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Body-directed gestures: Pointing to the self and beyond

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Abstract

The prototypical pointing gesture is directed outward at concrete objects, people, or locations in the world. But in everyday discourse pointing gestures are also commonly directed inward, toward the body. *Body-directed gestures* are co-produced with a variety of spoken referents, from personal pronouns (*I*, *we*) to experiential concepts (*belief*, *instinct*), exhibit wide but motivated variation in handshapes and movement patterns, and involve conceptual processes whose prevalence in co-speech gesture has gone largely unexamined. Based on a corpus of 40 one-on-one interviews from the Tavis Smiley Show, three varieties of body-directed gestures—*self-points*, *body-points*, and *body-anchors*—are introduced and the semiotic and morphological characteristics of each variety are investigated. Body-directed gestures present a variegated subset of pointing gestures more generally, affording a novel vantage on pointing and its relation to speech, conceptual processes in everyday real-time behavior, and the role of the body as a foundational site for anchoring meaning of all kinds.

Keywords: Gesture; Pointing; Reference; Iconicity; Pronouns; Conceptualization

1. Introduction

A little more than eight minutes into a 2006 television interview, then-president of the United States George W. Bush pointed to the free world. He did not use a map or any other visual prop, only his body. Bush and an interviewer for the Irish television network RTÉ were discussing the state of the Iraq war. Visibly exasperated by the interviewer's persistent and unwelcome focus on the conflict's death toll, Bush insists: ''These people are willing to kill innocent people. They're willing to slaughter innocent people to stop the advance of freedom.'' He continues: ''So the free world has to make a choice.'' As he says ''free world'' he gestures toward himself, drawing his hand quickly to his body so that it comes to rest flat on his chest. After a pause, he continues: ''Do we cower in the face of terror, or do we lead in the face of terror?'' The gesture quietly creates a connection between Bush and a much broader and somewhat abstract entity—''the free world''—a connection made more explicit seconds later in his use of the pronoun *we*. Such gestures may be all the more conspicuous in moments of pitched and public statecraft, but they are hardly confined to such contexts. Speakers direct gestures at their own bodies in all kinds of everyday discourse contexts and pair them with a wide variety of spoken referents.

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Consider next a more mundane and perhaps more commonplace example of a body-directed gesture, taken from a television interview in which the topic of discussion is personal struggle. The interviewee is Natalie Cole, a popular American singer, and she is opening up to the interviewer, Tavis Smiley, about unfulfilling relationships in her past[1]:

Example 1 [NC 11:31]

NC: 1 when I look back on, you know, some of the people that I've known
2 they've all wanted to- they didn't und- they didn't get it
3 they didn't get **me**

As the speaker says ''me'' in line 3, she quickly brings both hands, fingers loosely bent, toward the center of her torso. She holds them in this position for close to two seconds before continuing. *Me*—and other variants of the first-person singular pronoun, such as *I* and *my*—are frequent partners of body-directed gestures. Between examples as straightforward as (1) and as gymnastic as Bush's free-world point lies a variegated gamut of examples of body-directed gestures exhibiting complexities of different kinds. Discussed below are instances of gestures co-produced with first-person *plural* pronouns (e.g. *we*), second-person pronouns (e.g. *you*), body part words (e.g. *face*), abstract notions related to subjective experience (e.g. *comfortable*), and seemingly far-flung concrete nouns (e.g. *script*). These gestures cluster into three broad varieties—*self-points*, *body-points*, and *body-anchors*—which are distinguishable by the type of referent involved. The first variety—*self-points*—exemplified by (1) above, involves pointing to the body in the course of reference to the self (or other persons). The second—*body-points*—involves indicating, either by pointing or touching, a particular body part, such as the knee or the ear, in the course of direct reference to that part. The third variety—*body-anchors*—involves indicating a part or region of the body to anchor reference to experiential notions, sometimes quite abstract. While these three varieties of body-directed gestures are ultimately distinguished by the type of referent involved—persons, body parts, or experiential notions—each variety also exhibits characteristic morphological and semiotic properties.

Body-directed gestures have gone largely unexamined in the literature on co-speech gesture, notwithstanding a few mentions made in passing. For example, in his nineteenth-century treatise on Neapolitan gestures, Andrea de Jorio (2000 [orig. 1832]) notes that ''the palm of the hand close to the chest, whether pressing upon it or touching it gently, just with the tips of the fingers, denotes *me* or *to me*'' (p. 268). de Jorio's example bears a clear resemblance to modern-day self-points among speakers of American English, such as in (1). In recent work on the semiotics of French gesture, Calbris (1990) includes an appendix on ''gestures targeting the body'' (pp. 222–225). Many of Calbris' examples appear to be highly conventionalized ways of conveying notions like drunkenness, dishonesty, satiety, and the like, and some are related to idiomatic expressions. The present focus instead is on spontaneous, idiosyncratic co-speech gestures that have no obvious basis in idiomatic language and lack rigid standards of form. More recently, Streeck (2009) has discussed a handful of body-directed gestures accompanying notions of ''consciousness'' (p. 154) and ''feeling'' (p. 157). (In the terminology presented here, these gestures would be considered body-anchors.) As Streeck notes, such gestures seem to exploit associations between parts of the body and experiential concepts. Additionally, Streeck briefly describes processes of ''self-marking'' in which speakers index their own bodies in making reference to *others*' physical attributes (e.g. ''angel-like hair'') or clothing (e.g. ''white skirt''). Streeck refers to such examples—somewhat cryptically—as cases of ''indexical reference once removed'' (p. 143). Similar examples are discussed below, with particular attention to their possible conceptual motivations.

What the different varieties of body-directed gestures—*self-points*, *body-points*, and *body-anchors*—have in common is that they indicate the speaker's body, whether the whole or some particular part of it. Are they just plain old pointing gestures? If not, what sets them apart? In folk theories of gesture—and occasionally in academic studies as well—pointing is narrowly identified with what might be called the ''canonical pointing gesture''.[2] The gesture is assumed to involve several key features. An index-finger extended handshape is used; whatever is pointed to is concrete, perceptible, and present in the speech situation; if the pointing gesture is co-produced with speech, it is taken for granted that what is pointed to—the *demonstratum*, or here the *target*—is in some sense identical to what is simultaneously referred to in speech—the *denotatum*, or here the *referent* (c.f. Clark et al., 1983); and, finally, the function of the gesture is to re-orient listener attention to the target. As an example of such a canonical pointing gesture, think of a customer approaching a

[1] In all examples segments of the speech co-produced with a gesture of interest are bolded and underlined; other gestures are not marked. Dashes indicate disfluencies in the speech. All clips are identified by the first and last initial of the interviewee, along with the start time of the segment.

[2] The notion that there is a prototypical pointing gesture or scenario is not new. Langacker (2008) has described the ''canonical pointing gesture'' as a ''conceptual archetype'' (p. 284), noting that it is often enshrined in directional signage. Similarly, Lakoff (1987:490–491) has described the ''Pointing-Out [Idealized Cognitive Model]''. Prototypicality is also implicit in Kendon's use of the phrase ''pure pointing'' (Kendon, 1980:106).