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Look who's talking (and follow the leader)! Eye movements in a social interaction reveal effects of speaking and social status

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Abstract: Human visual attention tends to operate in an environment that is complex, dynamic and social. However, experimental investigations of where people direct their attention often neglect these factors. In our research, we recorded people making decisions in groups of 3 and then showed video clips of these situations to new participants while monitoring their eye movements. This provided a rich record of how people distributed their gaze on a moment-by-moment basis. Observers tended to look at the person who was talking at any one time, and they fixated this person slightly before they started to speak. Higher-level social attributions also had an effect: people who were rated as having high social status were gazed at more often, over and above the effects of speaking. These effects show that the gaze system is extremely sensitive to the complexities and dynamics of the current social context.