Speech and multimodal resources in social interactions of students with invisible mental disabilities

Advancing inclusion and diversity in higher education is one of the most important global priorities and challenges, which is critical for sustainability. Inclusion is accomplished, for example, through communication that includes everyone and counteracts stereotypes. Inclusive communication is based on the assumption that we respect our interlocutors, so we strive to reach mutual understanding, adapting the message to their needs. Every year there are more and more students with invisible disabilities, especially with mental disorders, such as depression, autism spectrum disorder or ADHD enrolling in higher education. These students are often stigmatized and have difficulty in social relationships, in particular in social interactions with other people. In linguistics, there are methods that can enable a micro-description of interactions, identifying triggers to crisis situations, and providing an understanding of how these could be avoided. In interaction between typical speakers there is an assumption that cooperation is critical as both speakers make an effort to reach mutual understanding. This assumption, however, may be challenged in interactions with people with ASD, ADHD, or depression, as the disability may significantly impact the shape of the interaction, which will be atypical. Our project assumes that students with invisible mental disabilities draw on their own communicative resources in social interaction, for example, gestures, or eye gaze, and every interactional phenomenon may be a potential, intentional communicative behaviour. According to this assumption, giving a delayed answer or using gestures that are atypical from the point of view of the recipient will not be considered accidental, but will impact in consequential ways the meaning of an utterance. The main goal of the project is to assess the role of speech and multimodal resources, especially gestures, in social interactions of Polish students with invisible mental disabilities. How do these students orient to their co-participants' utterances and what strategies do they use throughout the interaction to maintain and further develop their interaction? What multimodal resources are mobilized to facilitate interaction? What interactional practices can hinder conversation? To answer these questions, an audio-visual corpus of interactions with students with invisible mental disabilities will be collected and subsequently analysed by a research team whose members have the necessary theoretical background, expertise, and methodological background in linguistics and psychology. This project will draw mainly on qualitative methods in linguistics, especially conversation analysis and discourse analysis. Describing speech and gestures in social interactions of students with invisible mental disabilities in the Polish higher education context can improve mutual communication experience of the academic community and this, in turn, may have a positive impact on disability inclusion and the improvement of the quality of studies.