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Things, Bodies, and Language

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Taxca is a small dog who loves to eat. On finding her food-dish empty she uses her paw to move it noisily across the floor and then looks up at her master (Figure 14.1). When he does nothing but look back at her; that is, he does not put more food in her dish, she repeats the request by pawing her bowl again.

What Taxca does here provides a simple example of several related phenomena that are relevant to the investigation of cognition, and to the part played by things in that process. First, she has attempted to draw someone else's attention to something, and moreover to something quite specific (her lack of food). Second, to do this she has used her body to manipulate a thing, her supper dish. Third, she has used that thing to make visible not only what is present, but more crucially a relevant absence, the lack of food in the dish. Fourth, all of this is at the service of building a particular kind of action, what we might gloss as a request for more food. Some demonstration of this, of how she is manipulating the dish specifically to try to get someone else to perform a specific next action (filling the dish), is provided by other aspects of her embodied behavior, including the way in which she moves her gaze from the bowl to her master after manipulating it, thus both addressing him and putting herself in a position to observe what he does next, and then her repetition of the action when he does not provide a relevant response.

A few additional observations about what happens here are relevant. First, Taxca is explicitly attending to two quite different kinds of material objects in her local environment as she builds this action: first, her dish and, second, the visible body of her master. What is to be seen in each of these objects is shaped by the local course of action. Thus, the dish functions as an indexical sign for food (rather than something to be purchased, etc.), and the body of her master as the place where Taxca can find if her request will or will not be granted. The part played by the human body in courses of action that include objects will be further investigated below. Third, to build

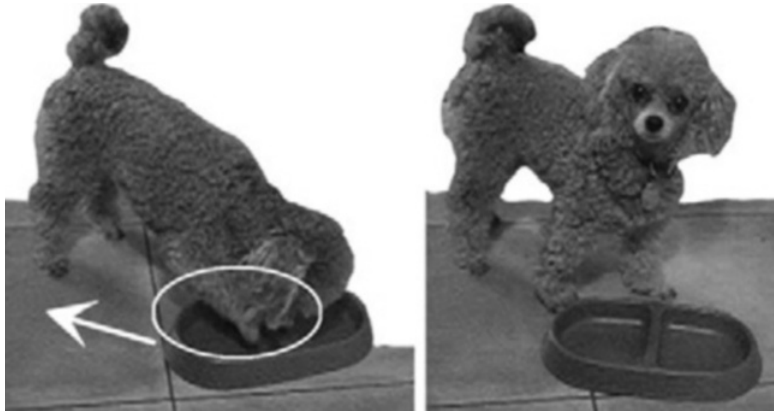

Figure 14.1. Using an object as a sign to make a request

her action, Taxca uses a thing, the supper dish from which she habitually eats, that already carries a history of use that is most relevant to the task she is trying to accomplish. The way in which objects in the external world can invoke and organize memory is a most-important aspect of the cognitive life of things. However, even in this very simple case, focusing primarily on the object's ties to a relevant past is inadequate. Taxca is using the dish to try to make something happen next. Her action, like most actions, has an essential prospective orientation; its retrospective components are being used to try to shape future action.

1. Embedding Things within Multimodal Contextual Configurations

Unlike Taxca, human beings have the ability to use language. Building from the work of Peirce (1998), Deacon (1997) argues that other animals are restricted to iconic and indexical signs that are linked to phenomena in the world around them, Taxca's bowl, for example. Human language on the other hand is characterized by an extensive network of symbols, signs that are organized not through links to the local environment, but instead with reference to systems of other signs. Though much analysis of human language treats it as an isolated, self-contained formal system, the material world can continue to play a most-important part in human processes of meaning-making structured through language and other symbols. Consider Figure 14.2, where Father says "So she sold me ***this*** But she didn't sell me this (0.2) or tha:t.."

One cannot grasp what the speaker is trying to tell his addressee from his talk alone. He also uses his body to construct relevant gestures. However, even when these are taken into account it is still not possible to grasp what he is saying (Consider the top left image in Figure 14.2).

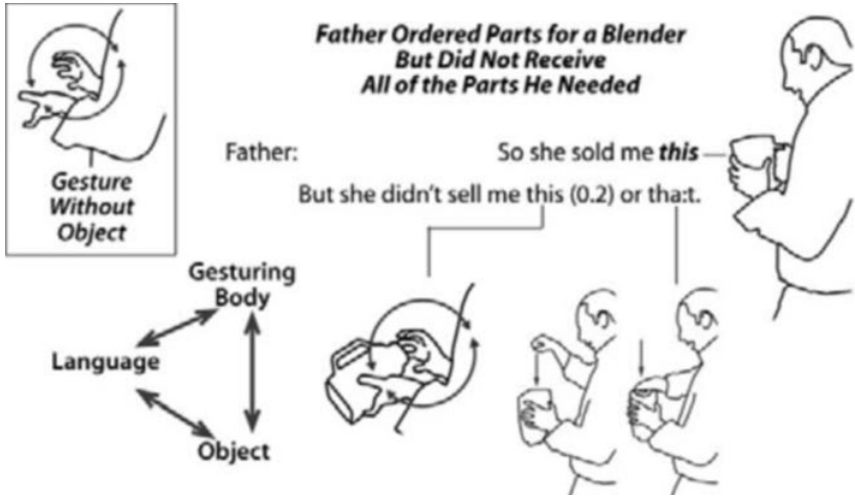

Figure 14.2. Building meaning through the integrated use of language, the body, and objects in the world

The speaker is holding an object in his hand, a jar for a kitchen blender that has been delivered after being ordered on the Internet. Only when this object, as well as the talk and gesture, are all taken into account, does what he is saying become comprehensible. By rotating his hand in a circular "screwing" motion over the threads at the bottom of the jar he is holding, while using talk to specify the absence of a relevant part ("But she didn't sell me this"), the speaker constructs a multimodal sign complex (language + gesture + object) that makes visible the missing part (Goodwin, 2007, in press). The thrust of his hand into the empty top of the jar a second later uses the same complex of resources to represent the jar's absent lid (note how he has rearranged his hand into the shape that would be used to grasp such a lid). At the end of this sequence of actions, he moves his eyes from the object he has been manipulating to his addressee. Note also that by virtue of a shared history in a particular culture, Father's interlocutor can recognize both this object and its habitual uses, and thus interpret what she sees in a meaningful fashion.

Very much like Taxca with her bowl, Father has used one object, the jar, to make visible another object, or rather set of objects, the base and the top of the jar, which are not physically present. However, Father's action differs from Taxca's in one crucial respect: he uses the descriptive powers of language to contextualize what he is doing with his actions upon the object in his hand. Without such accompanying language it can become extremely difficult for an interlocutor to determine what someone is doing by gesturing or pointing toward a thing in the environment, or even to figure out what object is being pointed at. I have become vividly aware of this as a genuine practical problem in another research I am pursuing with a man who was left with a three-word

vocabulary after a severe stroke (Goodwin, 2003), and who thus frequently builds action through gesture without being able to speak language to contextualize the gesture.

The part played by language in Father's action does not, however, mean that his use of one object, the jar, to construct a sign that brings into the present another, absent object, can be ignored, or that it is less important than his talk. The inadequacy of either language alone, or the object alone, is well demonstrated by the way in which what Father is saying cannot be grasped by focusing on any single modality – his talk, his gesture or the object – in isolation. Instead he builds a multimodal complex in which the signs provided by each meaning-making resource, including his language, are partial and incomplete, but which construct a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. This is made possible by the way in which diverse elements with complementary properties mutually contextualize each other.

Such multimodal arrangements of structurally different, mutually elaborating signs, in which objects participate in a discourse with language, the body, and a range of other phenomena (including emerging courses of action), are one site where the cognitive life of things can be investigated. The intrinsic hybrid nature of such contextual configurations (Goodwin, 2000) raises analytic issues, and indeed traditionally most analysis has focused on each system or modality in isolation and not developed models that investigate, for example, language and the human structuring of the material world as integrated components of a coherent, interdependent process.

One further difference between Taxca's action and Father's can be briefly noted. While Taxca is able only to paw a bowl that is already supported by the floor, bipedal Father is not only able to hold the object he is bringing to the attention of his interlocutor, but also to rapidly reconfigure a hand, that has enormous flexibility when compared with Taxca's paw, into finely shaped gestures that are precisely attuned to the particulars of both the shape of the object being manipulated and of what he is doing at a specific moment. Thus he rapidly shifts from an open-handed moving gesture at the base of the jar to the grasping gesture at the top of the jar that indexes the lid. Both gestures are shaped, though in quite different ways, by the objects they are articulating. At the base of the jar, Father's moving hand with its extended fingers enacts the missing object that would rotate there. However, at the top of the jar he does not trace the shape of the missing lid (for example, use his finger to outline a square lid over the jar), but instead makes the lid visible by enacting with his grasping hand shape how a human being would hold and move the lid to the jar. Such a gesture is built by enacting how objects in the world are known and manipulated through the work of an active hand (LeBaron and Streeck, 2000). The systematic ability of humans to recognize this provides an extraordinary economy, since the gesturer is freed from the task of depicting in detail all of the complexity of the objects being represented, but can instead work with resources that are always present and are already being used, specifically the body as the primordial medium for encountering and interacting with the objects around us.

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