

Project Description

Title

The accommodation of gestural and verbal metaphors in psychotherapeutic interaction: metaphoric adaptation-processes between patient and therapist, studied in long-term-therapies. (working title)

Metaphor

With pictures one can build bridges between the unconscious and consciousness. What seems inexpressible can become utterable and comprehensible as a metaphor. The inexpressible can be either what we censor or any abstract objects, e.g. emotions, feelings or what one hides from oneself (the unconscious). Buchholz (2008, in Lakoff/Johnson: 8) considers metaphors as a bridge between social, communicative, and psychic issues. Not only are metaphors an element of our speech, but also of our thinking and of our cognition – a thinking that cannot abandon the imagination.

Research on metaphors often cites Lakoff and Johnson. They achieved their breakthrough in 1980 with their book „Metaphors we live by“. They assume that human thought and action is based on metaphorical concepts. How this conceptual system is built up, can be shown through the exploration of language. The present study draws on the work of Lakoff and Johnson on metaphors and on Stähelin's (1914) concept of the "Bewusstseinslage der doppelten Bedeutung": for it is only the awareness that $A=B$ is at the same time also $A \neq B$ that enables the conception of a metaphor as a metaphor. In terms of psychotherapy this means: the patient who describes his head as a bursting balloon, knows at the same time that his head is not a balloon.

Metaphors are a popular object of study in psychology and psychotherapy. According to Buchholz (2008, in Lakoff/Johnson 2008: 9), our whole psychotherapeutic theory, but indeed even to a greater extent the practical language used in therapeutic dialogues, consists of metaphors. One finds them in diagnoses (e.g. Borderline, Narcissism), in associations about what therapy is (e.g. confession, device), but also in an individual self-conception (e.g. victim, mother Theresa). Therapeutic work consists of replacing dogmatic metaphors through others.

What does therapeutic work really look like? Do metaphors become adjusted – and if so – how? Through accommodation? Does the therapist stimulate the patient with new schemata, until the patient adapts to the therapist and clothes his world in new metaphors? Who adapts to whom?

Accommodation

Adaptation, respectively accommodation is the subject of the accommodation theory developed by Giles and his co-researchers (1991). The main idea of this theory is that interlocutors adapt their speech-style to each other, in

order to create or maintain a positive personal and social identity. The adaptation occurs verbally (grammar, form, lexis), paraverbally (intonation), and nonverbally (proxemics, gesture, mimicry). Giles refers to Piaget, amongst others, who studied regularities of changes in cognitive patterns during childhood and youth. Piaget's basic assumption was that thinking adapts to things and is structured by them, which in turn structures things (Piaget 1936: 18, cited from Kohler 2008: 73).

If accommodation between verbal and nonverbal speech style takes place in interaction, and if thinking adapts to things, and is based on metaphorical concepts, then this raises the following question: Do the metaphorical concepts of the therapist and patient adapt to each other - and do they express this not only verbally but also gesturally?

Gesture

For a long time, gesture was mainly an object of study in psychology. Linguists tended to concentrate on the representational function of verbal language. However, researchers in the field of metaphors like Mc Neill (1992) and Müller (1998) showed that gestures also have a representational potential. This is obvious given that gestures represent forms, proportions, kinds of movement and direction, and hence content. While Müller concentrates on arm and hand movements, the present study adopts a broader notion of gesture, based on Adam Kendon (2004), who considers everything as a gesture that replaces or accompanies an utterance and which is perceived as a conscious, intentional act.

Gesture/Metaphor

Research on gestural metaphors has developed only recently (e.g. Cienki/Müller 2008). Mc Neill (1992) describes the metaphoric gesture as a gesture where the hands have a shape, as if the speaker were holding an invisible object in his hands. Often, the palms face upward and are slightly opened. Ideas, he observes, are spoken and thought about as if they were objects, and via communication, as if they were transferred from one person to another in a container. Cienki and Müller (2008) took up this idea in their research on metaphoric gestures, whereby they concentrate on the function of gestures. Above all, they find metaphoric gestures particularly amongst abstract referential gestures. Such gestures refer to abstract referential objects, which elude iconic representation. One example of such an abstract object would be LOVE. The corresponding metaphoric gesture could be a heart drawn in space.

Questions

Based on the above theoretical considerations, the following questions will serve to interrelate the fields „metaphor“, „gesture“, and „accommodation“:

Do patients and therapists accommodate their gestural and verbal metaphors to each other? Does such accommodation refer to specific interaction or does it occur increasingly

during the process of therapy. Who adapts to whom? Is the adaption verbal as well as gestural?

These questions are formulated as open-ended, since until now no research exists on the interface between accommodation, gesture, and metaphors in psychotherapy. Furthermore, such open-ended formulation allows for generating and differentiating the questions based on the material itself – in the sense of Grounded Theory.

Data

The present study is based mainly on recorded therapist-patient interactions. Psychotherapy is a special form of interaction, which as an object of conversation analysis can be criticized by traditional conversation analysts because of the different roles of patient and therapist. For a long time, research focused on patients. As Buchholz (undated: 2) puts it, scientists ignored the interactive contribution of psychoanalysts. This oversight is untenable, however, as the analytic relationship is reciprocal, since there are also patients who analyze their therapists (albeit in a concealed manner and by means of artful allusions), or who even try to 'cure' their therapists (perhaps out of a crazy wish to heal other people). Focusing attention on interaction also means to acknowledge reciprocity – even with a very insane patient.

The interactions used in the present study were recorded at the psychotherapeutic practice of the University of Berne. Concretely, the data comprise audiovisual recordings of 3 to 4 courses of ongoing single-patient therapies, which last for at least 6 months. The same therapist needs to be undertaking two of the therapies. The focus lies on only one of these courses of treatment. The other therapies are used for comparison or for specific questions. Furthermore, the data consists of patient documentations and interviews with the therapists.

Methodology

Initial, mid-process, and current sessions are selected and broadly transcribed. One transcribed session will be narrowly transcribed and analyzed. Based thereupon, theory and methodology are described and further material selected where applicable.

Relevance

The study of gestural metaphors is a very young field of research. Considering the already well-researched cohesion between verbal and nonverbal speech, the study of verbal and gestural metaphors as well as the adaptation between patient and therapist are a relevant field of research, which can not only provide psychology as a science with important insights, but also therapeutic practice. Ideally, the results will extend the "tools" available to practicing therapists as well as enhance the understanding of how conversations proceed and reveal the connections between communication and the course of therapy.

Literature

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