

MIMETIC LANGUAGE LEARNING OR HOW TO INCORPORATE THE "PERFORMATIVE MAGIC" OF LANGUAGE

In einer empirischen Untersuchung wurde ein Theaterprojekt einer Willkommensklasse videographiert, also einer Schulklasse mit Schülerinnen, die neu in Deutschland sind und über wenig Deutschkenntnisse verfügen. Die Bedeutung ihrer Bewegungen und Gesten beim Spracherlernen wird auf Basis der Habitusstheorie (Bourdieu) und dem Mimesiskonzept (Gebauer & Wulf) beleuchtet. Die Ergebnisse weisen darauf hin, dass die Kinder beim Aneignen unbekannter Begriffe mimetischen Bezug zu der Lehrkraft oder der Theaterpädagogin nehmen. Weiter wurde festgestellt, dass die Schülerinnen bereits über ein Wissen über einen sprachlichen Markt (Bourdieu 1991) verfügen und es verstehen, dieses bei einer Aufführung (z.B. dem Vorsingen eines Liedes) vor anderen zu nutzen. Mit einem Verständnis für die Macht mimetischen Lernens und der daraus resultierenden „performativen Magie“ (Bourdieu 1991) ergibt sich schließlich das Plädoyer, beim Lernen einer Sprache verinnerlichte sprachliche Dispositionen sowie den Handlungscharakter stets im Blick zu haben.

● Serafina Morrin | Catholic University of Applied Social Sciences Berlin



Serafina Morrin is an educational scientist, early-childhood educator and actress who has worked in film and theatre. She

has gained many years of experience as an applied theatre practitioner. The focus of her research and third-level lecturing is on performative learning, linguistic education and (inter) cultural education. She is a lecturer at the Catholic University of Applied Social Sciences and the Alice Salomon University of Applied Sciences, both in Berlin.

1 Study Presentation

The drama practitioner introduces a game, in which she names terms that then have to be depicted by the players as statues. Doing so, the players can act out whatever occurs to them. Both the teacher and the children participate in the game. One such term is "Weihnachten" (German for Christmas). Immediately, the class teacher acts out taking something in his hands which he opens while breathing softly at the same time, his voice raised in an "oh" sound, and observing his hands with a pleased, astonished look. At the same time, the sobbing of a boy can be heard. The boy raises his fists to his eyes and rubs them. He now looks at the teacher's gestures. With that he changes his posture, moving his arms and hands into a similar position. His tearful facial expression changes into a smile.

This is a scene from a theatre-in-education project with 10 to 11-year-old children in a Berlin welcome class – a class for children who have not lived long in Germany and have little knowledge of German. What is revealed here about handling unknown terms? Which meaning does our body have in this regard, and which meaning do movements have in

social interaction?

The aim of the videographed study was to assess implicit linguistic knowledge. The basis for this is the viewpoint that in school-based learning settings, competencies that can be explicitly tested and permit a country-wide or even global ranking seem to have a high value or status yet the consideration that, "we can know more than we can say." (Polanyi 1966: 4), is potentially overlooked or neglected in this context. Thus, the intention with this study was to concentrate on implicit knowledge. As this never lets itself be completely grasped, the focus was placed on mimetic processes instead. But what are mimetic processes and what do they have to do with "languages on the move?"

2 Theoretical Background

In the context of this study, references to two theoretical concepts can be taken, those of mimesis (Gebauer & Wulf, 1998) and of habitus (Bourdieu, 1991), in which physical bodily movements and gestures play a role in social interaction.

Let us explore mimetic processes first-

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ly. With these, the human perceives their external world, steps outside it and creates a world in their imagination once more. The external and the internal worlds continuously compare themselves and become experienceable in this way (cf. Wulf, 2005: 23). Mimetic processes are mostly implicit as they occur unconsciously for the most part. In their performativity form, however, they are empirically graspable in actions (cf. Wulf, 2005: 14). The intention with the above example is to illustrate this. The boy's depiction is based on his internalised image. He links the sound of a word he knows, "weinen" (German for crying) with the beginning of the German word for Christmas, "Weihn", which sounds similar in German. He assumes a reference to an already experienced meaning and embodies this through his sobbing. In the moment that he looks at the teacher, he adapts his inner image to that enacted by the teacher. It now becomes visible in the boy's smiling that he seems to have understood that "Weihnachten" (Christmas) can mean something joyful and does not necessarily have to be connected with "weinen", or crying. While the boy has certainly not grasped the semantic range and diversity of this, he does, however, reveal a mimetic process in which meaning is embodied or incorporated.

Language is regarded here as being a social action. This is consistent with Bourdieu's consideration of viewing language as part of an incorporated habitus. For the human acquires a linguistic habitus over the course of their socialisation via a multitude of such mimetic processes. Bourdieu calls it "performative magic" (Bourdieu, 1991: 106) when with the help of an "invisible silent violence"

(Bourdieu, 1991: 52), language is used in social practices, for instance, in order to distinguish between social differences. Language can denote a symbolic power, with the language being spoken regarded as a legitimately recognised language that is accorded more cultural capital and therefore more symbolic power in a linguistic market than is the speaking of a non-legitimate language. Linguistic dispositions are "impalpably inculcated, through a long and slow process of acquisition, by the sanctions of the linguistic market." (Bourdieu, 1991: 51) This invisible silent violence reveals itself in social practices.

Thus when learning a language, bodily-based knowledge is significant as a habitual performance in a social interaction. Implicit language knowledge, which is understood here as practical knowledge acquired mimetically, represents the basis of both theories.

3 Research Questions and Methodical Approach

The study focuses on the questions: Which mimetic processes are apparent in a welcome class in relation to implicit linguistic knowledge? Which significance does knowledge about a linguistic market have for these children? In conclusion, the intention is to discuss what results from this for successful learning.

If we regard language as being acquired in social interactions, then a performative research approach seemed a plausible one here. In this regard, methods from theatre play and drama were applied in a manner comparable to questions in an interview. However, the children were not requested to provide verbal answers (reality as text), such as for instance,

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"Tell me what you do well or like to do." Instead play stimulations were provided, such as, "Show me what you do well or like to do." (reality as a physical, bodily process-like event). It was requested that the learners depict or act this out physically.

The videographed drama-in-education project was held ten times in total. The participants consisted of 10 children, as well as the teacher and the drama practitioner. No demographic data about the school-goers was collected for reasons of data protection. However, the children frequently spoke to each other in Rumanian, Turkish and Arabic, while using German in class to the extent they could. (The parental letters were provided in German, English, Arabic and Rumanian.) The video data were evaluated using the documentary method (Bohnsack, et. al 2007). With this method, the intention is to proceed from the question of what cultural facts are to the question of how these are produced. For instance, no questions were posed about what the children spoke or which actions they completed. Instead, the intention was to ascertain the underlying habitus, i.e. the way and manner, in which something was spoken about or treated. The actions were reconstructed on the basis of the tacitly shared "orientation patterns" (Bohnsack et al. 2007), i.e. the underlying habitual patterns to these actions (for more details, see Morrin 2018).

4 Findings

4.1 Mimetic Processes when Grasping the Significance of Terms

The children immediately act out a statue for words they seem to already know (pizza, baby, school). However, when grasping the significance of apparently unknown terms, it occurs frequently that the children adopt a mimetic reference

to the movements of the adults, similar to the example above. Doing so, the gestural action is creatively imitated by the children and a connection with their own imaginary world view is produced. The following example is exemplary of this. During the above-mentioned play in which the intention is to physically act out a term, the teacher claps his hands once, smiles and lets out a breath of relief during the presentation of the term "Herbstferien" (autumn school holidays). The children observe this, initially begin slowly and then ever-faster to clap their hands, which turns into an applause, and start to laugh.

The children have not physically embodied their teacher's gestures exactly, but instead have found their own reference that makes sense to them. They connect the teacher's bodily presentation with a gesture familiar to them, as well as with their own cultural-habitual experience, in which recognition is expressed through applause. Even if they have not fully grasped the meaning that the words "Herbstferien" (autumn school holidays) have for the teacher, they have experienced that something pleasant is linked to this.

The fact that the children are able to grasp unknown terms via their physicality and less so through conscious and cognitive understanding is also revealed in the following example of a misunderstood subordinate clause.

The children enthusiastically tell the drama practitioner about their football game. When everyone is seated in a circle afterwards, the drama practitioner asks who amongst them is able to play football well. An excited babbling of voices immediately ensues. The drama practitioner then stands in the centre of the circle, raises her arm, points her forefinger up in the air and says, "Whichever one of you I call up, can

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stand in the middle and show us how they play football." With that, two boys jump up, stand in the centre of the circle, each raise one arm and point their forefingers into the air. A third boy then also stands in the circle, but without raising his arm, while a fourth one prepares to stand up, but then remains seated.

As the study focuses on tacit knowledge, it is interesting to look at how the children react. While the drama practitioner wants the children to stay seated until one of them is asked to demonstrate their football skills, the students imitate her in different ways. The semantics of a subordinate clause construction are apparently more difficult to understand than is the physical appearance of the drama practitioner, to whose gestures the children refer mimetically.

Thus regarding the question of mimetic processes with linguistic knowledge, it can be found that the children assume a mimetic reference to the gestures of the adults with apparently incomprehensible sentences.

4.2 Knowledge of a Linguistic Market

The children are asked to show something that they like doing or can do well. A girl stands up and says she can sing well. She stands before the group and explains, "Auf Englisch aus meine Kopf" (In English from my head). With that, she begins to sing a song consisting of imaginary intonations that sound very similar to the English language.

During this presentation in a classroom context, the girl uses a dominant language, even if she is not really proficient in it. The knowledge of the linguistic acceptability, i.e. that of the "concessions one makes to a social world by accepting to make oneself acceptable in it" (Bourdieu, 1991: 77) is illustrated in a

highly similar manner in a further scene.

A boy who would also like to perform, stands up before the group, smiles and asks aloud, "Auf Deutsch?" (in-a German). "Äh, egal," (Ah, doesn't matter) the drama practitioner responds quickly and just as loudly. The boy begins to beatbox "K P Pft Pft Tz", makes hip-hop movements with his arms to this and says rhythmically in German, "Alice, ich liebe Mädchen. Ich liebe. Ich gehen. Stark." (Alice, I love girl. I love. I go. Strong.) This is followed by further beatbox sounds and a final "Ah bh te geeeh" that slowly fades out. The boy grins and the audience begin to laugh and clap. The teacher calls out "bravo".

Likewise in this scene, no linguistic specification was given. The boy knows how to compensate for his lack of German linguistic competencies through the use of rhythm and movement. With his linguistic play, he physically embodies his membership of one of the social groups recognised among his peers. In this way, his knowledge reveals itself through the symbolic impact of the language. His embodied and verbal linguistic style seems to be accepted by the student group and indeed by the adults, who can be regarded as part of a symbolic authority (the school institution).

After two children have already decided to sing a song, a girl says that she would also like to present something. She positions herself before the group and starts to sing a slow song in Spanish in a low voice. The group applauds.

In these situations, the children are not using the languages that they speak outside the formal classroom lessons. All three children have chosen dominant languages with high cultural capital (Spanish, German and English) that – with the exception of the classroom

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instruction language – are not spoken in the classroom. Thus, it may be found in relation to the research question that the children have already internalised knowledge about a linguistic market and know which language to use in which way in which context. This is significant to the extent that in another scene, one of these girls started a discussion about the language to be used.

4.3 Discussion about the Language to Be Used

The drama practitioner asks a female student, who has informed her that she is going to sing a song aloud in the school assembly hall, whether she also wants to sing a song now. The girl responds, "Ich singe andere, ich singe Deutsch." (I sing different, I sing German). With that, several children name various songs that can be heard in the latest charts. The girl thinks for a moment, and smiles. "Ich singe Rumänisch." (I'll sing Rumanian.) "Ja" (Yes), responds the teacher in confirmation, "auf Rumänisch, sehr schön" (in Rumanian, how nice). A babble of voices ensues. The girl exchanges a few words with the boy beside her, at which the teacher asks if they want to sing together in Rumanian. "Ja, ja" (Yes, yes), she answers enthusiastically. The boy responds curtly: "Gut" (Good). But before they start, he turns around quickly to her and names a song that is currently a hit in the German-language charts. "Ja, ja" (Yes, yes), says the girl and both of them sing in German, until the boy has to laugh and the group finally applauds.

In this scene, a discussion occurs between the performers, as well as within the group. Doing so, the girl becomes aware of the reactions of the others. When chart songs are named by the group, she gets

the idea of singing a song in Rumanian. But despite the teacher's acknowledgement of this, "auf Rumänisch, sehr schön" (in Rumanian, how nice), the two children suddenly decide on the common classroom instruction language. The decisive aspect here is not the influence of the adults, but rather the reactions of her peers. Likewise, this alignment to those of a similar age is based on knowledge about the symbolic influence of language, on performative magic in other words. As an embodied knowledge, it reveals itself homological in all of the cases presented.

5 Discussion

The aim was to record and comprehend the significance of habitual gestures and movements during linguistic learning processes of school-goers who have not lived long in Germany.

It confirmed that an invisible power is inherent in mimetic learning, and that any embodied performance of the adults mostly acts as a role model for the students, and that this can already be grasped on a pre-reflexive level. Thus for teaching staff working with children with little knowledge of the target language, it is essential to have an understanding of such mimetic-performative processes.

The intention of the study was not to provide examples of formulaic knowledge, but rather to explore the significance of mimetic learning processes. In this regard, during teaching practice, it should be considered that not everything can be formulated linguistically, i.e. in words, by the children. This concerns any questioning of misunderstood terms, as indeed of more complex interconnections that

require cognitive processing. As the children are less likely to grasp new terms via their contextual-semantic level but more so pre-reflexively via their bodily-performative level, it should be considered that this can easily lead to misunderstandings. The bodily performance of the adults can be a model for them. In this respect, the knowledge about the actional character of languages can help to recognise and create awareness for mimetic linguistic learning processes, and permit shared reflection on them. Furthermore, it has been shown that the children have knowledge available to them about the social function of languages and have already internalised the magic powers, i.e. "the laws defining the social conditions of acceptability" (Bourdieu, 1991: 76). They understand how to present themselves by means of accepted social codes and dominant languages. As the danger exists here of reproducing hegemonial structures, the awareness of teaching staff has to be enhanced for this, so as to counter any potential biases. For example, it can be discussed in the classroom on a cognitive-verbal level what is shown only on a linguistic-performative level. Alternatively, the children can find situations or scenes where social conditions are shown in a habitualised way. In that way educational theatre especially can provide access to languages on the move in the sense of embodied gestures and physical movements, because it is able to make communicative norms visible, to reflect consciously on them and ultimately to also make performative magic graspable for everyone.

It was shown that the children have knowledge available to them about the social function of languages and have already internalised the magic powers.

6 Literature

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