

GESTURE CATEGORISATION: UNDERSTANDING SPEAKER PERCEPTIONS

Full presentation

Lauren Gawne, Barbara Kelly

University of Melbourne

The study of gesture as a communicative act has been a field of rapid growth over the past three decades. Throughout this period, researchers have developed and refined definitions of gesture. In the majority of instances by 'gesture' researchers typically mean those movements that often accompany speech and are performed with the hands, with the intention of communicating information. The increased interest in gesture has resulted in the creation of a much-debated categorisation schema (Kendon 2004; McNeil 1992, 2005). While academic advances have occurred, there has been little attention paid to what speakers perceive as a gesture. This paper addresses this question in order to determine whether there is a relationship between speaker classification and academic classification used in research – in other words, are gesture researchers on the right track? To address this issue we examined the following questions:

- 1) Is there concordance between the categories and gestures that analysts code as being important and gestures identified by conversation participants?
- 2) What body movements and gestures do conversation participants orient to and what meanings do they assign to them?

Data for the study come from a series of elicitation tasks in which twelve adult speakers of Australian English (7 females, 5 males) participated. In brief, participants were asked to complete a survey including a prompt for them to define what they think constitutes a gesture. They were then given training in the use of ELAN, a film/audio transcription tool, and asked to watch a 53 second DVD of a woman recounting a conversational narrative regarding a recent meal (made expressly for this study) and identify each event that they thought constituted a single gesture. Three gesture analysts were asked to complete the same task. Finally, post-hoc interviews were conducted to clarify perceptions and provide supporting evidence for speaker intuitions shown in the survey and transcription.

Results indicate that there is concordance between analysts and participants as to which events are considered gestures. However, participants also identified a broader range of movements as gestural, identifying an average of 15-16 gestures compared to 10 for analysts. Participant categories were either based on function, or form+function rather than on form alone. Additionally, participants used a variety of categorisation strategies including movements outside the range of phenomena analysed by researchers, such as grooming movements and posture shifts. Participants were, however, more likely to choose established gestures when asked to nominate a prototypical gesture, which is in line with earlier research. This research serves as a timely reminder to those working with gestural, non-verbal, and multi-modal communication that while a formal framework of analysis is a useful analytical tool, it may not adequately reflect the way people process visual information in their communications.

References

Kendon, A. (2004). *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

McNeill, D. (1992). *Hand and Mind: What Gestures reveal about thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McNeill, D. (2005). *Gesture and Thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Keywords: gesture, non-verbal, interaction, movement classification

Contact details: Both authors - School of Languages & Linguistics,

Room 512 Arts Centre, University of Melbourne, Parkville, 3010

(tel) + 61 3 8344 8986; (fax) + 61 3 8344 8990

Email: Kelly – b.kelly@unimelb.edu.au; Gawne - lauren.gawne@gmail.com