

Mimicked gestures and the joint construction of meaning in conversation

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Abstract

The current study investigates a complete course of action for the joint construction of meaning and the way mimicked gestures are used along with speech to accomplish the joint action in Mandarin Chinese conversation. The domain of analysis is a stretch of talk that encompasses the beginning till the end of the joint action during which similar gestures are produced by different speakers across turns. Within the stretch of talk, the beginning of the joint action is the 'presentation phase' during which a speaker presents meaning. A variety of situations were found to prompt another participant to jointly create meaning. The end of the joint action is the 'completion phase', during which the new meaning is recognized and the collaboration ends. In between is the 'collaboration phase' during which the joint action starts and develops with the use of cross-modal resources. In conversation, one way to accomplish the joint action is by the use of gestural repetition with slight modification as in a discussion about size. For other types of semantic information, the involvement of speech and gesture is more frequent, in that the second speaker mimics the gesture of the previous speaker to form a semantic foundation shared by the participants; and the second speaker conveys new meaning with a new lexical expression on the basis of the semantic common ground. The use of cross-modal resources thus facilitates the simultaneous realization of shared knowledge in gesture and new meaning in speech within a clausal unit.

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1. Introduction

In daily conversation, a common use of language is to construct meaning for communication, which can be accomplished via the collaboration between participants. A joint action such as this "is carried out by an ensemble of people acting in coordination with each other" (Clark, 1996:3). In order to understand how people collaborate to establish meaning together, it is first necessary "to develop a detailed account of a course of action to understand what part any utterance plays within it" (Lerner, 2002:249). In the past studies of the grounding of meaning for mutual understanding (Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986; Clark and Schaefer, 1987; Clark and Brennan, 1991; Clark and Krych, 2004), two phases of the joint action were proposed, namely the 'presentation phase' during which a referent is uttered by a speaker, and the 'acceptance phase' during which the referent is acknowledged by the other speaker. While such pattern is not directly subject to speakers' collaboration to construct meaning together, a complete course for such particular type of joint action has not yet been well investigated. Thus, the current study aims to examine a complete course of the action for the joint construction of meaning, which is preliminary and crucial to the investigation of the occurrence of mimicked gestures.

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In that joint actions are social interaction, not only language, but also “the body-in-action is available as a situated social resource” (Lerner, 2002:250). The present study focuses on hand gestures, not only because the use of hands and arms along with speech is prevalent in daily communication (McNeill, 1992, 2000; Goldin-Meadow, 1999; Kendon, 2004), but also because gestures play a role in the joint creation of meaning. While co-speech gestures are largely spontaneous and speakers usually have their own ways to depict meaning based on their personal experiences and conceptualization, there is also a type of gesture that repeats the manual configuration which has previously been produced by another speaker for the same referent. This kind of repetition is ‘gestural mimicry’ (Kimbara, 2006:41) and involves “the recurrence of the same or similar gesture across speakers.” Gestures of this kind are also called ‘return gestures’ (de Fornel, 1992), ‘gestural rephrasings’ (Tabensky, 2001), ‘mimicking gestures’ (Kimbara, 2006) or ‘mimicked gestures’ (Parrill and Kimbara, 2006; Holler and Wilkin, 2011). Here, the term ‘mimicked gesture’ is used.”

Different kinds of mimicry data have been elicited by use of different methodologies in the previous studies, including data from videophone conversations (de Fornel, 1992), discussions on assigned topics between participants who had not met each other before (Tabensky, 2001), cartoon narrations and casual Japanese conversation (Kimbara, 2006), joint descriptions of video stimuli (Parrill and Kimbara, 2006; Kimbara, 2008), and face-to-face dialogs in which participants talked about a set of geometrical figures as stimuli (Holler and Wilkin, 2011). Studies using these various kinds of data provided different results about the occurrence of mimicked gestures. Parrill and Kimbara’s (2006:165) experiments found that observers were sensitive to mimicry, in that “participants who observed mimicry in gesture produced more of the mimicked features.” Kimbara (2008), by manipulation of the visibility of the speakers in the joint description of a cartoon, and Holler and Wilkin (2011), by doing the same in a referential communication task, consistently found that a greater number of mimicked gestures were produced when the participants could see each other. In other empirical research, the use of recurrent gestures demonstrated attentiveness, strong involvement in the interaction, understanding and acknowledgment, alignment or heckling, and the joint establishment of meaning (de Fornel, 1992; Goodwin and Goodwin, 1992; Tabensky, 2001; Kimbara, 2006; Holler and Wilkin, 2011).

In the studies of the joint creation of meaning, Tabensky (2001) presented two examples of gestural rephrasings and supported de Fornel’s (1992) claim that the use of mimicked gestures displayed participants’ strong involvement during speaking. Five examples were discussed in Kimbara (2006) to show that gestural repetition made salient the foregrounded aspects of meaning, reshaped the co-expressivity of the interlocutors’ speech and gesture, and accomplished the co-construction of utterance units. Finally, quantitative evidence can be found in Holler and Wilkin (2011) to manifest that mimicked gestures can be used for ‘presentation’, ‘acceptance’, and ‘displaying incremental understanding’. However, as mentioned above, the data in Tabensky (2001) were from conversations between participants who did not know each other before the recording; three topics were assigned from which participants chose one for discussion. The data in Kimbara (2006) were mainly elicited from stimuli for joint description, as the participants first watched cartoon clips and then described the content together. In Holler and Wilkin (2011), although the data were more natural as participants engaged in face-to-face dialogs, the interaction was still task-based, in that “the content of their talk focused on referents to concrete concepts as well as spatial information, and the exchange was structured in the sense that those participating in it adopted particular roles” (Holler and Wilkin, 2011:136). Thus, the remaining question is: Do mimicked gestures play similar roles in naturally-occurring daily conversation?

In the present study, the occurrence of mimicked gestures along with speech during the course of action for the joint construction of meaning is examined in the most fundamental type of talk-in-interaction – daily face-to-face conversation (Sacks et al., 1974; Clark, 1996; Stivers et al., 2009). In this casual and spontaneous type of interaction, participants are free to talk about any topics of interest in their own way and develop joint actions without assignment of the topic or the use of video stimuli. The sequential turns in conversational interactions are also pertinent to the understanding of the participants’ collaboration in joint actions.

In brief, the current study aims to investigate a complete course of action for the joint construction of meaning and the occurrence of mimicked gestures, to understand the circumstances under which meaning is jointly constructed, and the way that linguistic and gestural resources are employed to achieve the joint action in conversational discourse. It will be shown that the use of mimicked gestures for the collaborative act in daily conversation differs from their occurrence in reference communication tasks as found in previous studies. The findings will contribute to the understanding of the use of mimicked gestures as they occur along with speech in conversational discourse and the role of gesture in communication.

The next section introduces the data for the present study. Section 3 is the analysis of the course of the joint construction of meaning and the occurrence of mimicked gestures in conversation. Section 4 is the general discussion and conclusion.

2. Data and methods

The data for this study consist of daily face-to-face casual conversations among adult native speakers of Mandarin. The participants were recruited to hold a conversation with their friends, family members or colleagues who knew each

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