

Gestures as Cues to a Target

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This talk on gestures rests on the following framework. A speaker's attention can come to be on something -- her "target" -- near or far in the speech-external (deictic) or speech-internal (anaphoric) environment that she wants to communicate about to a hearer at a certain point. She thus needs the hearer to know what her intended target is and to have his attention on it jointly with her own at the relevant point in her discourse. Language coordinates a three-stage procedure in the hearer's cognition that brings this about. This procedure is initiated when the speaker includes in a sentence a member of a specialized set of mostly closed-class lexical forms -- "trigger forms". English trigger forms include: this/these, that/those, here, there, yonder, now, then, thus, so, such, yay, thisaway, thataway, and the personal and relative pronouns. In the first stage, the trigger form directs the hearer to find certain elements of information: "cues" to the target. Such cues have so far been found to belong to ten distinct categories, representing ten different sources of information. In the second stage, the hearer uses the cues in combination to determine the target. In the third stage, the hearer maps the concept of the target he has now determined onto the trigger form in the speaker's sentence, relating it there syntactically and semantically. I call this whole process "targeting".

One of the ten categories of cues to a target consists of "targeting gestures". Every targeting gesture that a speaker makes is at a spatial location different from that of the target, usually with some distance between them, so means are needed to conceptually connect the two in space. It is proposed here that, in a hearer's processing of it, a targeting gesture generally evokes a particular sequence of cognitive operations involving certain conceptual or "imaginal" constructs that together connect the two locations. The main constructs for establishing such a conceptual connection are projection, extension, trace-formation, repositioning, and interface-crossing (in the case of contiguity).

Targeting gestures further fall into six major divisions on the basis of the main method by which they or the constructs that they evoke help single out the target. Specifically, there are target-intersecting, target-enclosing, target-coextending, target-coproggressing, target-contacting, and target-affecting gestures. All six types, in addition, can be realized anywhere along a "precision parameter" --from an approximative to a precisional execution -- that can also help determine the target to be singled out.

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