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Linguistic Anthropology Laboratory
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Discourse as pareidolia: Seeing "things" in the talk of others

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Pareidolia is a phenomenon whereby a vague and random stimulus is interpreted by a viewer or hearer as being a recognizable thing (e.g., the full moon is perceived as having a face, i.e. "the man in the moon," or seeing the Virgin Mary in a grilled cheese sandwich). In this work I explore the notion of pareidolia as a productive metaphor for understanding the meaningfulness of discourse as a phenomena ("thing") that is recognizable to participants in human interactions. In particular, I consider how participants in a tutoring interaction appear to see "things" in discourse during the first 20 minutes of a 45 minute tutoring session. I point to two types of "things" seen - persons and interactional frames. First, I argue that the tutor appears to treat the student's discourse as that of a "learning disabled" person, thus allowing him to see her as that type of person in spite of evidence to the contrary. Second, I argue that the tutor's discourse, at one particular point, leads to a retrospective seeing of the previous discourse as having been of a particular kind. In both cases, I consider the co(n)texts that suggest these instances of seeing in the first place, and I trace out some of the apparent consequences that both of these instances of seeing have for what follows later in this interaction.