considering the question where the viewers are looking. These findings may also stimulate advances in the function of gaze in conversation in general. Para-verbal phenomena such as gaze still seem to play a minor role in qualitative studies, even though it seems unquestionable that a gaze (or the lack of it) can change the meaning of an utterance. Finally, studies on humour in conversation (Norrick, 1993) could certainly profit from taking gaze into account.

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Appendix

Transcription conventions

she's out.	falling tone in the preceding element; suggesting finality
oh yeah?	rising tone in the preceding element; cf. yes-no question intonation
so,	level, continuing intonation; suggesting non-finality
bu- but	a cutoff or truncated intonation unit
DAMN	high pitch and a rise in volume.
(2.0)	timed pause in seconds
[and so-]	overlapping talk
[WHY] her?	
and=	latching of contiguous utterances with no interval or overlap
=then	
(?)	incomprehensible parts
{laughs}	para- and non-verbal behaviour and contextual information
……	head-turn of speaker towards recipient
xxxx	speaker looks at recipient
,,,,,,,	head-turn of speaker away from recipient towards TV
……	head-turn of listener towards speaker
xxxx	listener looks at speaker
,,,,,,,	head-turn of listener away from hearer towards TV
(X→Y)	speaker X redirects gaze away from TV towards recipient Y
(X→Y)	listener X redirects gaze away from TV towards speaker Y

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English summary

This paper describes the gaze behaviour of television viewers talking to each other. It is based on the ATTAC-corpus which consists of transcribed video recordings of Britons watching football at home on TV.
In regular everyday conversation, generally people tend to face each other, and gaze is used as a key cue for turn-taking and interactionality. However, in this specific setting, the conversationalists face the following dilemma: they can direct their gaze at each other, but only at the cost of not being able to look at the screen.
The data suggest that spatial arrangements, age, and an orientation towards humour influence the gaze behaviour of the viewers. In contrast to conversation in general, the rule "the listener should look at the speaker, when the speaker chooses to look at the listener" could not be corroborated.

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