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Tapping into interaction

How children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders design and place tapping in relation to activities in progress

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Children diagnosed with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are frequently thought to be incapable of using communicative gestures. When children with an ASD undertake motor actions — other than practical actions (such as direct manipulation of the physical environment) — these are often taken to be either impaired relative to control groups or symptomatic of the child's pathology. Drawing on videotaped data of children with an ASD interacting in home and school settings, we examine adult–child interactions in which children repeatedly tap items that are presented to them (for a response). We show how these actions are systematically placed at just those points where it is appropriate for the child to provide an answer (or candidate solution) to the adult's question but before the child has completed it. Thus by investigating the sequential context in which actions of this sort are placed we can better appreciate the interactional work they undertake and the extent to which they are communicative gestures rather than either being interactionally irrelevant or symptomatic of an underlying pathology.

Keywords: Autistic Spectrum Disorder, hand gesture, contact-gesture, social interaction

Introduction

This paper analyses instances of a repeated tapping action used by two children diagnosed as having an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in interactions with a teacher and a parent. The interaction between the teacher and child with an ASD occurs in a familiar classroom setting and involves the child tapping on a board on which a sum is written (which is also orally presented by the teacher).