

Pointing

By Jack Sidnell

When people interact with one another they draw upon a range of semiotic resources. Although, research in this area has largely focused on language and its apparently unique capacity for reference and predication, it is clear that reference and predication are themselves dependent upon a capacity for joint attention as well as a mechanism for creating and sustaining intersubjectivity. Moreover, reference and predication happen in a world in which people speak in order to do things. Reference and predication are, in that sense, tools for social action.

Pointing provides a compelling illustration. Human infants begin to point at around 11 months and in some cases quite a bit earlier as part of the so-called "nine-month revolution". Although it is a matter of some controversy there is some compelling evidence that pointing is a species-specific capacity and that superficially similar gestures produced by chimpanzees are not functionally equivalent (Povinelli et al 2003). Indeed, Tomasello has recently argued that a unique human capacity for language is already in evidence in an infant's early pointing attempts (Tomasello frth, Tomasello 1999). Pointing, of course, requires not only that pointer and interlocutor jointly attend one another but also that the jointly share attention to some third, referred-to entity - the thing being pointed at. In terms of cognition, this implies both an ability and desire to draw the other's attention to something in the world and, in this way, modify the interlocutor's knowledge or understanding of that world. It further implies a sense of what is important - of a figure to be distinguished from a ground - and, at a deeper level perhaps, a sense of others as potentially intentional agents like oneself. In terms of technique, pointing typically requires a coordination of gesture - the pointing finger - and gaze, the latter being the medium through which attention is visibly displayed. Even among infants, points are typically accompanied by vocalizations and so talk too must be coordinated with other semiotic resources in this apparently simple task.

On the small Caribbean island of Bequia where I have been conducting fieldwork for the past several years, speakers often use points in the course of making recognitional reference to people and places. Recipients sometimes show that they have understood the reference by producing a similar point. This is illustrated by the example, below. Here two fisherman are talking outside a local shop. Cat is telling Rog that he wants to pull his boat out of the water to fix it but he has to wait until some people come and go from the island. At lines 11-12 he refers to "these people" but subsequently expands the reference in three parts – characterizing them as people:

- a. he works with
- b. up there on the hill
- c. (in) the big red house

As he starts to say "on the hill," Cat brings his right hand up to produce a point and, at the same time, gazes in the direction he is pointing (towards a large hill). As Cat begins to move his hand Rog momentarily looks at it, and subsequently produces a matching point.

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- 11 Cat: an mi jos ga weet ontill diiz
and I just have to wait until these
- 12 piipol: ah-ai doz wok wid op de-
people I – I work with up there -
- 13 an ii [hil? i big red hous dong de.= ((gaze redirect an “an”
on the hill? the big red house down there. ((point at “hill”
- 14 Rog: [mm an ii hil ()
mm on the hill ()
- 15 Cat: =kom an goo.
=come and go.
- 16 Cat: ka de- yunoo kom somtain neks
because they’re- you know – coming sometime next
- 17 mont (ah) en noo hou [erlii.
month (I) don’t know when
- 18 Rog: [oo:::
oh
- 19 Cat: fu meebii a tuu wiiks ar so.
for maybe two weeks or so.

The papers in this symposium are focused on issues of human interaction. They examine the range of semiotic resources implicated in interaction and address the theoretical, methodological and conceptual issues involved in studying language as a part of interaction. One common theme running through the papers is the role played by the non-human, material environment in human interaction. This includes robots created for the purpose of conversation with humans, computers, tools used in archaeological excavation as well as the semiotic structure provided by the very material surround itself.

Web links

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