Apples

Discussion Note

Developing picture communication for interactional situations at the beginning of the asylum process; mapping interactional practices

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The paper reports the initial findings of the first phase of the research and development project PICCORE – Picture Communication in Reception Centres. The goal was to map the use of pictures and other visual modes of communication at reception centres in Finland using an ethnographic, multimodal research approach. The ethnographic data was collected at four reception centres in Finland. A multimodal viewpoint draws attention to how action and meanings are mediated through pictures. The initial findings mark established practices for enabling and coordinating mutual attention, supporting the use of visual and embodied resources in interactions and – as a consequence – supporting mutual understanding.

Keywords: asylum process, ethnography, multimodal interaction, picture communication, semiotic resources

1 Introduction

This paper aims to present the initial findings of the first phase of the research and development project *PICCORE – Picture Communication in Reception Centres*[1]. The first phase set out to map the use of pictures and other visual modes of communication using an ethnographic and multimodal approach (Scollon & Scollon, 2004).

PICCORE, a three-year project operating between 2017 and 2020, is funded by the EU Home Affairs Funds and led by the Humak University of Applied Sciences. The overall project goal is to develop picture communication for interactional situations at the beginning of the asylum process, in order to support *meaning-making* in situations in which people do not share a language or linguistic resources with which to communicate. The project collaborators include the Finnish Immigration Service, experts and employees at four Finnish reception centres, and experts in linguistic accessibility, picture communication, mobile technologies, and graphic design.

The paper aims to present initial findings to the research question, 'What types of picture, visual artefact, and interactional practice are in use at the reception

centres to support meaning-making?' To answer that question, I focus in particular on the views of the reception centre workers.

2 Methodology and data

Nexus analytical research, which implies ethnographic study, focuses on social action, striving "to understand how people take actions of various kinds and what are the constraints or the affordances of the mediational means (language, technologies, etc.) by which they act" (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 21). That goal proposes a multimodal viewpoint that draws attention to how action and meanings are mediated through an abundancy of communicative modes – or semiotic resources – such as gesture and image (Norris, 2004).

This study's data is derived from observations documented in field notes, photographs, and interviews recorded as handwritten notes or as voice or video recordings (see Table 1). A *tourist guide* method was also used to collect data at two reception centres.

Table 1. The data collected at the four reception centres.

	Length of stay, approximate	Tourist guide method generated data	Observations data	Interviews
VOK01, established in 2015, takes families and single residents.	Four hours.	One 46-min video recording, 46 still images.	24 photos, field notes.	One voice-recorded, 25-min interview & several shorter discussions documented in field notes.
VOK02, a reception centre with distributed housing.	Two days.	–	26 photos, field notes, paper forms, & webpages used by personnel	One longer interview with two participants & several shorter discussions documented in field notes.
VOK03 established in 2015, families and single residents.	Two days.	A 44-min video recording, 79 still images.	39 photos, field notes.	Several shorter discussions documented in field notes.
VOK04 a reception centre with underage residents.	Six hours.	–	16 photos, field notes.	A one-minute video-recorded interview of a resident & several shorter discussions documented in field notes.

As Table 1 shows, I collected the data from four reception centres labelled VOK01 to VOK04, each exemplifying a different service type. Two were established in 2015 to receive some of the 28,000 asylum seekers that arrived in Finland that year

(Jauhiainen, 2017). One centre was established to host underage asylum seekers. One was a long-standing centre offering decentralised accommodation. I visited the centres in spring 2017.

Szabó's (2015) 'tourist guide' fieldwork method resembles Garvin's (2010) 'walking tour' methodology and has been used to investigate school linguistic landscapes and language ideologies (Szabó, 2015). I chose the method for its visual-interactive nature, which makes it suitable for mapping everyday interactional situations and the use of pictures and illustration at reception centres. In the tourist guide method, someone familiar with the environment is given the role of tourist guide directing the researcher, the tourist, through the premises investigated (Szabó & Troyer, 2017). The guide controls the tour while the researcher can ask further questions on what is said or seen (Szabó, 2015). The original method application uses a voice recorder held by the guide – and photos taken by the researcher – to document the walking interview. I chose instead to give a handheld video camera to the research participants. In both cases, the guide, the research participant, was happy to take control of the video recording, guiding me and our mutual focus towards the artefacts and places they considered focal points.

I considered ethical questions of anonymity in data collection carefully. The Finnish Immigration Service gave research consent to conduct the data collection at the four reception centres mentioned. Each reception centre also signed separate research consent forms for participation in the research and for data collection and use.

3 Pictures and their functions at the reception centres

The reception centres used pictures and other visual materials for multiple purposes; for example, as images on notice boards. Modifying the list created by Kotimäki (2013, pp. 46–47), the categorisation in Table 2 outlines the distinct communicative roles or functions of the pictures in each centre.

Table 2. The functions of the pictures at the four reception centres.

1. Picture embellishes	The picture is intended to decorate the message.
2. Picture categorises	The picture or type of picture communicates the thematic category of the message. For example, a picture presenting a group of people might hint that the message concerns family activities. The text mediates the information.
3. Picture supports remembering	The information enclosed in the picture is already familiar and was shared previously. If the information is not already familiar to the person, the meaning of the picture remains vague.
4. Picture only supports the meaning of the coexisting text/talk	The information is mediated by a spoken or written language or languages; the picture supports the meaning of the coexisting text or talk. Typically, the picture mediates one focal concept of the text.
5. Picture mediates meanings on its own	The information is mediated by the picture or pictures only; for example, instructions in the kitchen area for recycling are given in a series of pictures.

In Figure 1, in a notice attached to a door – with the text *Täällä ommellaan | tiistaina kello 13–15* (in English, 'We'll sew here | on Tuesday 13–15') – a picture of a sewing machine supports the meaning of *Täällä ommellaan*, falling under *Category 4*.

Figure 2 shows the small forms used in VOK02. Several forms were made available to clients at the reception desk, where reception centre workers helped those clients to schedule appointments, such as at a local dentist's office or police station. The pictures in the forms described belong to *Category 3* and *Category 4*. Those pictures were devised to help clients remember visits discussed previously at the reception desk—and to help convey the meaning of the coexisting text, which offered the name and address of each place a client was asked to visit.

Figure 1. Illustration: the picture supports the meaning of the coexisting text.

Figure 2. Illustration: pictures in forms created to schedule meetings at focal points, local places outside the reception centre.

The use of pictures at the centres is motivated further by aiming to enable equal participation for clients, irrespective of linguistic background. Workers at the reception centres were concerned about the linguistic accessibility and possible language hierarchies (Blommaert, Collins, & Slembrouck, 2005) that may be implied by mundane actions, such as the order of languages on a notice favouring certain languages – usually English or Arabic – over other languages in a concrete way.

4 Practices for creating a shared interactional space

I focused in particular on visual and embodied practices—actions with history (Scollon & Scollon, 2004) – used by people to create a shared interactional space supporting meaning-making (Goodwin, 2000, 2007, 2011). Through multiple semiotic resources such as gaze and gesture, people show each other the relevant material, artefacts, and other semantic content important in the interaction (Goodwin, 2000). A mutual orientation is crucial for creating a framework, a modal configuration, in which different semiotic resources can flourish (Goodwin, 2011; Norris, 2009). From the perspective of using pictures in communication – on paper *or* mobile devices – it is necessary that the *physical place* with its material objects and architectural layout offers possibilities for line-of-sight to the pictures and between participants (Tapio, 2018).

Typically, at each reception centre and during scheduled appointments, clients framed meeting topics by offering a staff member a piece of paper, such as an official letter. While reading aloud a modified, plain Finnish version of that text, the staff member often highlighted focal points with a pen. To confirm that the client understood the message content, the staff member established a mutual gaze, nodded, used facial expressions, and observed the client's verbal and embodied responses while reading.

Pointing gestures were used when a staff member wanted to coordinate mutual attention to other relevant materials, such as to maps or other material on the computer screen. In this manner, the participants in the interaction coordinated attention between one semiotic field and another – and built a contextual configuration for meaning-making (cf. Goodwin, 2000). Another typical manner of coordinating attention to items relevant to the topic discussed was to bring objects such as letters into the client's immediate proximity.

During scheduled appointments, the staff member often had a pen and a piece of paper, drawing illustrations on that paper. Figure 3 offers examples of illustrations used in such meetings. On the left, a social worker has drawn an illustration of a floor mat with toys and arches; on the right, the social worker has depicted the functions of a radiator. Here, the staff member in question can be seen using the *Quick Drawing Communication System* (in Finnish *nopea piirrosviestintä*; see Papunet, 2019).
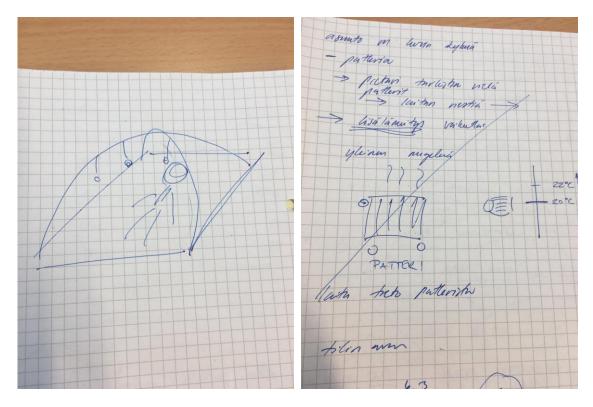

Figure 3. Illustrations by a social worker during a scheduled meeting with a client.

Besides coordinating their mutual gaze and attention, the participants adjusted their bodies in relation to each other and to the physical environment. For example, chairs were arranged carefully when a meeting began, the participants ensuring that everyone involved could attend to each other visually.

This project focuses on how workers at reception centres use pictures and other visual and embodied practices with clients when no interpreter is present. However, a future examination of *interpreter-mediated situations* is vital, I contend. I consider such study to be essential, having observed interpreted situations in which participants either used visual and embodied resources actively or *withdrew* from the embodied participation framework, minimising their own embodied behaviours, such as gestures. Studies of interpreted situations might be compared in more detail to the findings of the research by Puumala, Ylikomi, and Ristimäki (2017) on interpreter-mediated asylum interviews, findings that highlight how we should acknowledge the importance of visual and embodied semiotic resources, the gaze in particular. Further study would help us to determine if using pictures to communicate in asylum interviews would direct movement away from a bias towards written language and monolingual ideologies, which dominate communication in those interviews, impacting them negatively (see Määttä, 2015, forthcoming).

Endnote

1 The PICCORE or KUVAKO project web pages are at http://kuvako.humak.fi/.

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