

Theme Session

Roles of gesture and body movement in communication

Organizers: Harumi Kobayashi (Tokyo Denki University) and Sotaro Kita (University of Warwick)

Gesture and body movement often play a central role in human ostensive communication. For example, the sentence “This melon is good” can convey a certain meaning in its own right, but it conveys completely different meanings when it is uttered by a customer in a shop, who points at the referent fruit with a glance to the store owner and conversely, the store owner’s pointing or reaching to the referent with a glance to the customer. The former may mean “I want this melon, because it looks delicious.” and the latter may mean “I recommend this melon, because it is delicious.” Thus, gesture and body movement are an essential part of human communication.

This theme session focuses on the fundamental functions of gesture and body movement in human communication and explore the relationships between these and language. In particular, as one of Evolving linguistics sessions, this theme session pays special attention to possible relationships between emergence of language and gesture/body movements. Deictic gestures such as pointing is claimed to play an important role for human intention sharing both in the past when humans acquired language and the present when children acquire language.

Sotaro Kita will first give an overview of different types of gestures and body movements as well as the roles of these in human communication. Then, he will discuss his experimental studies, showing that children’s seeing iconic gestures have various communicative effects and lead to better performance in the memory and word learning. Eriko Yamamoto will present data on infants’ understanding the body movements and discuss the importance of infants’ experience of own body movements in understanding others’ body movements. Yuka Ishizuka will present her work on children with autism spectrum disorder and will show that gesture imitation training encouraged both the expression of gesture and the linguistic comprehension and production of it. Ulf Liszkowski will discuss the studies on ontogenesis of pointing gestures, and show that one-year-old infants communicate using attention-directing gestures and vocalizations before acquiring language. He will also report their recent cross-cultural and longitudinal findings on infant pointing and show that infant pointing is an outcome of social-interactive practices in the first year of life. Tetsuya Yasuda examined whether adults use different gestures and eye gaze according to whether they are teaching labels for the whole object or a part of the object. He will show that adults certainly provide appropriate nonverbal cues. Finally, Harumi Kobayashi discusses the roles of pointing gesture in language development and show that young children are sensitive to different pointing gestures and preschool children spontaneously produce these.

Speakers & Titles

1. Sotaro Kita (University of Warwick)
The role of seeing gestures in children’s word learning and event memory
2. Eriko Yamamoto (The University of Tokyo)
How do infants perceive and understand the body movements of others?
3. Yuka Ishizuka (Japan Society for Promotion of Science, University of Tsukuba)
Gesture imitation increases reciprocal communication in children with autism spectrum disorder.
4. Ulf Liszkowski (Universität Hamburg)
Ontogenetic origins of the human pointing gesture
5. Tetsuya Yasuda (Tokyo Denki University)
Coordination of pointing and eye gaze in adult teaching whole/part object labels
6. Harumi Kobayashi (Tokyo Denki University)
Children’s comprehension and production of different pointing gestures



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