Speech-gesture mismatch and how it changes in a problem described by a client in psychotherapy

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Abstract

In psychotherapy, clients describe their problems in their own words, which are often accompanied by gestures. Interestingly, mismatches between speech and gesture as well as within words are observed, and they become resolved as the counseling proceeds. We report a case study demonstrating speech-gesture relationship changes in a therapeutic interaction.

The case study consisted of a series of interviews conducted as part of the "reflecting process" in family therapy. The client initially characterized his problem as having too many tasks to manage in his schedule. As it turned out, however, the real problem was that he thought himself as being lazy. He made himself extremely busy to cope with the problem, because doing so obscured his laziness. Among other things, a shift in conceptualization was achieved by fixing the problem with his use of the Japanese word, "konasu" (to manage to do), which entails an active involvement of the actor. He frequently used this word to describe how he performed his tasks. Although the client's utterances and concurrent gestures had elements representing the notion of active involvement, there was also an element in his utterances that suggested the opposite: that he tended to let his schedule go without so much involvement. Noticing that, the therapist asked for clarification. Although in his paraphrases of "konasu," the client kept invoking the notion of active involvement, through therapeutic interaction involving effective use of gestures, the therapist could bring the mismatch to the client's attention.

We consider this case study as pointing to the possibility that speech-gesture mismatch could serve not only as an index of ambivalence in the client's conceptualization of the real problem, but also as media with which the psychological problem can be solved.

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