

The heritage of the NHI. Response to H. Walter Schmitz

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We agree that most recordings of interaction do not give much in the way of reflexive detail about the process of recording itself. In fact, Birdwhistell was quite interested in this, and often talked about it, though he wrote down his ideas far less often. WLH remembers particular comments made in his classes about the filming of families in ten zoos, and has found a relevant comment described by Catherine Bateson (Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead's daughter), in her review of that film, where she says:

With characteristic irony, Birdwhistell ends with two passages that deviate from the plot of the film, the series of zoos, and strengthen its meta-message about the nature of the film medium. The first shows van Vlack spontaneously *turning off* his camera when he realized he had happened to focus on a pick-up in Paris – and then, urged to resume shooting, focussing on a gendarme, a guardian of morality. The second shows a section, ten seconds long, which was almost discarded as poor quality and yet conveys volumes. Again, we get the message that the potential richness of film for anthropology lies in a growing understanding of filmmaking and film analysis; in the process as well as the product. (Bateson 1972: 192)

So at least he made comparable metacommunicative comments about the process on video, for others to discover, even if he did not typically write about this very often.

In his commentary Schmitz asks if it is really true that, as we wrote, “many of the assumptions and features of their [the NHI researchers’] methods have had an extensive influence and have contributed significantly to the way interaction studies are pursued today.” In quoting this he added emphasis on the words “extensive” and “significantly”. He does agree that there was some influence, but he

claims this to have been limited and that it did not last long. As he puts it, “On the contrary, I would argue that it is difficult to make out even a hidden influence of the NHI project in the relevant literature, even in empirical film-based or video-based studies of interaction from the past 40 years – with the exception of Adam Kendon, who can describe himself as ‘a member of the NHI theory group’” (Schmitz 2021 [this volume]: 239). That is to say, Kendon was a Visiting Scholar at the Western Psychiatric Institute in Pittsburgh in 1966–1967 when Brosin and a small team of researchers connected to NHI work were present, which included William Condon, with whom Kendon collaborated. He also was in touch with Ray Birdwhistell in that period. Subsequent to this Kendon joined Albert Scheflen’s “Project on Human Communication” at Bronx State, where he remained until 1976, when he left to take a research position at the Australian National University. His work as published from 1972 and subsequently, on his own admission, has been much influenced both by Scheflen and Birdwhistell (see Kendon 1972b,a; 2004; Forthcoming).

It is a pity that here Schmitz does not give any indication as to what “relevant research” he is referring to in which, according to him, “it is difficult to make out even a hidden influence of the NHI project”. There has, of course, been a great deal of work on the study of interaction since NHI. The many investigators who have entered this field have done so with different disciplinary backgrounds and certainly much of this work has been initiated independently of the NHI work, or of work done by those who had been influenced by it. However, we think we are right in claiming that, nevertheless, important strands of work on social interaction since NHI do reflect its influence, even if in more recent years this influence is not directly acknowledged. Some of this influence is already well described in the chapter by Engelke 2021 [this volume]; we believe its influence is still evident in much of the work today on “embodied interaction”, in the many studies of social interaction from a “multimodal” perspective, even though explicit references to the actual NHI work are not often encountered. The work of Birdwhistell, for example, was important for the growth of interest in the development of and an awareness of the importance of visible bodily action in human communication. Although his attempt to develop a *kinesics* modeled on the concepts and analytic methods of structural linguistics was not further developed in the way he had tried to do (and he himself came to acknowledge that this approach would not be as fruitful as he had originally envisaged), the idea that body motion is patterned and is consistently organized within the communication process is widely accepted today. This is clear from the fact that nowadays it is widely recognized that communication processes in interaction are “multimodal”, and that much of what happens in interaction is “embodied”. Birdwhistell’s work was shaped in

very important ways as a result of his participation in the NHI project. Several of the scholars who are widely cited today as being important in the recent developments of interaction studies, such as Adam Kendon, Charles Goodwin, and Jürgen Streeck, were all influenced by the approach to the analysis of communication developed by the NHI project. This we have already noted in the case of Kendon; Charles Goodwin, as a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania, where he primarily worked with Goffman, Birdwhistell's early student and later colleague – he cites both Birdwhistell's individual publications and the entire NHI as edited by McQuown (Goodwin 1981 [1977]; see also Erickson 2019); Jürgen Streeck was much influenced by Albert Scheflen who was, as already described, a close and longtime collaborator of Birdwhistell. The “multimodal” or “embodied” approach to the study of interaction, well exemplified by the volume edited by Streeck et al. (2011), although shaped in important ways by the approach developed in Conversation Analysis, insists on the importance of visible bodily action in the interaction and this insistence is a direct consequence of the work of scholars such as Streeck, Goodwin and Kendon, as may easily be verified by checking the bibliographies of the papers in this book. It is our claim that anyone who takes for granted that communication is patterned, learned, context specific, and multichannel (multimodal) is relying on ideas that were, early on, explicitly put forward and advanced through NHI, and through those who were immediately influenced by them.¹

To reiterate: we have not argued that either Birdwhistell's kinesics or Trager's paralanguage started a major new research strand continuing today, but rather that the larger understanding of the value of analyzing the pattern, structure, and order underlying interaction as proposed by the NHI researchers as a group, what in this volume is termed “holisms of communication”, is precisely what has had substantial influence on future generations of researchers, and their choices of what to study and how to study it. Birdwhistell, and the NHI project, get credit for “attending to the behavioral ‘atoms’ of everyday life, details that could be seen and heard in all manner of transactions”, in Davis' phrase (2001: 43) – and more, for ensuring that others paid attention to these behavioral atoms as well. We did not take on the task of following all of those who adopted microanalysis after NHI, but at least we do mention most of the major strands of research developed later by others as a result of this early work. Erickson (2004) has done far more along these lines, with a specific focus on multimodal discourse analysis,

¹For example, Hymes' shift from the term “ethnography of speaking” to “ethnography of communication” owed much to Birdwhistell (see Hymes 1967, which could not yet cite NHI since it was still being written, but which does cite multiple sources by Birdwhistell, as well as Bateson and Hockett).

and he specifically talks about how it was NHI which demonstrated that “multimodal analysis of social interaction was the direction to take” (2004: 201). The debt owed Birdwhistell and the NHI project is akin to the debt anyone studying social interaction owes to Erving Goffman, who established the idea that everyday behavior was worthy of attention, even if his name is no longer attached to all publications in that strand of research (Leeds-Hurwitz 2018). Not everyone explicitly attends to the origins of the ideas they espouse but, when writing history, it is an appropriate part of the task to sort out who influenced whom, and where ideas originated and were developed.

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