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.

Language, culture and cognition

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This series looks at the role of language in human cognition – language in both its universal, psychological aspects and its variable, cultural aspects. Studies focus on the relation between semantic and conceptual categories and processes, especially as these are illuminated by cross-linguistic and cross-cultural studies, the study of language acquisition and conceptual development, and the study of the relation of speech production and comprehension to other kinds of behaviour in cultural context. Books come principally though not exclusively, from research associated with the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, and in particular the Language and Cognition Group.

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8 N.J. Enfield The Anatomy of Meaning: Speech, gesture, and composite utterances
It is bad when one thing becomes two.

Yamamoto Tsunetomo, 1716
For Sam and Matt, and their worlds.
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Preface

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
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 under-
standing 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.

N.J.E.
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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).
For their help in putting the book together, and in commenting on newly written sections, I thank Paul Kockelman, Steve Levinson, and Tanya Stivers. I am grateful to Adam Kendon for encouragement and advice at a critical stage. I owe the ‘pyramid of midgets’ line, with thanks, to Peter Richerson and Rob Boyd (2005: 50).

While I cannot list each of the many people who have contributed to this work, a few deserve special mention. Steve Levinson has supported, encouraged, and contributed to the development of my work for nearly a decade. For this, and for his camaraderie, intellectual and otherwise, I am especially grateful. Sotaro Kita introduced me to gesture research when, in the year 2000, he hand-delivered an entire suitcase full of field equipment to me in Melbourne, thus beginning my career in video-based fieldwork. In subsequent years his constructive approach was a welcome path into the world of gesture. At the same time, and since, J. P. de Ruiter has helped me keep gesture research in its proper perspective. David Wilkins preceded me in Nijmegen, and the indelible traces he left there have been a major influence. My meetings with David have been few and far between, but those who know him will understand how even brief exchanges can have far-reaching effects. Bill Hanks has been a key interlocutor and friend, and a steady advocate for the importance of situated, token understandings, with obvious effect on my work. Also a major influence in recent years is Paul Kockelman, whose riotous intellect has knocked down walls in my understanding of meaning. And last but not least, Tanya Stivers has re-educated the linguist in me, bringing sequence and sociality to the analytic foreground.

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.

And finally thanks to family for their patience and support, not only classificatory kin (Edith and the Gang of 5) and affinal kin (Na) at home, but consanguines and their people on the other side of the globe.

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