

The linguistic stepping stones to calming an anxious child patient

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In this presentation, I offer a first analysis of the 32-minute consultation introduced by Ilse Depraetere during the welcome session. The relevant participants are Dr Sara, five-year-old Jan and his mother, and the aim of the consultation is to prepare him for an operation for which a strong anaesthetic is not an option. Our interdisciplinary team (comprising linguists specialising in child language development, multimodality and pragmatics, and a paediatrician in charge of a paediatric ward) aims to identify and explain those communicative strategies that best help ease Jan's anxiety and increase his participation. Various tactics reveal how a child-focused participation-based framework (Goffman, 1981) is built up incrementally. Qualitative analyses of Dr Sara's verbal and non-verbal behaviour (terms of address, pronouns, gestures, gaze, body orientation, touch, object manipulation), show how Jan is her addressee, relegating mum to the role of bystander. Further attention to Dr Sara's utterances show how she uses features from child-directed speech to entice Jan into the conversation. Key indicators of Jan's increasing involvement include his utterances changing from most non-verbal to verbal and from chiefly asking questions to actually posing them. A crucial point of our study is that successful communication with Jan goes way beyond careful vocabulary, and that it is a linguistic approach that can best reveal and bring together those layers of the exchange that are most beneficial.