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Signs of absence in interspecies play: vocal, verbal, and bodily manifestations of ‘being out of sight’ and ‘being out of reach’

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This paper investigates sound patterns and meaning-making during interspecies play, in situations where an object or a playing partner is out of sight or out of reach (hereafter referred to as *absence*). These include e. g. searching or hiding games. The analysis is based on a video corpus of French-speaking children (6-12 years) and pet dogs playing outdoors (approx. 3 h, 3 dog-human pairs) (Grandgeorge et al. 2020). It combines methods and theoretical approaches from linguistics and ethology.

As a shared activity, playing calls for different degrees of detachment from the physical reality, as it deviates in a mutually recognizable way from what is considered by both partners as expected outside the play. The participants are engaged in metacommunicative sign processes where a real-world action (e. g. chasing) is evoked but its consequences (e. g. pain caused when the prey gets caught) are cancelled (Bateson 2000, Kohn 2013). The action becomes a form that receives a new meaning within the play (Despret 2021). This meaning is activated in social interaction, where the participant using the play form must be able to anticipate how the partner is going to interpret the form and count on them for understanding the specific meaning (Bohn et al. 2020).

This contribution explores a) how the human and canine participants manifest absence vocally, verbally and through bodily cues, b) how absence is incorporated in the complex interactional dynamics of play, c) how children tailor their dog-directed speech, in terms of prosody and complexity.

The study shows that perceived absence is multimodally marked by both partners, although the schematic meaning-structure of ABSENCE underlying human language structures is not necessarily shared. A phonetic and interactional analysis reveals that the canine partner uses specific sound patterns of barks and growls at different moments of ball play where the ball is in sight but out of reach. These are treated by the human partner as meaningful turns and can even be reiterated into a complex grammatical construction through imitation (Mondémé 2018, Harjunpää 2022): *non pas r(h)o::*: ‘no not r(h)o::’. The children lean on prosodic cues, along with gestures, gaze, and grammar, when referring to an absent object: [showing an empty hand that was holding the lost ball 1.5 min earlier] *CELLE-LÀ* ‘THIS ONE’ [showing another toy in the other hand] *pas celle-là* ‘not this one’.

The paper maps the phonetic and prosodic features onto the embodied actions (e. g. the posture and gaze of a dog when the human participant is hiding; the empty hand as an indexical sign) and the grammatical (modal) constructions (negation, directives, interrogation) observed. In doing so, it describes in depth the multilayered semiotics and interactional complexity in human-animal communication. It also shows how the capacity of language structures to target entities of various conceptual degrees (Talmy 2017) is used by human children when co-constructing absence in interspecies play. The study attests to the interdisciplinary complementarity and potential of the approaches used.

References are available on request.