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Semiotic and asemiotic practices in boxing

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Abstract: Tracing different kinds of semiotic practices in boxing, in our text we provide a detailed reconstruction of the way athletes and other participants interpret each other's actions and integrate these interpretations in their own course of motor action. Drawing on an ethnomethodological approach we argue that these interpretations should not be seen as being isolated from their contextual background. This context (such as the rules of the sports) and the semiotic actions taking place within them mutually elaborate one another. Analyzing several video recordings and their transcripts, we show how the social interaction of boxing fights consists of a “multi-layeredness of semiotic practice.” These layers of semiotic practice are complemented by what we introduce as asemiotic practices. Asemiotic practices exploit semiotic routines that are a part of boxing and attempt at weakening and overcoming the opponent during the fight thus eventually destroying his or her semiotic capacities.

Keywords: asemiotic practices; boxing; ethnomethodology; semiotic practices; sports; video analysis

1 Introduction

As the editors of this special issue rightfully put it, sports in many aspects occurs within semiotic fields and through semiotic actions and practices of the co-participants. Since many, if not most types of sports are interactional, semiotic actions occur together with, as reactions and “pre-actions” (Parlebas 1999: 44) to, other semiotic actions or semiotic affordances and conditions of the environment of action. The detailed reconstruction of the way athletes and other sports agents interpret each other's actions and integrate these interpretations in their own course of motor action is crucial for an understanding of sports as social interaction. Since sports is highly rule based, the semiotic actions of the co-participants in

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sports mostly also possess an “ethnosemiotic” character – i.e., their meaning is indexically related to, and only meaningful within, the specific enforced rule-set and typically occasioned setting of the respective sport.¹ For sure, the meaning of semiotic actions relates to culture, history, and social structure. However, these “contexts” of action, as we suggest drawing on Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology (1967), should not be conceptualized as “external containers” that provide specifying environments for semiotic actions and signs. Rather, semiotic actions and their contexts mutually elaborate one another. That is, semiotic actions produce and evoke their contexts insofar as actors both interpret signs by taking into account the specific conditions of their occurrence and interpret their context by taking into account the occurrence of signs (also cf. Meyer 2019).

Furthermore, in sports, an exceptionally high amount of semiotic actions and practices is performed not in linguistic or textual form, but in embodied kinesthetic, i.e., in *motor* form, so that their characterization by the editors of this special issue (drawing on Parlebas 1999) as “semiotior” (motor-semiotic) and “ethnomotor” (ethno-motoric) not only appears reasonable but is also relatable to Merleau-Ponty’s conceptions of motor intentionality, motor signification, and motor project (2012: 112–113) that we have used earlier for the analysis of sports (Meyer and v. Wedelstaedt 2017). From his perspective, bodily movement is laden with meaning and intentionality, and reversely, intentionality and meaning are grounded in movement. In our text, we will describe the broad repertoire of semiotior and ethnomotor actions, practices, and fields in professional boxing.

However, in boxing as in many other sports, the materiality of the setting, but also of the sporting bodies involved (including their movements) plays a crucial role for the particularities of the type of sociality that is active in this kind of social world. Much of this materiality remains, as we argue in this text, non-semioticized, and even non-semioticizable. A concise description of this was already given by Mead (1934: 72): “In the case of the boxer the blow that he is starting to direct toward his opponent is to call out a certain response which will open up the guard of his opponent so that he can strike.” An uppercut that is only suggested or feigned and that causes the opponent in the ring to dodge and steer into the desired position to hit him better, differs in its semiotic function from the surprising blow that knocks down the competitor abruptly. Thus, the successful strike that makes a point and hurts and weakens the opponent is precisely an asemiotic one, while the semiotic play of stimulus-response only serves as preparation to open the guard of the opponent. In other words, only when the strike occurs asemiotically, it can be

¹ Rather than Greimas, with our usage of the prefix *ethno-*, we refer to Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967), even though Garfinkel was highly suspicious of semiotic understandings of communication and practice.

successful, since only then, it is unforeseeable, unpredictable and comes unexpectedly. When Peirce defined “a Sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former” (EP 2: 478), an asemiotic action refers to the lack, or impossibility, of interpretation because the interpreting faculties of the interpretant or the interpretant him-/herself are destroyed. In this case, the “interpretive response in the addressee” (Eco 1976: 8) that a sign is previewed to arouse is inhibited by the very asemioticizing action itself. Thus, in boxing, the term asemiotic only refers to the dyad of the two boxing athletes; the relation of the boxers to the referee, the judges, or the audience remains a decidedly semiotic one.

For asemiotic action, the “carnal dimension of existence” (Wacquant 2004: vii) is crucial. Typically, in asemiotic sportive interaction, the materiality of the opponent’s body is exploited: their weight and momentum, their endurance, and their vulnerability. When the opponent is “knocked off his/her stride” or “thrown off balance,” this is only possible when the materiality of his/her body and its own kinetic dynamics is manipulated. Then, the semiotic stimulus-response schema is interrupted by these very own dynamics of bodily materiality. Expressed with Merleau-Ponty, interkinesthetic expectations are permanently exploited in boxing for the purpose of feinting (cf. Meyer and v. Wedelstaedt 2017).

This whole non-semiotic or “asemiotic” dimension of action and practice, as we will call it drawing on Srubar (2012), is a necessary, essential, and indispensable element of sports and many other types of sociality. According to Srubar, meaningful structures of experience not only emerge from communicative exchanges, but go back to non-linguistic or asemiotic constitutional mechanisms as they are produced through phenomena of immediate bodily contact such as violence, care, or sexuality. Especially in physical violence, communication leaves the realm of sign-boundedness and becomes asemiotic. Since this asemiotic character is also present in movement, we suggest the concept of “asemiotricity” to describe this type of sociality. Asemiotic and asemiotor actions and practices are indispensable in sports since, as we argue, it is them on which much of the individual success or failure – winning or losing – is based.

In our paper we will demonstrate on the basis of video footage that in boxing, several semiotic layers can be distinguished than previously assumed, but that also asemiotic moments are crucial. (1) For one, ethnomotricity is vital: The semiotic activities of the boxers are directed towards the performance of ostentatious collusion with the culture, norms, and rules of the sport. (2) Secondly, since basic human embodied actions of feigning and hinting are omnipresent that make actions anticipatable and expectable, semiotor practices are fundamental in boxing. Alongside the interaction between the opponents, as we will show,

however, a second tight communicative relation that is often overlooked concerns the one between coach and athlete (cf. Meyer and v. Wedelstaedt 2013). (3) Thirdly, asemiotor practices that exploit the ethnomotricity as well as the semiotricity of boxing to exert physical violence that weakens the opponent, to make a punch and win a point are essential for winning the fight. We will address these three dimensions one after the other empirically in the following subsections.

For our paper, we use videographic analysis of a German national boxing tournament. As part of the research multiple coaches and boxers were accompanied before and during the Championship and about 36 h of video material were produced, including about 21 h of tournament fights and their preparation. The data is analyzed by use of reconstructive methods (see Meyer and v. Wedelstaedt 2017).

2 Ethnomotor practices in boxing

In boxing, modes of behavior that would be socially rejected and sanctioned in the everyday world – physical violence – are socially desired and encouraged. This apparent tension between the ordinary and the extraordinary reality is mediated through ritual practices that can be described as ethnomotor. A boxing fight is framed with regard to several dimensions and thereby segregated from the paramount reality of everyday life (cf. Schütz and Luckmann 1973). Concerning the temporal dimension, the ringing of the bell clearly delineates the beginnings and ends of those periods in which violence is accepted and even approved, while outside these periods it is banned and disapproved. However, the bell only signals the start and end of each round. The actual command that starts the violence is given by the referee by the verbal directive *box!* and by pulling his hands back after having held them like a gate between the boxers.

In a similar manner a certain spatial environment, the ring, is visually marked and singled out as a space where violence is allowed and justified while outside this space it is forbidden. Concerning the agentic dimension, it becomes apparent that special conditions are in place: specific social roles and rules are established that only apply for the time and space of the fight. During the fight the opponents, as well as all other related participants such as coaches, referees, judges, physicians, spectators, media, are obliged to follow a set of explicitly pre-defined rules. Every activity is observed by nominated persons with regard to rule violation and sanctioned if rule-breaking appears. Some of the participants, especially referees and controlling agencies from the sports organizations, are introduced by the stadium announcer. From then on, they are – optically visible through special seating arrangements, dress regulations and insignia (such as badges, etc.) –

endowed with certain rights and duties such as the right to intervene and sanction rule-breaking actions as mediating and arbitrating “third parties.”

2.1 Introduction and symmetrization in space

However, to achieve such a redefinition and redimensionalization of the social world, it does not suffice to merely state or proclaim it by a voluntary act. Rather, the new definition of the situation must be made evident – observable, tangible, bodily experienceable, and also visible – for all the participants in order to shape their “reality accent” (Schütz 1945: 553). In Transcript 1,² it becomes apparent how this redimensionalization of the ordinary in direction of the extraordinary is achieved and practically accomplished, mainly through the interplay of audible and visible components of bodily activity.

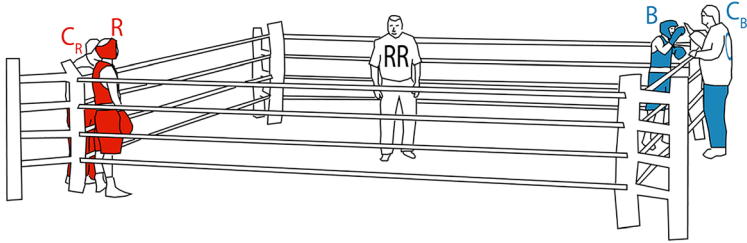
While the stadium announcer introduces the judges, the referee and the boxers by name, the referee simultaneously positions the boxers as equals in space and in relation to himself through a constant adjustment of gesture. The opponents are symmetrized not only in space (in their respective corners), but also in relation to him as impartial referee. The symmetrization of the boxers as equals relative to the set of rules of boxing events had already begun with the ritual weighing beforehand and is now renewed. At the same time the boxers are visually and spatially contrasted for everyone who attends (including themselves respectively as opponents).

As one can see on still II, the referee performs a symmetrical hand gesture to achieve that both boxers come up to him. When the blue boxer (right side, who still got his mouth guard inserted during the referee’s initial hand gesture) approaches too fast (still IV), the referee holds him up (V), in order to achieve the synchronization with the introduction of the stadium announcer as well as to keep the equidistance of both boxers to himself. After that, he symmetrizes his gesture once more relative to the red boxer (left side) by lifting his hand towards the boxer (even if the boxer is already in a waiting position [VI]) in order to synchronously lower his arms again (VII). Both boxers relax their muscles until the referee gets them simultaneously coming up to him and lets them touch gloves (VIII–XI), thereby adjusting the speed of his gestures to the speed of the boxers’ movements.³ While the stadium announcer is acoustically introducing all the people

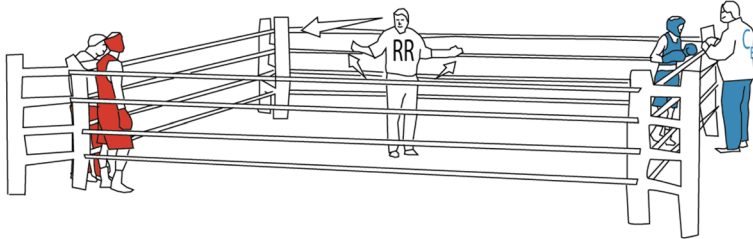
² Essential parts of the collected material were transcribed and analyzed sequentially. For reasons of space and accessibility for readers who are not familiar with sequential conversation analysis, some details usually occurring in conversation analytic transcripts are left out in the multimodal transcriptions presented here.

³ Double arrows indicate a higher speed of the movement.

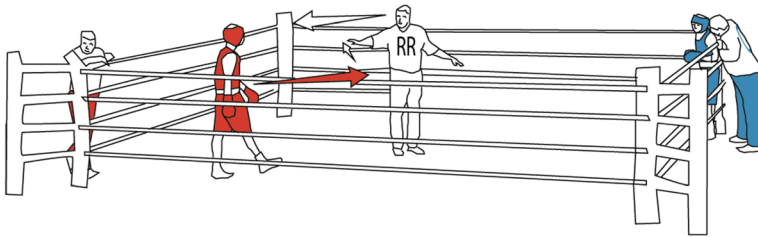
I



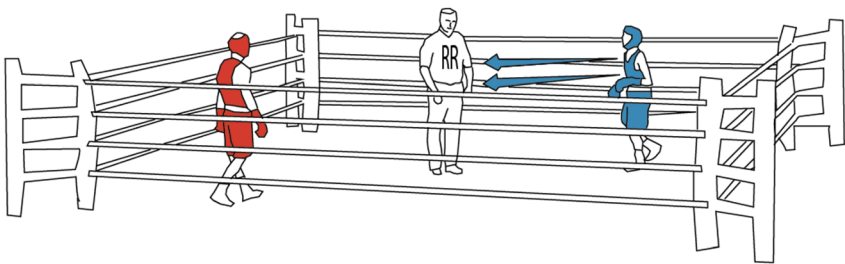
II



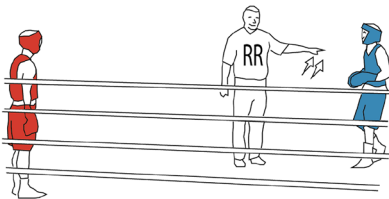
III



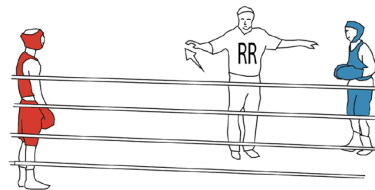
IV



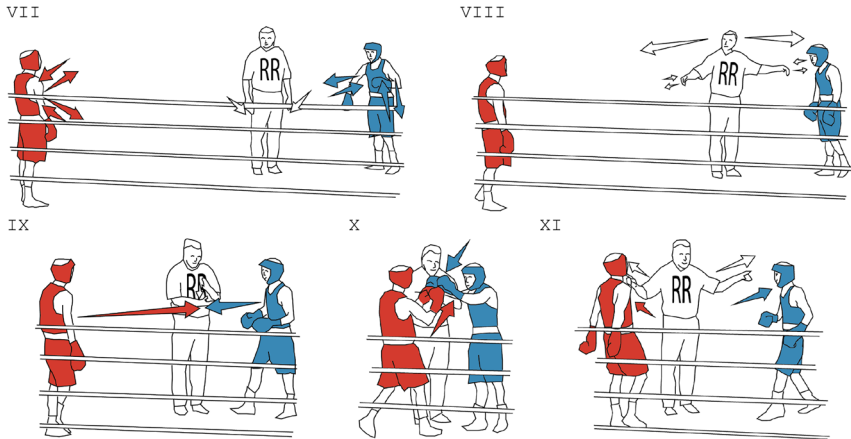
V



VI



Transcript 1: (R/B = Red/blue boxer; C_R/C_B = Coach red/blue boxer; RR = Referee).



Transcript 1: Continued.

participating in the fight, the referee – virtually on a second level of the same activity – uses the same moment to not only present the boxers but to also display the equidistant relationship of both athletes towards himself, to visualize and practically accomplish their antagonism and to symbolize it for the boxers as well as for the crowd.

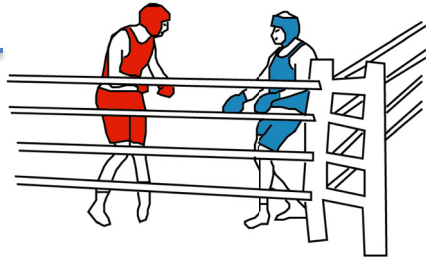
2.2 The performance of not having been hit

It is a fundamental characteristic of the social activity of boxing that differently addressed visibilities are constructed collaboratively as well as antagonistically through the bodily activities of the participants. Often, it is the third and last round of a fight that turns out to be interesting for the analysis of these overlapping semiotic practices. The final phase of the fight is an extremely meaningful situation since the rivalry for the visualization of specific athletic social processes intensifies, condensing the semiotic practices of the participants. The following examples mostly derive from such a third round.

In Transcript 2 the blue boxer starts in the third round with a six points lead (13:7)⁴ and tries to keep this lead over time.

⁴ At the end of each round the score is displayed on screens visible for the spectators and coaches who usually transfer it to the boxers during the round breaks.

01 C_B yE:S=COME PUSH YOURself
 02 (0.77)
 03 YOURself
 04 A_B and yourself come
 05 (0.77)
 06 C_B WE:LL DONE!



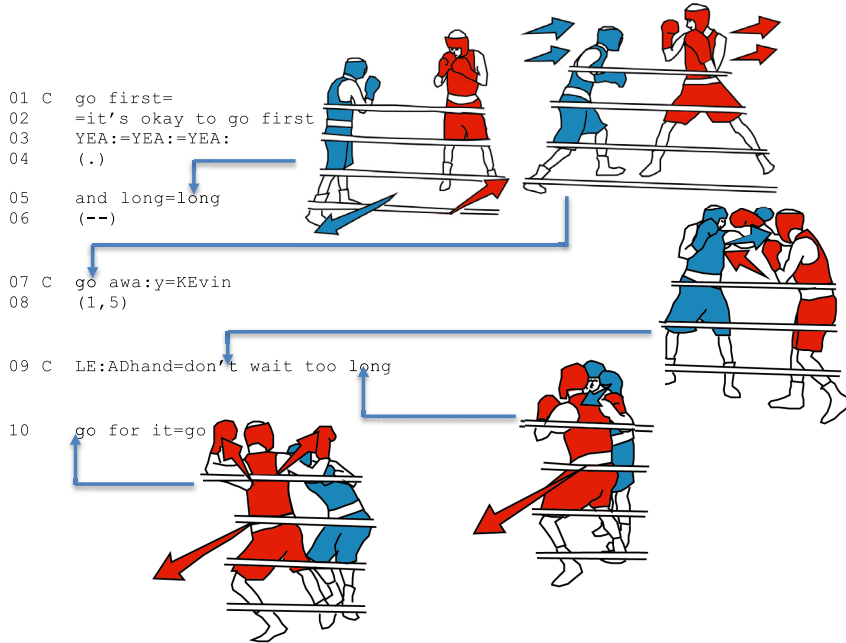
Transcript 2: (C_B = Blue boxer's coach; A_B = Blue boxer's assistant).

Contrary to the instructions of the coach (lines 1, 3) and the assistant (line 4), the blue boxer steps back until he nearly touches the ropes (2). Then he turns left and steps further back (still, line 2) by shifting his weight backwards and putting his hands in front of his body. By doing so he gives up his defensive stance even if being involved in infighting: His torso and head are no longer protected against punches. Through this risky gesture he displays that – despite the preceding infighting – he has not been hit by his opponent and is able to keep acting agilely and with ease. This performance is addressed not only to the spectators, but also to the scoring judges who rate a hit by pressing a button to their front. If at least three (out of five) judges press one boxer's button within 1 s, the boxer scores a point. Because of the different perspectives the judges have on the ring, it is essential for the boxers to clearly indicate – ideally towards multiple directions – that they have not been hit. The semiotic practice performed by the boxer is commented by the coach with a noticeably marked and long-drawn-out 'well done!' (6).

Transcript 3 contains another scene in which the boxer ostentatiously marks for the judges that the action performed by his opponent has not been a scoring hit. Meanwhile the coach keeps shouting instructions into the ring.

After a short period of skipping in front of each other (line 1–6), the blue boxer attacks forward and the red boxer symmetrically moves backwards (7), thus, keeping a constant distance to his opponent. When the blue boxer attacks again (9), the distance between the two boxers drops under a critical level so that the red boxer is forced to demonstrate to the spectators and the scoring judges that he has not been hit (10). However, he does so in a way that appears natural and even casual by lifting both arms.

This displaying of not having been hit is often applied when the distance between the opponents drops under a certain level. Even if a blow is successful, it can be undone – at least on the scoring lists of the judges – through this type of ethnomotor practices.

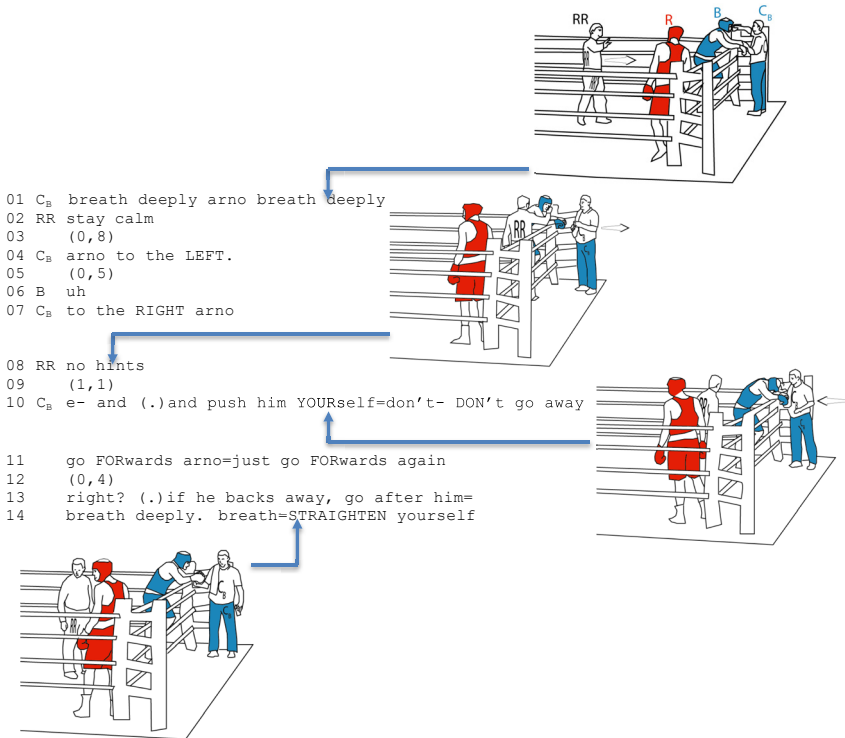


Transcript 3: (C = Coach).

2.3 The performance of rule compliance

A second type of ethnomotor practices serves the ostentatious performance of rule compliance directed to the referee. In our example, the blue boxer falls down and thereby damages his glove so that the fight is interrupted. If the boxer does not manage within 1 min to be ready for fighting again, the fight will either be aborted (and repeated later) or judged in favor of the opponent. For this reason, the assistant instantly goes to the locker room to get a new glove. Transcript 4 shows the break caused by this incident.

First, the referee directs the red boxer into the neutral white corner by a hand gesture and tells him to keep calm (lines 1, 2). After he has given the damaged glove to his assistant, the blue boxer's coach (outside the ring to the right) immediately starts to take care of his boxer by wetting his back with water (1) and addressing him verbally (1, 4, 7). Subsequently the referee tells the coach not to give his boxer



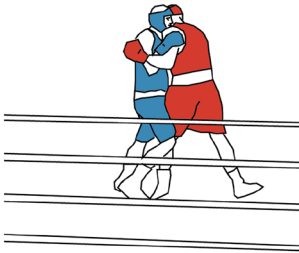
Transcript 4: (C/C_B = Coach; B = Blue boxer; RR = Referee).

hints (8).⁵ As soon as the coach sees the referee walking in his direction, he slightly backs off from his boxer (8). After the referee has gone a few steps back in direction of the red boxer, the coach starts talking and touches his boxer again (10). In doing so the coach now performs a pendulum motion, moving towards the boxer and back. Whenever he comes close to the boxer, he touches him. Meanwhile the referee and the red boxer watch out for the assistant who is supposed to get the new glove. The referee's warning does not lead the coach to totally change his behavior. However, he takes account of it by performing a modified semiotic practice: by extending the distance between him and the boxer time and again. Even if the referee turns towards him, he does not stop. In this respect, his orientation towards the audience (including other officials and especially the scoring judges) becomes apparent.

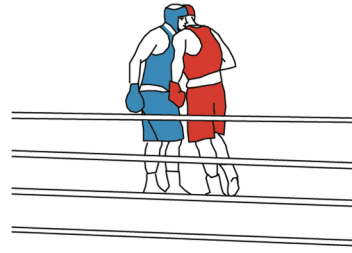
⁵ The set of rules does not explicitly define whether the coach is allowed to talk to his boxer in such a situation. It merely says that the coach is the only person allowed to stand beside the ring, but not in the ring.

Clinching is another activity of ostentatiously performing rule compliance towards the referee. Clinching is an opportunity for the boxers to secure a short moment in which they do not run the risk of being hit by the opponent. When doing so, the boxers mutually hold the opponent's body with one or both arms to hinder punches. As an irregular delay of the fighting activity, clinching constitutes a breach of rules that – at the referee's own discretion – results in either a simple warning (without any further consequences), in a booking (two points for the opponent), or even in disqualification. Apart from that, a clinch can also be dangerous because the first one to free his arms can easily land a punch from close range. The fact that the scoring judges can hardly, or not at all, see what happens between the clinching boxers limits the possibility of the latter to display hits or not-having-been-hit (Transcripts 2 and 3). Another challenge is to (mis-) represent the opponent as the initiator of the clinch, in order to not show any weaknesses. Nevertheless, the practice of clinching is very common in boxing, especially near the end of the fight. It usually leads just to a short interruption (by the referee's command *break* and a simple warning) after which the fight is continued (by the referee's command *box*) (Transcript 5).

I



II



Transcript 5: (B = Blue boxer; R = Red boxer).

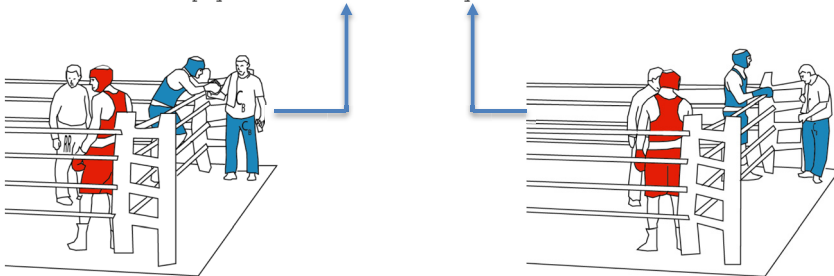
Still I shows the two boxers clinching which is interrupted by the command *break* of the referee. The command entails that according to the rules each boxer must immediately take a full step back. However, the boxers remain for a moment close to each other, leaning their heads on the opponent's shoulder and slightly pressing their bodies against each other (still II). Thereby they play for some more rest time, simultaneously accepting the risk of being close enough to the opponent to be hit and or of a rule breach, both possibly determining victory or defeat. By lowering their arms, the boxers signal the end of the clinch and display not to be responsible for it, clearly visible for the referees, judges and the spectators. In this way they also signal rule compliance as well as physical strength (i.e., that they were not those who needed to clinch in order to take some rest). Lowering their arms before the interruption would make them vulnerable; this is why they just

remain leaning against each other until the referee issues a warning and resumes the fight. The visual bodily activities and gestures of the boxers during the clinch are thus simultaneously directed semiotically at different recipients (referee, opponent, judges, spectators).

2.4 The performance of vitality and self-control

A third ethnomotor domain (that also encompasses semiotor dimensions) has already been addressed above and is visible in Transcript 6 below (which depicts the situation subsequent to Transcript 4): the need to demonstrate bodily strength toward the opponent as well as the spectators and judges. During the break caused by the damaged glove the coach gives his boxer tactical hints (Transcript 4, lines 10–13 and Transcript 6, line 2). After that and after having requested the boxer once more to breathe deeply, he asks him to straighten up himself (Transcript 4, line 14 and Transcript 6, line 3). This verbal expression is accompanied by a slap on the underneath of the remaining glove, indicating that he should do it now directly and literally and that the instruction in this case does not refer to the boxer's general fighting technique. The orientation towards the judges and spectators and their supposed perception of the boxer's physicality is evident. The second screenshot (Transcript 6, line 3) shows that the boxer changes his posture respectively.

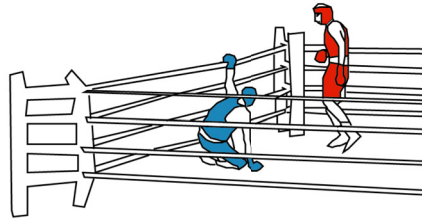
01 (0,4)
 02 C_B right? (.)if he backs away, go after him=
 03 breath deeply. breath=STRAIGHTEN yourself



Transcript 6: (C_B = Blue boxer's coach).

Another example (Transcript 7) shows how the blue boxer stumbles across his opponent's leg during a repeated attempt to get away from the ropes (similar to the situation in Transcript 2).

01 A_B a:rno: COME ON now
 02 (4, 1)
 03 C_B ARno
 04 (2, 7)
 05 ARno (.) PUSH yourself



Transcript 7: (C_B/A_B = Coach/assistant with blue boxer).

The blue boxer now faces the challenge to display that his falling was neither caused by a hit nor by bodily exhaustion but by an accidental stumbling. Unlike in soccer he cannot indicate the involvement of his opponent by remaining lying on the ground and holding his shin. Staying on the ground would lead the referee to start counting out, after which the boxer would be possibly declared having lost. In general, every sign of bodily weakness compromises the boxer.

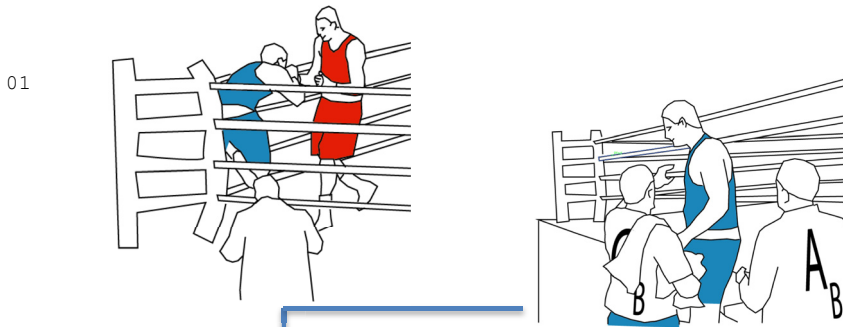
Although the boxer is still on the ground, the coach keeps shouting instructions into the ring (lines 3, 5) just as he does throughout the fight. Thereby he contributes to the boxer's presentation of his fall as an unproblematic stumbling and simultaneously objects pre-emptively to any possible interpretation of the fall as a sign of weakness.⁶ Even if such an event has no direct consequences for the ongoing fight or the scoring, – the referee starts to count out a boxer not before a boxer has fallen several times within a fight – the boxers always make efforts to give the impression of physical strength because they assume an impact on the scoring judges and the audience (who in turn is assumed to have an impact on the scoring).

2.5 The performance of fairness

Apart from the boxer's interaction with the coach, the opponent, the referee, and the judges, some of his semiotic activities are specifically addressed to the audience, as can be observed in the fight presented in Transcript 6. In this fight the blue boxer who has fallen down and damaged his glove finally wins the fight. After the announcement of the winner by the stadium announcer, loud booing in the crowd emerges, which is rather unusual. During the entire period of data collection booing has been observed only in cases when illegal activity had occurred (such as a punch below the belt). However, the blue boxer has benefited from the interruption: while the red boxer has been put into the neutral white

⁶ The issue of shared visual and bodily practice will be discussed in more detail below.

corner, the blue boxer has been allowed to go to his own corner where he has been taken care of by his coach (see Transcript 4 and Transcript 8).



01
 02 C_B good arno=straigten yourself
 03 (1,4)
 04 WINNers (--) don't know any pain (--) come on

Transcript 8: (C_B = Coach blue boxer; A_B = Assistant blue boxer).

After the announcement of the winner and the obligatory handshake with the opponent's coach and assistant, the blue boxer lifts the ropes for the red boxer to get through. This is a highly symbolic action, especially since the ropes are so tightly taut and so heavy that their position only hardly changes. The red boxer shakes hands with the blue boxer once more (still 1) and climbs through the ropes. With his gesture the blue boxer addresses the red boxer particularly, but also the audience where many other participating boxers are seated. After the blue boxer has left the ring, his coach encourages him to “display greatness” in front of the audience and his potential future opponents.

3 Semiotor practices in boxing

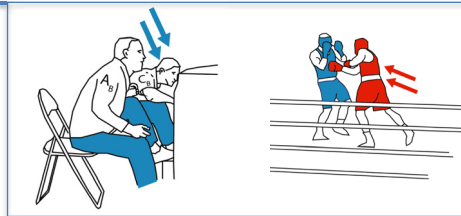
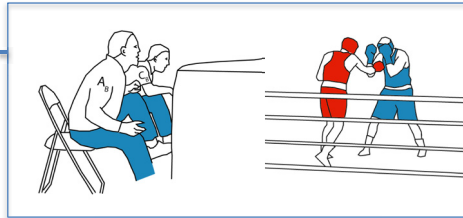
As pointed out above, semiotricity in boxing is not an objective fact but is voluntarily established to manipulate spectators, the opponent, referee, judges, and other officials. In this subsection, we will not describe the many semiotor practices in boxing in detail. We will leave out many interactional co-semiotor practices that are used among the opponents for mutual “scanning,” to establish a joint rhythm, to create expectations and expectabilities and to exchange minor “tit for tats.” All of these practices are important, since, as expectabilities, they can be exploited to make sudden breaches and catch the opponent flat-footed. We come back to that in subsection 4. In the present

subsection 3, we will rather be concerned with a semiotic dimension that has not yet been investigated in detail: The semiotic and co-semiotic action performed by coach and athlete together. The examples we analyze illustrate the ability of the participants to *jointly* manage the fighting situation in a co-semiotic manner.

3.1 Distributed semiotics and semiotricities

In the following transcript this refers particularly to the support that the visual perceptive of the coach and his assistant can provide for the boxer (Transcript 9).

```
01 C look THERE=look THERE-
02 A [( )]
03 C [ARno (.) (stay) closed]
04 (1,2)
05 A a:rng: WATCH out
```



Transcript 9: (C_B/A_B = Coach/Assistant blue boxer).

The coach and the assistant anticipate the punches of the red boxer and warn the blue boxer about them. They put their own perceptive in the service of the boxer by mimetically co-experiencing the fight in embodied manner and by verbally shouting their perceptions into the ring. Outside the ring, the coaches have a totally different semiotic field at their disposal, particularly because their field of view is not permanently impaired by punches of the opponent or by own defensive measures and, therefore, their cognitive processing is not affected negatively. Moreover, the coaches have an extraordinary expertise as to the identification of tactical patterns or other relevant aspects in the opponent's behavior. Through the verbal activities of the coach the boxer has access to and can benefit from the coach's trained and skilled capabilities of seeing and interpreting.

Apart from that, it can be observed that the coach imitates the activities of his boxer by simultaneously and mimetically displaying the same movements with his own body. He mimetically slips and ducks just as the boxer would do to avoid the opponent's punches (line 5, also see Transcript 10, line 4). Nearly everyday, the coach spends several hours training his boxer and implementing various measures for the long-term (intensive training in the past weeks) and immediate preparation (attuning him to the opponent in the locker room) of the fight. One element of the warming-up before the fight is that the coach simulates the opponent and lets the boxer strike at the coach's focus mitts, thereby giving constantly tactical hints about how to improve his punching technique. Hereby the coach attunes the boxer to his commands, drills certain rhythmical patterns of punching, and points to the opponent's specifics. Through this technique, boxer and coach mutually adjust their bodies; the voice of the coach is calibrated in accordance to the movements of the boxer. This enables the coach to activate and recall the boxer's embodied knowledge acquired in the last years of joint training, only by shouting abbreviated, buzzword-like commands into the ring.

This can be observed in the next example, in which the coach's view coalesces with the boxer, not by verbal, but para-verbal communication: by clapping (Transcript 10).

01 C_B EH::: ((claps 3 times))
 02 (0.67)

03 look there
 04 (0.48)

Transcript 10: (C_B/A_B = Coach/Assistant blue boxer).

In line 1 the coach's instructions consist only of a long-drawn-out and emphasized "eh" (01), after which he claps his hands three times. The informational content of this utterance appears very low at first glance. But the coach drills commands of precisely that kind again and again throughout the preparation for

the fight, when he practices certain offensive and defensive maneuvers together with his boxer. The repeated clapping corresponds with a specific rhythmical fight pattern practiced before that the coach now recalls. Thereby he supports the boxer's offensive moves towards his opponent. By this para-verbal form of semiotics the coach succeeds not only in recalling the boxer's embodied knowledge (which is shared by him as well), but also in connecting his own semiotic practices with the bodily activities of the boxer. Due to the enormous speed in which the events in the ring constantly and abruptly change, this is only feasible by using those extremely shortened, para-verbal – one might almost say, analogous – signs.

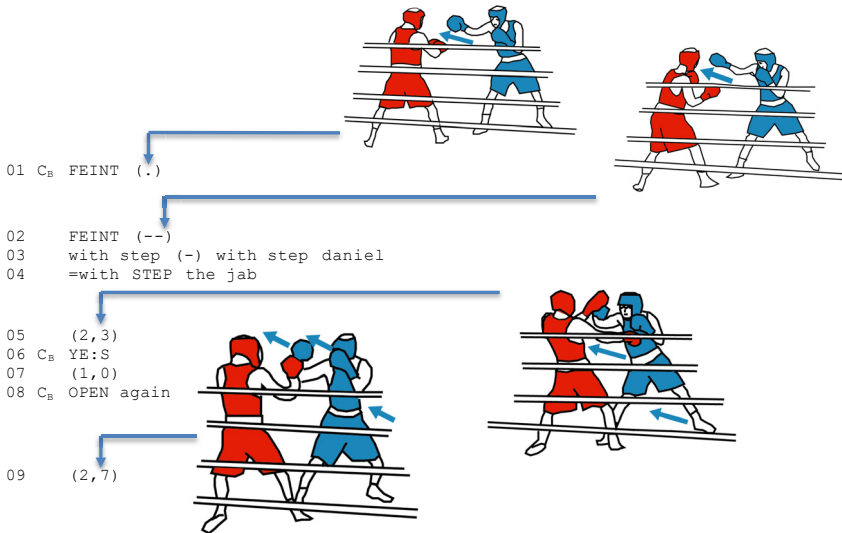
In the further course of the fight the blue boxer changes from an offensive into a defensive position. In this situation the coach makes an evasive movement to the lower left (line 4) exactly in the moment when his boxer is actually hit. By performing the coach's movement, the blue boxer could have successfully avoided the right jab of the red boxer. This indicates the mimetically based anticipation capacity accomplished by the coach in this moment. He recognizes the red boxer's punch already shortly before it is conducted and warns his boxer verbally of the forthcoming. By issuing the hints *look* or *watch out* he extends the boxer's field of perception by adding his own perspective.

Thus, the communication between the boxer and the coach is a multimodal process, based on a *shared* semiotic practice. The coach makes use of para-verbal semiotic forms in order to cope with the specific temporal structure of the events in the ring. As illustrated above, 'seeing' is distributed between at least two people, if not three (if we add the assistant). Just as Goodwin says: we find "the ability to see ... lodged not in the individual mind" (1994: 633) but distributed between different participants.

Interestingly, a distribution into both directions emerges and in the end the coach and his perceptive is interlinked with the boxer's perceptive: By observing the boxer's movements and due to his attainments about the boxer's embodied knowledge, the coach is able to visually identify the resistances and deficits the boxer is exposed to. By this means, he is also able to anticipate the boxer's limited and decreasing perceptive (caused by increasing exhaustion) and to supplement it with his own perception and its verbal or para-verbal communication into the ring.

On the other hand, this "distributed semiotics" can lead the boxer to stop boxing (thereby running the risk of not being able to parry his opponent's punches off) if the coach does not fulfill his task of observation and co-experience and stops shouting instructions into the ring. This can be observed in the last example of this subsection. But before, another example illustrates in more detail how the relationship between the coach and the boxer works.

This relationship is maintained most notably by the coach's permanent verbal addressing of the boxer. Transcript 11 shows how closely the vocal contributions of the coach correspond with the actions of the boxer.



Transcript 11: (C_B = Coach blue boxer).

It becomes apparent how the coach's instructions are translated into action by the blue boxer in an extremely precise manner. In line 1 and 2 the coach tells the boxer to feint (a pretended blow in the opponent's direction that is not meant to hit but to provoke a reaction). This is supposed to create a better starting position to attack the red boxer who would then get into a defensive stance taking cover by placing his hands in front of his head, which reduces the risk of a counterattack. Furthermore, by observing how the red boxer reacts to the feint, the coach and his boxer can extrapolate likely responses to own attacks. The coach makes only short pauses between the single instructions within which the boxer puts them into action. In line 3 and 4 the coach gives a more complex instruction: He wants the boxer to simultaneously take a step forward and deliver a jab, moving the entire body into the punch. After that he makes a longer verbal pause (5) in which the boxer takes the desired action and eventually lands a hit with his left hand, i.e., his lead hand. The coach responds to this successful action by shouting a long, drawn-out "yes" (6). The same pattern is observable in line 8 when the coach tells the boxer to offer himself to the opponent. In the subsequent pause (9) the boxer again implements this instruction, thereby displaying that he has heard and understood the coach's command.

In the example it becomes apparent that the boxer's actions are closely linked to the coach's instructions, while vice versa the verbal utterances of the coach are closely coordinated with the bodily activities of the boxer. However, feigning and delivering a jab are totally different activities and are processed very differently:

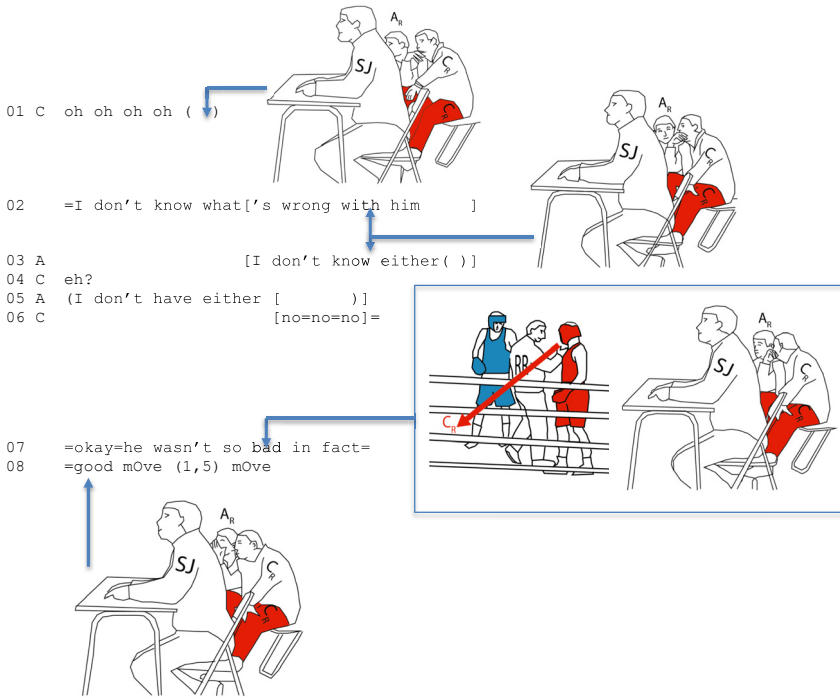
The feints can easily and immediately be implemented, because they are comparatively risk-less for the boxer due to the relatively large distance to his opponent. The situation is different when more complex instructions to deliver a jab are given. In this case it takes the boxer more time to translate it into action because then he first needs to observe his opponent carefully in order to be able to anticipate the opponent's possible reaction on his attack and to watch for the right opportunity for it. The coach is aware of that and takes it into account by leaving a much longer pause after his instruction. After the boxer has finally delivered the jab combined with a step forward the coach ratifies it and formulates his next call.

In this way, coach and boxer constitute a joint unit of action; this being the case, the unit of action has to coordinate the visual perceptions and tactical considerations of both individuals with the bodily activities of the boxer and his opponent. The last example occurred in a comparatively calm period within the fight in which the blue boxer is in a clearly superior position, which allows coach and boxer to perform their activities accurately. Nevertheless, the example illustrates a fundamental mechanism of boxing: Tactical decisions as well as their underlying perceptions are *jointly* accomplished in the ongoing interplay between the coach's verbal and non-verbal utterances and the boxer's bodily performance in the ring.

However, the connection between coach and boxer is not a given, but actually very fragile. In order to maintain it, an ongoing accomplishment of coach and boxer is needed. Transcript 12 shows a situation in which this connection is interrupted which causes an attempt to repair it.

Instead of concentrating on the boxer's activities in the ring and giving instructions, the coach is involved in a side talk with his assistant. When the coach does not understand what his assistant said, he turns his body and face towards him ("eh?", 04) (lines 1–7, still line 7). In the meantime, the fight has been interrupted in consequence of a clinch. But in this situation the boxer does not look at his opponent or at the referee, but in direction of the coach and his assistant who still talk to each other (line 6–7). When the coach turns to face the ring again he sees the boxer looking at him. Subsequently he interrupts the conversation with his assistant and starts shouting into the ring again. Additionally, he raises his right hand and waves (still line 8).

In this example the coach turns his attention away from the events in the ring to discuss the boxer's performance with his assistant, which leads, in a way, to the collision between two co-semiotic units: the semiotic unit of the boxing fight that requires the coach's visual attention to the ring on one hand and the semiotic unit of the interaction between the coach and his assistant that requires visual attention all the more in the case of acoustic misunderstanding on the other hand. Only when the coach realizes that his boxer tries to make eye contact with him, he continues addressing verbal instructions at him and thereby gives an instruction that is inappropriate in this situation; he shouts 'go on' although the



Transcript 12: (C_R/A_R = Coach/assistant red boxer; S_J = Scoring judge; R_R = Referee).

fight has been interrupted. Usually the boxer never looks directly at his coach, because he then runs the risk of not recognizing an attack of his opponent in time. Although the fight is interrupted in the moment of eye contact, this sid glance nevertheless represents a “noticeable” (Schegloff 2007: 86–87) deviance from the usual cooperative unit constituted by the coach and the boxer. By the boxer’s glance at the coach the focus of attention shifts away from the boxer to the coach. This interpretation is also confirmed by the reaction of the coach who abruptly stops talking to his assistant and turns to his boxer again making a waving gesture. Usually the coach never communicates visually and by gesture with his boxer because he does not want to distract the boxer’s attention from the fight. Thus, this scene can be interpreted as an attempt of the coach to repair the interrupted connection to the boxer.

4 Asemiotic and asemiotor practices in boxing

As we have seen, especially in the last transcript, semiotor practices involve a lot of work from the participants. They require an ongoing commitment to get involved into the interactional proceedings. This deep involvement can also be exploited for

asemiotor practices. Boxers and coaches exploit both the ethnomotricity and the semioticity of boxing to score a point, cause harm to the opponent or achieve other interactional projects. Hereto they often switch between the different semiotic and asemiotic modes of interaction in fast succession. These fast paced switchings are well visible in boxing training. In the training sessions the coach wears focus mitts and requests combinations of blows from the boxer. In fast the coaches acts as ‘opponent’ and swings towards the boxer causing him to cover (usually without touching him). Such a moment is depicted in Transcript 13.

01 C aber schön (.) auch beim rechts rübergehn die sicherheit
über die führungshand-
but nicely (.) also when going right secure
via the leadhand

02 D (---) <<f>A!m>
(---) <<f>A!m>

03 C =nicht (.) nicht (---) sondern (0,8) sichern (---)
=no (.) no (---) but (0,8) secure (---)

04 D <<f>A!m>
D <<f>A!m>

05 C =ja (.) besser (1,5)
=yes (.) better (1,5)

06 D <<f>A!m>
D <<f>A!m>

07 (..)

08 C <<pp>so (--) und schön hep>
<<pp>so (--) and nicely hep>

09 D uhm (.) <<ff>A!m> (.)
uhm (.) <<ff>A!m> (.)

10 M <<f>[0!]:h]>
<<f>[2]h>]

11 D [herr] trai[ner]
[mister] co[ach]

12 C <<ff>[0!]:h>=<<f>was war denn hier los?> (.)
<<ff>[0!]:h what was going on here?> (.)

13 <<f>den schnellen herrn saare mal getroffen,>
<<f>finally hit the fast mister saare>

Transcript 13: (C = Coach [blue trousers]; D = Dennis Saare [blue shirt]; M = Marco).

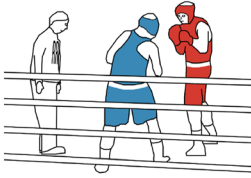
After the boxer delivered a blow to the coach's mitts (line 02), the coach corrects the boxer's blow by verbally referring to it and mimicking a false and correct way of covering the face during the blow (03). The boxer delivers another blow (04), and the coach verbally acknowledges improvement (05). However, right after the next blow the coach starts to swing more directly towards the boxer (06). The coach requests the next blow (08, after a short omission in the transcript). The boxer delivers a hard blow to the coach's right mitt. Again, he pulls his hand back low and leaves the face uncovered. The coach moves forward right away and hits the boxer in the face with his left mitt (09). This immediately causes the boxer to be 'on guard' and to pull back his blow hand in the 'right way' (still with 10). This causes some amusement among the coach and the two boxers in the training session (10–13).

The session of blows the coach's requests from the boxer is a highly coordinated practice involving verbal exchange, complex arrangement of footwork as well as gaze coordination by coach and boxer. It shows all the characteristics of a semiotic practices, since it is established by joint practices of coordination that create specific expectabilities. The coach's disruption of these expectabilities is fast paced and alters the situation right away, causing an immediate physical reaction by the boxer. This should not be confused with inflicting pain and altering the behavior via conditioning. It is much more suitable to link the situation of the training session with the prospected later situation of a real fight: the warming-up serves to introduce elements of the fight into training (v. Wedelstaedt and Singh 2017). In direct preparation of a fight, this is also a way for coaches to establish a form of *competition hardness* in the boxers (cf. Meyer and v. Wedelstaedt 2018b, 2020).

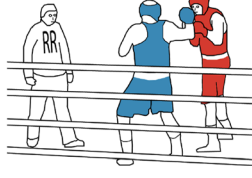
Exploiting semiotic practices and turning the situation into one in which materiality of the boxers' bodies can be directed is at the core of the actual boxing fight. This is depicted in the Transcript 14, which could be described as a classical way of gaining points in a boxing fight.

The blue boxer positions himself in front of the red boxer and "opens up" towards him (still I). This means that the dark boxer lowers his cover by a bit, delivers light blows with his right (lead) hand, and moves slightly towards his opponent. All this happens, in a very fast succession (one of these blows and the forward movement is depicted in still II). The light boxer then approaches the dark boxer with great speed who himself is in a slower backwards movement (still III). The dark boxer next delivers a blow and "dives down," narrowly avoiding getting hit himself (still IV). He moves backwards and "surfaces" again, while the light boxer is still in his forward motion, and delivers a hard hit against the head of his light opponent (still V).

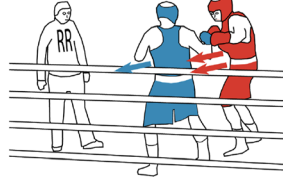
I - 00:39:45



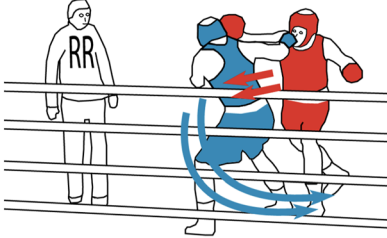
II - 00:40:14



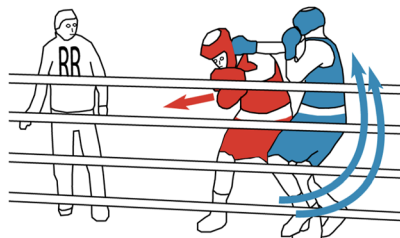
III - 00:41:23



IV - 00:41:76



V - 00:42:04




Transcript 14: (RR = Referee).

The red boxer was “tricked” into a forward movement by the blue boxer. A standard move deployed by the boxers (just as in many other sports, for the case of handball, cf. v. Wedelstaedt and Meyer 2017) is often referred to as ‘feint’ (German *andenten*) or “opening.” In our case, the blue boxer exploits the speed of motion of the red boxer, as the latter’s forward movement is faster than the former’s own backwards movement. For our argument more important is that this can also be viewed as an exploitation of a semiotic practice: The opening of the dark boxer makes use of the semiotic practice of indicating an attack which is ideally complemented with a counter-attack. Through his diving the dark boxer lets his opponent run empty and lose his cover and thereby lands a substantial hit.

These kinds of hits, of course, can lead to a level of asemiotic practices that become prevalent over other, semiotic forms of interactional conduct. Though knockouts are rare in amateur or Olympic boxing (which is more focused on gaining points via landing and avoiding hits), there are sometimes instances in which the “carnal dimension” affects the semiotic capacities of the participants (Transcript 15).

Seconds before Transcript 15 sets in, in the last moments before the ring pause, the boxer received a hit at the eyebrow causing a laceration. Upon the bell ringing the coach quickly gets into the ring and compresses the cut with a towel and requesting vaseline from the assistant coach (03). During the next lines the coach speaks to the boxer while also giving instructions to the assistant (07). In the course of his talking, he constantly starts sentences that he leaves unfinished or pauses



01 C oh what's wrong with HIM; !=his Eye is cut
02 ((bell rings))

03 vaseLine
04 BREATH deeply very good listen you are uh five Ahead
05 =brea:th deeply SO don't let
06 (1.5)

07 hide it a bit
08 the jab up=jab
09 just try to place it higher=

10 =punch with the right punch with the right

11 B cross,
12 T yes my son
13 you just have to. just uh (-) get the punch done=

14 =then you'll get your points right away

Transcript 15: (C_R/A_R = Red boxer's coach/assistant; green cross = vaseline).

after single words. This even prompts a question by the boxer (11) which is a unique occurrence in our whole sample, since, normally, the boxers only listen to what is being said (comparably to handball time outs where the team members stay mostly silent and instances of their speaking are evidence for “other trouble,” cf. Meyer and v. Wedelstaedt 2018a). It is only after the cut is closed with Vaseline that the coach enters into his “normal” monologue.

In our final example, it becomes apparent how asemiotic “hard facts” can influence the fight. The application of Vaseline serves to stop blood running down

the face of the boxer inhibiting his vision in a downright asemiotic manner. However, it also serves to hide the semiotics of the cut from the opponent, the judges and the referee. In our example, the semiotic questions resulting from the asemiotic practice of getting a cut also prevent other, more routine semiotic practices in the pause. Only after the bluntly carnal asemiotic dimension of the interaction is fixed, the usual semiotic conduct can prevail again and coach and boxer can engage in tactical advising. In boxing, we have many instances in which hard, material, asemiotic facts such as hard hits that weaken the opponent, pain, exhaustion, swellings of the eyes that inhibit the vision of the boxer, become relevant and even decisive for the fight. Not only because they are semiotized by the co-participants and interpreted as *signs* that the respective athlete is shattered, but because, with them, the athlete is actually weakened also in a material way.

5 Conclusion

As shown, several overlapping ethnomotor and semiotor practices directed at various addressees can be observed in the semiotic, embodied practice of boxing. The semiotic practices observed are deployed under the interactional condition of bodily co-presence. However, they are interwoven with other modalities and semiotic resources of human physicality such as the verbal, para-verbal, gestural, and physical. Considering the diverse and intertwined semiotic practices permanently accomplished in the framework of specific semiotic requirements and conditions of boxing, we can speak of a semiotic sociality with regard to the bodily interaction in boxing and probably beyond this specific context.

In detail, the boxer's ethnomotor practices that are oriented towards specific contextual requirements include his ostentatious obeying the coach's vocal instructions shouted into the ring (Transcript 11), as well as his demonstrative rule compliance addressed to the referee (Transcripts 4 and 5), his visual performance of scoring a hit (or of not having been hit; Transcripts 2 and 3); and his displaying of physical fitness, moral integrity, and unlimited vitality in front of the spectators, the scoring judges and the opponent (Transcripts 6 and 7).

However, another fundamental semiotic and semiotor requirement concerns the semiotic preparation and subsequent asemiotic hiding and feinting of punches towards the opposing boxer. The boxer has to "layer" all these semiotic asemiotic activities, each of them in an addressee-specific way, which often means simultaneously rendering them visible for one addressee and invisible for another. Due to the reflexive character of social action, we can observe not only differently addressed or even "split" semiotic practices, but also their exploitation in order to mislead the opponent (Transcript 14). Furthermore, the semiotic constitution of

social reality is occasionally distributed between several persons (for example between coach and boxer) in order to enhance their perceptive capacity and to improve their ability to manage the physical reality (Transcripts 9 and 10).

The described “multi-layeredness of semiotic practice” includes cooperative (semiotic) as well as antagonistic (asemiotic) practices, with the former having to be synchronized coordinatively and cooperatively between the interacting entities and the latter being characterized by the preparatory performance of deception practices. Both kinds of semiotic practice are essentially tied to the use of multimodal resources provided by the boxer’s body as well as by the materiality and mediality of the environment. The fact that the boxing body is a biological body as well adds another semiotic and asemiotic dimension, the carnal dimension.⁷ This dimension of bodily weight and momentum, but also vulnerability makes it nearly inevitable that semiotics (such as swollen eyes or cuts) emerge that are interpreted as evidence of an incident or state (e.g., a successful punch, physical inferiority) by the participants. Hence, not only the bodily action is subject to specific semiotic practices, but also the carnal dimension, once it has become manifest and the semioticization of the asemiotic has been accomplished. Thus, even in boxing, an activity apparently reduced to physical confrontation, semiotic – and simultaneously reflexive, situated, distributed, and embodied – practices are ubiquitous.

We have shown that perceptive practices in boxing consist not only in a physiologic-intrapersonal process based on general sensorial preferences. Rather, “seeing” and “semioticizing” are cooperatively accomplished, heterogeneous processes that are layered according to their context in a multimodal interplay of bodily and objective materiality. Although this cooperative process runs through specific obligatory passage points with a defined starting and ending (such as the redimensionalization by the referee, Transcript 1), it is not completed at a particular point in time, from which then a stably ongoing semiotic sociality arises. Rather, this process needs to be steadily continued in order to uphold the definition of the situation of boxing, which differs tremendously from everyday life (exchange of physical violence, competition conditions, etc.). If this process is ended, the definition of the situation also ends and the reality becomes fragile for the participants (Transcript 12).

Thus, the specific semiotic practices of boxing concern not so much general models (such as textbook descriptions of “proper seeing” in order to recognize the opponent’s punches as soon as possible) but rather diverse, multimodal, and

⁷ This dimension is of course present in all interaction. But sports (and especially boxing) is (compared to everyday life) one of the rare occasions where the carnal dimension becomes central for the interaction.

partly multi-addressed practices referring to specific semiotic requirements in boxing, that prominently include asemiotic moments. These semiotic requirements are shaped by the set of rules and the institutionalization of the boxing sport.

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