

# The communicative intentionality of pointing gestures

## Summary

This work is motivated by two main aims. The first is to present the functions and forms of pointing gestures from communicative, developmental and cultural perspectives, and to show that pointing gestures which are often referred to in the literature as simple and basic actually constitute morphologically and conceptually complex interactive phenomena. The second aim is to distinguish and analyse the attributes of forms of pointing gestures, which might signify their communicative intentionality. It was assumed to relate to the sender's communicative engagement and his/her wish to convey information in such a way that the recipient can not only see it, but also interprets it in accordance with the sender's intentions. This translates into the form in which gestures are performed – the nature of the movement made.

This monograph comprises two parts. The first critically reviews issues related to the function and form of pointing gestures from the ontogenetic, philogenetic and cultural points of view. The second, empirical one, is devoted to studies on pointing gestures based on an analysis of those features which may be interpreted as expressions of communicative intentionality. The starting point here is the sender's perspective. The assumption is that the communicative intentionality of gestures can translate into the way in which they are performed, onto their physical characteristics, and also these gestures' relationship with verbal utterances. This multifaceted analysis of the research material deals not only with particular features of pointing gestures but also with the way they might co-occur in one gesture or in interpersonal interaction, and this interaction's potential influence on the way gestures are performed.

The objective of Study no. 1 was to check whether those features of gestures distinguished as potential expressions of communicative intentionality appeared both in situations where participants in the communication were visible to each other and where they were not. Respondents were presented with the ostensible aim of constructing together figures using sheets of paper. The task of the 'instructor' was to tell the 'constructor' how to use the materials to build a figure resembling a box. The task of the 'constructor' was to re-construct the figure as closely as possible on the basis of the instructions they received.

The aim of Study no. 2 was to determine whether the form of pointing gestures in the communicative situation being analysed depended on the object being indicated.

The adjustment of the gesture form to the category of the object indicated and to the applicable cultural norms were interpreted here as expressions of communicative intentionality. The first part of the study is a survey aiming to canvass opinions on cultural norms applicable among Polish-language users and also individual impressions regarding the appropriateness of using index finger gestures and open palms with other people or objects. The second part of the study aimed to establish the influence of the object being indicated on the form of pointing gesture. Two communicative situations based on dialogue scenarios were set up. In one, the participants pointed at objects, and in the other, at people.

The research illustrates the complexity of the problem of communicative intentionality of gestures and its analysis, which does not always lead to unambiguous conclusions. The studies provide evidence that acknowledging all pointing gestures to be communicatively intentional might be an oversimplification. The features analysed, which are an expression of communicative intentionality, are not attributed permanently to the category of pointing gestures. Their occurrence depends to a great degree on the communicative situation.

Translated by Rob Pagett