From understanding to participation:
A relational approach to communicative and embodied practices

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The paper presents some general methodological considerations around the topic of the conference and does that through discussing an applied linguistics project under development. The aim is to shed theoretical and analytical light on embodied participation in material settings. Theoretically, the research is placed in the turn to a relational perspective. In this perspective, the world, culture, society, organization and identities etc. emerge through entangled, layered - but not necessarily scaled - practices in concrete circumstances. Rather than treating (shared) understanding as, for instance, a philosophical puzzle or as a purely linguistic phenomenon, it is conceptualized as a concrete, embodied, multimodal process (eg. LeBaron 2005) in which language together with bodily senses or “modal channels” (vision, hearing, touch, smell, taste) and a sense of place contribute to a phenomenon being recognized (as shared).

These “multimodal discourses of participation” will be empirically researched in an environment in which mutual understanding is an everyday challenge, namely in the newly opened Late Brain Injury Centre North, Senhjerneskadecenter Nord, SCN, in Frederikshavn, Denmark. SCN also serves as a living lab, the aim of which is to enhance research into brain injury and the quality of life of the residents. One aspect of all practices in the home is pace. For example, family and staff members might have to slow down to be able to be part of the Home’s “sensescape”. The residents are in a new environment, so how do they learn to accommodate to the unfamiliar surroundings and to the everyday, often routinized, space/place-bound practices?

With Nexus Analysis (Scollon & Scollon 2004), the practices can be analyzed as constituted by cycles of discourse (or itineraries) that can be “dissected” into historical bodies, the interaction order and discourses in place. Instead of treating understanding as a passive, mental process, the analysis documents how exactly (or whether in practice) the residents are (treated as) able to participate in their everyday world, and what kind of membership is made possible. Interestingly, family members and friends sometimes claim intersubjectivity (and, therefore, participation), whereas the health care personnel deny it. The aim of the study is not just to theorize about multimodality and participation, but to provide SCN’s staff, and also to certain extent family members, with knowledge based on close analyses of practices. At present, they have to rely on neurological (medical) or therapeutic (psychological) diagnoses of the injury when involved in everyday practices with the residents.

References:
