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Towards interspecies pragmatics: Language use and embodied interaction in human-animal activities, encounters, and narratives

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Highlights

- Animals' first and second actions are conditionally relevant to human utterances.
- Cats use bodily cues to direct humans' attention to a shared object.
- Dogs distinguish addressed recipient from the unaddressed recipient.
- By reporting animal thoughts humans share awareness of non-human perceptual worlds.
- Interspecies Pragmatics explores the Human-Animal bond in language and interaction.

Abstract

This special issue explores interaction and language use in situations involving human and non-human participants. Bringing together methodologies and theoretical approaches in linguistics and interactional studies, namely conversation analysis, the volume focuses on the social actions accomplished in interspecies interaction and the linguistic construction of non-human perception and meaning-making. The studies of the volume deal with cats' bodily and vocal cues used for coordinating human participant's attention to a shared object, animal actions as conditionally relevant to human utterances within sequence organization, dogs' embodied responses to playing partners within a ball game, and expressions of non-human sensory perception through reported animal thoughts. The special issue introduces Interspecies Pragmatics as an approach used for studying human-animal interactions and relationships, with a particular focus on building multimodal understanding in these specific environments. Interspecies Pragmatics aligns with various interdisciplinary approaches in the Humanities and Social Sciences (Human-Animal studies, Posthumanism, Ecocriticism, Ecolinguistics, Biosemiotics). By undoing conceptual hierarchies and boundaries between humans and other living beings, we can gain insights into shared interests and meanings across species boundaries.

Keywords

Conversation Analysis, deixis, embodied interaction, Human-Animal studies, interspecies interaction, Interspecies Pragmatics, multimodality, sequence organization, Umwelt

Editorial

This virtual special issue investigates situations where human and non-human beings seek mutual understanding through bodily and verbal means. In a Biosemiotics sense, *meaning* goes beyond human language and emerges when something in the environment matters to someone (Uexküll, 1982). The articles of this special issue explore linguistic and non-linguistic meanings in context, i. e. in data where humans and other animals engage in everyday interactions or where people talk about these interactions. The contributions of the volume are partly based on papers presented at an online pre-conference meeting on 26-27 April 2021 and, further on, in the panel "Language use in human-animal communities" on 28 June 2021 at the IPrA Conference in Winterthur. The studies of the special issue attest to the dynamics and richness of the emerging field of Interspecies Pragmatics.

This introduction to the special issue makes a case for the contribution of linguistic and interactional approaches and methodologies to the endeavour of reconsidering human-animal relationships and the status of language within them. We will first look at the foundations of verbal language use when humans address other animals, and then discuss the particularities of human-animal interaction and the experience of interspecies sharedness. In this second part, we will also briefly present the papers included in the special issue. The concluding section will place studies on interspecies interaction in the field of pragmatics.

Using language with animals

The faculty of speech and verbal language has been a core criterion for setting the human species apart from other living creatures (Pennycook, 2018). Indeed, it is a key for observing and understanding the distinctive particularities of human cognition (Tomasello, 2019). In pragmatic terms, language is defined as a method of human communication. Linguistic literature has accordingly concentrated almost exclusively on human-to-human language use (Cornips, 2022). Other animals' communication has mainly been brought up to highlight the contrast with human language and, thereby, demonstrate human uniqueness. The effective border between human and non-human is further sustained by language-based political, moral, and legal institutions.

Yet, people resort to language, along with other embodied modes of expression (gaze, gestures, body postures, non-verbal sounds, etc.), when interacting with beings who do not express themselves verbally. What is more, it is quite normal in human language use to represent non-verbal interactions and events as dialogues (e. g. Pasqual, 2014). Language, with its verbal and vocal dimensions, as well as the conversational framework, are means for operating in social situations, whether or not the interlocutor shares the same language or uses verbal language at all.

Animal-directed speech is sometimes associated with the so-called “baby-talk”, i. e. speech addressed to human infants. Both display higher pitch, more repetition, and simpler constructions than the speech forms used by average human adults among peers (Mitchell, 2001; de Mouzon et al., 2022). These similarities result from the fact that language users readjust the interplay between verbal and non-verbal delivery when communicating with non-linguistic or developing linguistic partners. The two are, however, fundamentally different in their implications. Human children are potential verbal language learners, and specificities in infant-oriented talk can be regarded as pedagogically motivated. Animal-directed speech, on the other hand, must be placed in a context where each interactional participant relies on at least partly different species-specific embodied semiotic resources, including anatomical properties, for communicating in the situation. The means of expression stemming from these are not to be located on different developmental stages with regard to each other. They are semiotic systems adapted to different bodily structures, physical environments, and social worlds.

Nevertheless, the perceptual and semiotic worlds specific to different kinds of living organisms, *Umwelten* in Jakob von Uexküll’s terms, interact constantly with each other. As a matter of fact, their evolution is grounded on these evolving mutual relations (Tønnessen, 2022). This has consequences for communication systems, as well. When it comes to interactions between humans and their closest companion species, such as domestic dogs (cf. Haraway, 2008), there is evidence of “a complex system of interspecific communication”, based on attachment and generating mutual benefits (Miklósi & Topál, 2013:288). Dogs have implicit knowledge about human interactional capacities (Simonen & Lohi, 2021). They have developed particular sensitivity to human social signals (Hare & Tomasello, 2005), and they are able to deal with the referential properties of indexical signs such as pointing gestures or gaze shifts (Miklósi & Topál, 2013). Moreover, dogs and humans are known to be sensitive to each other’s vocal emotional cues (Pongrácz et al., 2006, Andics et al., 2014, Siniscalchi et al., 2018). Dogs are also able to differentiate human languages, as they react differently to human vocal input in a language they have been exposed to, compared with unfamiliar language (Cuaya et al., 2022).¹

These abilities to identify auditory regularities in human vocal delivery and to match them with human emotional states attest to the high interactional relevance of human speech for dogs. Non-verbal auditory cues of human language, namely prosody, play a role in organizing the overall structure of interspecies interaction, including establishing reciprocity (Harjunpää, 2022), getting attention (Mitchell, 2001) and designing talk to multiple but distinct recipients in parallel (Szczeppek Reed, 2023).

¹ We would like to thank Alban Lemasson (University of Rennes) for bringing to our attention the literature on voice perception in Dog-Human interaction.

The aim of the present issue is obviously not to contest the particularities and the complexity of human language in all its forms and human-to-human uses but to explore how language, together with other modes of expression, also participates in networks of communication shared across species. Verbal language used in interspecies interaction is to be placed as one component of this multilayered semiotic context.

Interspecies interaction and sharedness

The proceeding of the interaction is negotiated by the interlocutors not only via the vehicles of turns-of-talk but also turns of embodied talk (Mondada, 2014). As Simonen & Lohi (2021) found, dogs expect humans to provide appropriate responses to their initial embodied actions—and if they do not receive the expected responses, they might try to pursue. And if that is not helping, they might turn to yet another resource: bystanders and other humans. Not delivering expected responses leads to the questions of accountability (concerning humans, see Sidnell, 2014) and reveals that dogs have access to the fundamentals of turn-taking in interspecies interaction so that they *know* what to expect from humans (for a similar observation in interactions between dairy cows and humans, see Cornips & van Koppen, 2024). Mondémé (2023, this issue) investigates two sequences common in human-animal interaction and argues that “conditional relevance” (Schegloff, 2007) also characterizes sequencing in human-animal communication. By examining initial actions and responsive actions in interspecies activities, Mondémé shows how animal actors not only respond to human requests, but also demonstrate compliance and rejection. When their embodied turns are seen through the lenses of turn-taking and sequence organization, the animals not only alternate turns, but their initial actions in the first position elicit human responses in the second position. Simonen (2023, this issue) complements this view by emphasizing how animal actions can be much faster than human actions. This development moves conversation analytic research forward from language-oriented talk-in-interaction to multimodal conversation analytic perspectives that can be further developed in the fields of pragmatics.

Interspecies participants can work together to achieve common goals involving larger sequential developments, such as sequences of sequences (Schegloff, 2007). Consider, for example, how the practice of throwing and catching a ball is organized as an interspecies achievement in interaction (Simonen, 2023, this issue). The person throwing the ball estimates the trajectory of the flying ball based on the distance between her and her dog. Before throwing and catching, the playing partners negotiate a suitable distance. The human thrower gives instructions to the dog catcher; the dog catcher shows receptivity. Such feats require confidence, coordination, and cognitive processing from all involved. Verschueren (1999) emphasizes the importance of understanding participants’ orientation to cognitive processing. Once the playing partners have set a common goal, they show through their actions what will happen next and where they should be. Indeed, everyone needs to be “on the same page” to make the exercise happen.

While studies have emphasized human-initiated gesturing, Cornips et al. (2023, this issue) argue that non-human animals, too, use bodily cues to coordinate humans' attention and secure their aims in the interaction. The authors observe that a cat employs her eyes, tail, ears, and bodily posture, along with vocal cues and other sounds (meowing and purring) in a domestic setting to direct the human's attention to a shared object, e. g. a closed door or a food bowl (cf. Goodwin, 2009, where a dog handles a food bowl). The cat is also shown to be sensitive to how humans signal their understanding of the cat's intentions. Identifying each other's intentions is an important part of human-animal communication.

There is thus co-construction of meaning and feeling of sharedness (and not only *otherness*) in interspecies interaction. Smuts (2001) even speaks of *merging* or *dissolving* at moments of profound mutual gazing with a companion animal. The limit between human and non-human is experienced as permeable. This is a condition for being able to track another being's perspective on the situation. When it comes to humans, this experience is manifest also in language use, for the symbolic dimension of language, too, construes our relationship to co-present or virtual animals. Artistic expression, but also everyday language use can concretize the human awareness and experience of the perceptual and semiotic worlds beyond human. Peltola (2023, this issue) shows that humans verbalize animal inner voice when reporting an encounter with a non-human animal. By construing more-than-human centres of meaning-making in this way, they aim to peek over the edge and gain understanding of the situation by perceiving the environment through the eyes of the other animal. Indeed, reported animal thoughts co-occur with expressions of non-human sensory perception. Reporting animal inner speech is yet another example of how important the dialogical framework is for human cognition, also when encountering non-human animals.

Toward interspecies pragmatics

This special issue addresses some of the fundamental aspects of language use and interspecies interaction in ways that have been neglected in pragmatic traditions, e. g. animal agency in sequences; species-specific and shared sensory perception; mutual recognition of activities; anthropogenic, anthropocentric and anthropomorphic language use. Yet, an early definition of pragmatics by Morris (1938:30) already operated on a level that goes beyond human, in very clear terms (see also Peltola, 2023, this issue): "Since most, if not, all, signs have as their interpreters living organisms, it is a sufficiently accurate characterization of pragmatics to say that it deals with the biotic aspects of semiosis, that is, with all the psychological, biological, and sociological phenomena which occur in the functioning of signs."

The role of language in the interactional and conceptual organization of interspecies activities and encounters is Janus-faced: language can divide, but it is also a means for humans to reach

beyond human perceptual and semiotic world. Interaction, on the other hand, is negotiated there and then.

The sequential organization of interspecies interaction shows that participants belonging to different biological species can seek and achieve mutual understanding. In other words, interspecies interaction is shaped by rules of its own, as living organisms make sense of each other and achieve shared communicative goals. Biological species-specific (physical, cognitive, communicational) particularities are part of the context in which the interaction takes place (cf., Mondémé, 2020). Within the field of pragmatics, research concentrating on human-animal interaction and relationships, *Interspecies Pragmatics*, focuses on the multimodal co-constructing of understanding in these particular circumstances. For this, it employs methodologies developed by Conversation Analysis and Interactional Linguistics.

Furthermore, Interspecies Pragmatics explores how variations in context, namely the kind of human-animal relationship that is relevant in the situation, shape the ways in which humans speak *about* other beings. Studies adopting this latter type of focus may concentrate on the construal of meaning in interspecies context, which locates them in the field of Cognitive Pragmatics (Schmid, 2012; Panther, 2022). Otherwise, they can deal with the treatment of other animals and human-animal (power) relations in discourse with the methodologies of (Critical) Discourse studies (e. g. De Malsche & Cornips, 2021; Stibbe, 2012).

In other words, Interspecies Pragmatics can be placed at the crossroads of several approaches within pragmatics. What these studies have in common is the concern for revisiting the relationship between human and non-human animals in language and interaction and offering a more visible position to other living creatures and their semiotics in studies on language use. In this sense, the development of Interspecies Pragmatics is in line with a more general *animal turn* within the Humanities (Ritvo, 2007; Cornips, 2022).

The interest in meaning-making and agency beyond human makes Interspecies Pragmatics an approach that is inherently open to interdisciplinary dialogue. Urgent concerns about the state of our environment and the position of non-human beings within contemporary societies have, indeed, raised the need for reflecting on ethical, cultural, and social issues related to human-animal relationships. These considerations go alongside growing ethological knowledge about the cognitive, communicative, and emotional capacities of other species. As conveyed by various interdisciplinary approaches in the Humanities and the Social Sciences (Human-Animal studies, Posthumanism, Ecocriticism, Ecolinguistics, Biosemiotics), by undoing conceptual hierarchies and boundaries between humans and other living creatures, we can gain insights on interests and meanings shared beyond species boundaries.

Papers included in the Special issue

Cornips, Leonie; van Koppen, Marjo; Leufkens, Sterre; Melum Eide, Kristin; van Zijverden, Ronja, A linguistic-pragmatic analysis of cat-induced deixis in cat-human interactions.

Mondémé, Chloé, Sequence organization in human-animal interaction: An exploration of two canonical sequences.

Simonen, Mika, Dogs responding to human utterances in embodied ways.

Peltola, Rea, Verbalizing animal inner speech.

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