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978-0-521-88064-0 - The Anatomy of Meaning: Speech, Gesture, and Composite Utterances

N. J. Enfield

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## The Anatomy of Meaning

How do we understand what others are trying to say? The answer cannot be found in language alone. Words are linked to hand gestures and other visible phenomena to create unified 'composite utterances'. In this book N.J. Enfield presents original case studies of speech-with-gesture based on fieldwork carried out with speakers of Lao (a language of Southeast Asia). He examines pointing gestures (including lip and finger-pointing) and illustrative gestures (examples include depicting fish traps and tracing kinship relations). His detailed analyses focus on the semiotic unification problem, that is, how to make a single interpretation when multiple signs occur together. Enfield's arguments have implications for all branches of science with a stake in meaning and its place in human social life. The book will appeal to all researchers interested in the study of meaning, including linguists, anthropologists, and psychologists.

N.J. ENFIELD is a senior staff scientist in the Language and Cognition Group at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, The Netherlands. His recent publications include *Person reference in interaction* (with T. Stivers, 2007, Cambridge), *Roots of human sociality* (with S. C. Levinson, 2006) and *Linguistic epidemiology* (2003).

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## *Speech, Gesture, and Composite Utterances*

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It is bad when one thing becomes two.

Yamamoto Tsunetomo, 1716

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For Sam and Matt, and their worlds.

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## Preface

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This is a book about meaning which concentrates mostly on the interpretation of speech-with-gesture composites. The payoff of studying speech-with-gesture is not only to understand gesture as a phenomenon of interest in itself, but – of greater consequence – to help shake linguists and other students of meaning from the view that language is an encapsulated system for conveying meaning. It isn't. What I've learnt from carrying out the work of this book is that meaning is composite and context-grounded no matter how you look at it. The type-level meanings traditionally described in linguistic semantics are never the full meanings that token utterances are taken by interpreters to have, or designed by producers to have.

Standing on the shoulders of a giant pyramid of other midgets, I offer a mere increment on the pioneering efforts of predecessors. The idea of composite utterances as promoted in this book is grounded in a significant prior literature. Those most proximally responsible for the perspective taken here include well-knowns like Adam Kendon, David McNeill, Herb Clark, and Chuck Goodwin, but also some less widely published and cited authors who have, nevertheless, had a direct effect on how I have come to approach the speech-with-gesture problem. Of particular note are Tatiana Slama-Cazacu (who suggested that language and gesture could combine in a 'mixed syntax'), Randi Engle (whose neo-Peircean account of 'composite signals' showed how utterance meanings are not merely summations of their multimodal parts), and Arika Okrent (who insisted that if we are to understand how 'language' and 'gesture' differ and interact, we must define them in terms of semiotic function and not in terms of modality).

This book is one of very many contributions to an emerging discipline of research on speech-with-gesture. With no shadow of a doubt, the most urgent work for this new tradition is extensive and intensive description, across languages and cultures, and across types of social and communicative activity. Human gestures show extraordinary variation in form and meaning compared to those of even our closest relatives in the animal world. While it is apparently possible to summarize in a book chapter the repertoire of gestures of a single species of great ape (Call and Tomasello 2007), this is not

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possible for our species. The diversity of social behaviour across human groups appears to be as great as that **between species** elsewhere in nature (cf. Dunbar 1988). So, we cannot confidently generalize about forms and functions of gestures and other meaningful bodily movements in human social behaviour until we have an idea of the degree to which these phenomena are variable across human groups. For this we need a deep descriptive tradition. Even if we decide that gestures are non-linguistic, they are nevertheless locally conventionalized and therefore widely variable. At present, too little is known. A major task, then, for gesture studies is to build an adequate descriptive base, as was (and continues to be) necessary for language in linguistic science. The greatest breakthroughs in our understanding of the universal properties of language came only after we had access to an extensive historical tradition of descriptive work on languages, large and small, from around the world. This history is yet to be written for gesture.

I dedicate this book to my sister and brother and the people and places who complete them. Sam and Matt are both one of a kind, and each, uniquely, half me.

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The work presented in this book has arisen from several years of collaborative research on language, gesture, and cognition conducted together with members of the Language and Cognition Group at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen. This work has been carried out within three projects of the institute: The Space Project, the Gesture Project, and the Multimodal Interaction Project. I thank my colleagues in each of these groups for their engagement, support, trust, and friendship.

For technical and research support, I thank the Technical Group of the MPI Nijmegen, for assistance with field equipment and for providing the means to conduct the kind of research reported on here. I am also grateful to student assistants in the Language and Cognition Group for their help with practical problems in the revision and formatting of the text and figures. In order of appearance: Norah Carp, Alex Dukers, Ludy Cilissen, Winie van den Bosch, and Annelies van Wijngaarden. I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Max Planck Society for their funding of this research.

Chapters 2–7 are significantly revised versions of previously published articles. I am grateful to the publishers of these articles for kindly giving me permission to revise and reproduce them here: Demonstratives in space and interaction: Data from Lao speakers and implications for semantic analysis, *Language* 79.1, 2003, 82–117 (Chapter 2); ‘Lip-pointing’ – a discussion of form and function with reference to data from Laos, *Gesture* 1.2, 2001, 185–212 (Chapter 3); Primary and secondary pragmatic functions of pointing gestures, *Journal of Pragmatics* 39, 2007, 1722–1741 (Chapter 4, co-authored with Sotaro Kita and J.P. de Ruiter); On linear segmentation and combinatorics in co-speech gesture: A symmetry-dominance construction in Lao fish trap descriptions, *Semiotica* 149.1/4, 2004, 57–123 (Chapter 5); The body as a cognitive artifact in kinship representations: Hand gesture diagrams by speakers of Lao, *Current Anthropology* 46.1, 2005, 51–81 (Chapter 6); Producing and editing diagrams using co-speech gesture: Spatializing non-spatial relations in explanations of kinship in Laos, *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 13.1, 2003, 7–50 (Chapter 7).

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This work would not have been possible without the generosity of many Lao speakers who allowed me to videotape them in action and to publicize the results: in particular, I want to thank Mr Naak, Mr Phouthong, Mrs Thong, and Na Vayaphanh.

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