

Rhythm and Tacit Knowing in Embodied Performance

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Abstract

Moving well with someone has an aesthetic and ethical quality. When we engage well with someone else, be it to shake hands, dance, make music, or have a wonderful conversation, this foregrounds relational qualities inherent in music, such as rhythm and pitch. Dialogue is explored as improvised performance, ‘a personal act of knowing’: It is about moving with uncertainty and trust and handling doubt, and allows us to come to share, for example, a sense of what is a beautiful shade of colour or a graceful dance step. My paper reflects on this ‘tacit knowing’ (a personal act of knowing) (Polanyi 1966) by considering how experiencing together in physical space facilitates my seeing as you see, hearing as you hear. It will explore the mediational structure (‘comprehensive entity’) of tacit knowing within dialogue, and in particular, rhythm. A collective rhythmic act involves at least two people sharing the knowledge of the same comprehensive entity, namely, of their joint skilled human performance. ‘These comprehensive entities include, apart from our own performance, both the performance of other persons and these persons themselves’ (Polanyi, 1966: 49). Discussions on ‘skill’ and ‘knowledge’, including those on tacit and explicit knowledge, have made the distinction between ‘knowing-how’ and ‘knowing-that’ (Ryle 1945 – Presidential Address (Proceedings of Aristotelian society). However anticipation and action and making a judgement are also temporal. Skilled performance is also about ‘knowing when’: it is relational. Skilled performance is a personal act of knowing in which we are our authentic selves, simultaneously mediating the experience of knowing-how, knowing-that, and knowing-when.

I investigate dialogue as improvised performance, where the collective movements of our bodies (body includes voice) perform pragmatic and salient phatic-prosodic moments that express how we are relating to each other. These take place in an engagement space of body fields of engagement that move with degrees of contact and distance. I am particularly interested in how we can simultaneously comprehend and engage with our differences, and describe these salient collective movements as making for the ebb and flow of crescendo’s (emergence) of momentary entrainment that enable this. Underlying this work is the conceptual thread of the concept of tacit knowing by Polanyi (1966) that is a mediational structure of personal knowing.

Understanding

Let’s consider how in our face-to-face everyday communications, the meanings of words can sometimes get missed or misunderstood because a gesture may have become too loud, or a voice was too quiet, an intonation ungrasped, a movement mistimed, etc. and we may ask ‘how do I know that I have understood, and that I have been understood?’

These phatic or prosodic qualities may be said to shape how we make sense of each other.

Someone whom I met briefly at Stanford spoke of her experience of ordering food in a restaurant in France whilst visiting with her husband. She is deaf, her husband is not and neither spoke French well. He had tried without much success to make himself understood to the waiter using his poor French, so she gave it a try, and using gestures and sounds, she was able to convey their needs with success. Her husband had attended to words, she had tuned to movements and sounds that would engage the waiter. Such improvisation is not about the one best way, nor is it possible to abstract it outside the person(s) involved in it; it is a personal act of knowing. It is not about certainty but about moving with uncertainty and handling doubt. Managing uncertainty involves mediated awareness, and I shall explore this further as I go along.

What I am going to explore is how sharing a physical space allows us to experience *social uncertainty* and enables us to manage it, and rhythm will emerge as an important aspect of this capacity.

So what is happening when we share a physical space of communication, a space of *engagement*? Imagine, you are standing in a field, and another person enters it from the far side, even though you cannot see the details of each other's face or other features, the moment you both become aware of each other's existence you become co-present and share that space. We naturally orient our bodies to express how we seek to connect with each other, as Adam Kendon has shown in his work on social interaction (Kendon 1990), whether this involves standing in a circle and chatting, or standing at an angle, or directly facing each other, sitting next to each other, and so on. How we *shape* our presence affects how we can make sense of each other. The processes of sense-making through body movements, gestures, vocal sounds, speech, and stillness, has been described by Edward T Hall as akin to an unfolding dance (Hall 1983). And we can experience this in music ensembles with conductorless conducting, such as Maggie Faultless with the Cambridge Collegium Musicum, where musical performance is akin to conversation.

Rhythm

Rhythm has an important role to play in our sense-making. Mark Doffman (Oxford) speaks of the force of entrainment as lying below the radar of our conscious self, as a rhythmic pull in musical interaction, even in the face of a resistance to move to another's beat, as in the case of the Congado tribes people of Brazil. Here tribal groups from different villages of the Congado region, come together in an annual musical challenge, where each group moves through the streets beating drums and singing to a distinct beat and each time one group encounters another their goal is pull the other to move in time with them. In daily face-to-face communications, we are connected in rhythm and synchrony at multiple levels ranging from the moment-by-moment continuity of timed syllables to emergent body and vocal rhythms of pragmatic sense-making and processes of 'joining-in' (just some of the work being undertaken at the Centre for music and science at Cambridge, Ian Cross and Sarah Hawkins, and Guy Hayward's PhD on singing

together). Our human capacity to synchronize with each other may be essential for our survival as social beings. Moving our bodies and voices together in time embodies a pragmatic purpose that of being together (mother baby talk – the baby learns how to move in the culture to survive in it). We could suggest this process is imparting the foundations of what we call tradition. In this synchrony of self with other, witnessing and being present become part of each other. And here lies part of the ethical dimension. In the example of the Cambridge collegium ensemble, Maggie asks the ensemble to listen to themselves and not just to play with each other. This creates a quality of performance that at the same time involves ethical and aesthetic awareness. In the discussion Maggie made, what I think it is a very important point, that in making music with others, we get to know each other at a level of intimacy that even a married couple would take years to achieve. It enables us to hear each other and share our differences at the same time. It is this quality that brought me to music from my work on collective rhythmic moments in human interaction.

Some years ago, I undertook an ethnographic study of how landscape architects come to share a sense of a colour being pleasing, or a beautiful line stroke of a pencil. I sought to understand whether the way they moved with each other in the space had something to do with this experientially shared aesthetics and its production. I drew upon the idea of psycholinguistic feedback such as *uhuh, ok, um, so..*, by which people let each other know how they are making sense of each other, and I considered the idea of ‘beats’ in gesture research, to investigate how the body mediates knowledge transfer and learning. In studying a 3.5 min video I took of a junior and senior architect sketching together, I identified certain movements, termed Body Moves. These composites of gesture, speech, and silence *of the participants together, not of the individuals* (as in the idea of a ‘composite signal’ (Clark 1996). This is an important distinction. Our skill in communication, as an individual, is impingent on our skill in performing with another self. In other words, *the understanding of the representations of the tacit dimension of another’s action, is expressed in the skilled performance with the other, be this to agree, disagree, negotiate, acknowledge, or simply, to act at the same moment with the other (simultaneously)*. In this 3.5 min video, there was one highly significant moment that involved a simultaneous rhythm. Until this moment, the junior architect had made three attempts to be heard, i.e. for an idea that he was proposing. Each time he was treated with a silent body and voice. In this moment, the senior architect opens the space making it possible for the junior architect to make one more attempt, and significantly, he moves with the junior architect as he does so. They are both drawing together, but making different proposals. This time, the senior architect hears the junior architect and physically acknowledges him with one gesture stroke.

SHOW THE VIDEO

In the ‘Tacit Dimension’ (1966) Polanyi described a relation between emergence and comprehension as existing when ‘an action creates *new comprehensive entities*’. It is proposed that Body moves necessarily involve at least two people sharing the knowledge of the same comprehensive entity, namely, of their *joint skilled human performance*. *‘These comprehensive entities include, apart from our own performance, both the*

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performance of other persons and these persons themselves' (Polanyi, op. cit. p. 49).

What binds the example of the architects and Maggie's ensemble together is this simultaneous listening to oneself and the other at the same time, expressed through the bodily expression of the pen stroke and instrumental sound.

Dialogue is skilled performance, and since knowledge is carried in dialogue, knowledge is skilled performance. Dialogue is improvised, and at its best it flows and feels good and we feel connected. Such improvisation is a personal act of knowing. It is not about certainty but about moving with uncertainty and handling doubt. Managing uncertainty involves mediated awareness.

Tacit knowing: mediated awareness

Here, I will briefly speak of Polanyi's theory of tacit knowing as it bears on this discussion. He gives the example of recognizing a friend's face. This occurs through a functional relationship between what Polanyi calls 'two terms of tacit knowing'. The first, proximal, term is the features, and the second, distal, term is the face. 'We know the first term only by relying on our awareness of it for attending to the second. It is the proximal term (the features) of which we have a knowledge that we may not be able to tell'. As Walter Gullick explains in his work on Relating Polanyi's Tacit Dimension to Social Epistemology, in this from-to structure of consciousness, perception and conception each rely upon subsidiaries which in their function are by definition tacit. Through this 'functional structure of tacit knowing' we come to know the richer and more comprehensive dimensions of our common experience by focusing (focal awareness) on or attending to their meaning from or through the less complex particulars of which they are composed. Jerry Gill (2000) calls this dimensional and vectorial construing of experience, and it allows (op. cit. p. 33) for a 'mediational' understanding of the structure of reality. These dimensions together form a *comprehensive entity*.

I draw upon this idea to consider structural *resonance* in embodied communication, (not of an individual, but between individuals). The two terms of tacit knowing, proximal and distal, are described as being two levels of reality, and between them, 'there is a logical relation which corresponds to the fact that the two levels are the two acts of tacit knowing which jointly comprehends them'. In resonating with the particulars of each level in the communication structure, we do so by being 'aware' of the particulars of the entity such as a gesture, for attending to it. This is distinct from saying we resonate with the particulars, such as the elements of the gesture, by attending to them. If we did so, this function of the particulars, i.e. enabling us to attend to the entity, is cancelled and we would lose sight of the gesture itself because all we would see is fragmented elements. A popular example of this in discussions about skill, is of playing the piano. If in the middle of performing a piece of music we suddenly began to focus on the movements of each of our fingers we would have difficulty in being able to play. Tacit knowing is about achieving the performance of playing the piano such that the finger movements and the piano keys are 'invisible' to us, as an extension of our selves.

In a similar way, our ability to grasp communication cues and the content that they frame

is invisible to us until we feel awkward in the communication situation, at which point we become aware of its particulars. For example, a handshake not quite working makes us aware of the particulars of our and the other person's hands and awkward movements, and we perceive the other as distinct and make judgements about him/her and our relation with them. A handshake becomes a conscious event.

Aesthetics and Empathy

Mediation and successful communication is considered here to involve empathy, which has an aesthetic quality. Imagine you are viewing a work of art: you experience the work as a whole yet you have an awareness that it is composed of the brush strokes, dots of paint, textures of paint, and colours. Together, these particulars enable you to see the picture and experience an aesthetic pleasure it may give. These particulars, marks on the page, form patterns of recognizable human forms, nature, artifacts, and a narrative, i.e. they give us a mediated quality of meaning and affect. Polanyi went further to say that we attend from the particulars of a work of art to attend to the aesthetics of the artist who created it. Within human interaction, such particulars include the forms of expression, the gesture stroke, the intonation of the voice, the rhythm of the movement, that together form perceptual patterns of a personality, the role of the person in that moment, a style of communicating, their rhythm, and a kind of knowing. The mediated quality of each person's meaning by another person, lies in the equivalence of the compatibilities of these particulars, these 'marks on the page' or 'brush strokes', of the interaction. This enables us to experience empathy¹, akin to the aesthetic emotion of aesthetic pleasure, which is necessarily part of human mediation, and thereby knowledge transfer.

If the representations of the tacit lie outside one's experience, then they become what some have termed, propositional or explicit knowledge. In human communication this could be a word, a phrase, a gesture, a movement, a tone of voice, a rhythm. They become either meaningless for the participant or cannot be interpreted or used, or responded to, by him/her in accordance to the background of understanding and practices against which they have been expressed, leading to misunderstanding. The understanding of the representation of the tacit dimension of another's action, is expressed in the skilled

¹ In this work, empathy is the compatibility and ability to generate shared understanding, with respect to a particular combination of compatibilities. Compatibility is the equivalence of x and y where x and y are, for example, forms of expression (linguistic, gestural) and forms of temporal coordination (synchronisation, entrainment). Empathy involves compatibility across a combination of compatibilities such as roles, dimension of knowledge, forms of expression, personality, style, etc. Empathy is necessarily personal and involves emotion. Empathy is, therefore, the ability to share or generate understanding. Empathy is distinct from sympathy. Empathy is often spoken of in the context of art where it is defined (cf. Oxford Dictionary) as 'the power of projecting one's personality onto (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation'. Aesthetic emotion is regarded as having an empathetic character. Being empathetic: 'the richer the personality, ... the more empathetic understanding of others it will be capable of'; person's who come from a similar background can be said to have a certain empathetic understanding of each other's personalities; in order to empathise with someone, one has to 'feel with' him/her before one can identify his/her elusive patterns of emotional response. Empathy can involve emotion at an abstract level, i.e. relating to art, as well as the kinds of emotions involved in understanding someone's personality. This discussion indicates that the emotion involved in understanding in dialogue does not mean having the same emotion or sharing the same emotions as the other person. This may be more suitably termed 'sympathy'.

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performance with the other, be this to agree, disagree, negotiate, acknowledge, or simply, to act at the same moment with the other (simultaneously).

Polanyi describes a skilled human performance as a comprehensive entity, and when two people share the knowledge of the same comprehensive entity, two kinds of '*indwelling*' meet. "The performer co-ordinates his moves by dwelling in them as parts of his body, while the watcher tries to correlate these moves by seeking to dwell in them from outside. This captures the example of the landscape architects and I am applying this idea to communication itself as a skilled performance.

I will end the talk here... I have drawn on Polanyi's 'from-to' theory of tacit knowing (Walter Gulick) with the mediational structure of the comprehensive entity (Phil Mullins) and how action can create new comprehensive entities. I am transposing these ideas to understand how we make sense of each other - investigating tacit knowing as a personal act of knowing by considering how *sharing experience in the same physical space* facilitates my seeing as you see, and hearing as you hear. In *Body Moves* at least two people share the knowledge of the same comprehensive entity, namely, of their *joint skilled human performance*. '*These comprehensive entities include, apart from our own performance, both the performance of other persons and these persons themselves*' (Polanyi). Within a collective act with another person, our body can mediate experience of knowing how, knowing that, and knowing when simultaneously.

Thankyou for listening.