

Mimicked Gestures and Joint Establishment of Meaning in Conversation

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A mimicked gesture used by a 'next speaker' repeats a gesture having been produced by a 'first speaker' for the same reference in prior context. For instance, in a topic about feeling itchy during the collection of grains in the field, the first speaker explained that there were prickles *máng* on the grains, and simultaneously produced a gesture for prickles: Speaker's right hand rises to shoulder level, with fingers together and curved into the palm; his left hand goes to chest level, with fingers together. The configuration as a whole enacts holding the stem of a grain on which there are prickles. In the following turn, the next speaker mimicked the gesture while characterizing a different quality of the prickles – having fine hair – by using the nominal *háomáo* 'fine hair' in the utterance.

Since "the body-in-action is available as a situated social resource" (Lerner 2002: 250), joint actions are readily accomplished by language and gesture. The present study investigates the collaboration between speech and mimicked gestures in the joint establishment of meaning across speakers in daily conversation. The linguistic-gestural data were from eight conversational extracts among adult native speakers of Taiwan Mandarin for a total of about 160 minutes of talk. Twelve instances of mimicked gestures were found: They were co-referential with their respective counterparts in the immediately preceding turns, and maintained high similarity with the counterparts across five gesture features (McNeill 2005): 'handedness', 'position', 'orientation', 'hand shape', and 'motion'. Moreover, half were iconic gestures depicting concrete entities and actions; half were metaphoric gestures representing abstract ideas, qualities, and location. These gestures convey meaning along with their respective lexical affiliates.

For the joint establishment of meaning, there are three sequential parts in the interaction: The first part is concerned with the action of the utterance in the first speaker's turn. It is mainly assessment or assertion and a new reference is represented in both speech and gesture. The need for the joint action would arise when the new gestural reference is introduced by a demonstrative, non-conventional ideophone or homonym, or when the first speaker encounters verbalization difficulty. Then, in the second part of the collaborative action, the next speaker repeats the first speaker's gesture at the time s/he provides a new aspect of meaning for the reference. In other situations, the next speaker would do the same linguistic-gestural act to establish a different aspect of meaning for the same reference to show alignment or disagreement. The joint action can take multiple sequences of talk till mutual understanding is achieved. The last part of the joint action is the acceptance of the newly established meaning by the use of agreement markers such as *duì* 'right' or by head nods, which could be accompanied by more elaboration to further indicate acceptance. The lack of the acceptance part, though occurs, typically implicates agreement with no objection.

The three-part sequential organization shows that in the manual modality, the next speaker mimics the first speaker's gesture without encoding new information; in the linguistic modality, the new linguistic expression provides a different aspect of meaning. Such simultaneous division of labor between given and new information across the two modalities suggests a multi-modal strategy in the process of grounding - an important aspect of language use (Clark 1996): The mimicked gesture constitutes a semantic foundation shared by the two speakers, and further establishment of meaning for the same reference proceeds on such semantic foundation. Moreover, the findings manifest that observing gestures is pertinent in the formation of joint actions. The sequential production of the same gesture across turns demonstrates that the next speaker is attentive and strongly involved in the interaction (Tabensky 2001). Finally, the occurrence of mimicked gestures and their collaboration with speech in the joint action provide evidence in support of the claim that speaking is a bilateral process (Clark & Krych 2004), and this bilateral process is multimodal: The next speaker monitors and takes into account the first speaker's speech and gesture in prior turn, and formulates his/her own speech-gesture unit by the incorporation of information from the manual modality.

References

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