Pointing Gestures and Personal References

Seychelles Sign Language (SSL) & Creole Seychellois (CS)

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Sign Language emerge from natural gestures and cultural gestuality used in the surrounding hearing community (Meir & al, 2012). Seychellois speakers and signers widely use pointing gesture in association with personal referents.

At what level is SSL influenced by cultural gestuality of CS’s speakers?

How are pointing gestures integrated in SSL: how do they change, or specialize?

Gestures and Speech in Creole Seychellois (CS)

Seychelles is an archipelago country in the Indian Ocean. 95000 inhabitants, a multilingual and multicultural society. Creole Seychellois is the native language of 90% of the population, and the everyday interaction’s language. Gesture assume a high status in everyday interactions. Silent communication is used with non-Creole speakers. Creole speakers gesture a lot. Interactional gestures without any counterpart in speech are common in use. But above all, speakers produce a lot of large co-speech gestures in alignment with personal and spatial referents in speech. Gesture and speech complement each-other, forming a co-expressive utterance (Kendon 2000).

In particular, CS reference marking involves not only speech, but also gesture and cultural factors. (Brueck 2016: 212). CS’s structure is characterised by a reduced pronoun and article system, composed by pragmatic constructions with repetition or dislocation, and the simultaneous addition of co-speech gestures. Brueck’s corpus shows that 79% of these co-speech gestures are referential gestures; among them 42% are iconic gestures and 58 % pointing gestures. At a semantic level, they correspond to direct pointings (to the person referred to in speech), metonymic pointings (to an existing place in relation to the person) or metaphorical pointings (to an abstract place in gesture space).

Seychelles Sign Language (SSL)

Deaf people live in the three main islands. Interactions make that they share a sign language, SSL, which can be categorised as a 'very-small-community sign language'. The lexicon shows a local variability, but also certain influence of other SL, like French, Mauritian or American Sign language. Pointing gestures are very frequently produced by signers, as interactional gesture but essentially as part of SSL.

In SSL, pointing is used extensively to convey personal and spatial anaphoric and iconic meanings. Pointing gestures are used to point to an existing location with its occupation status, marking a personal and spatial anaphoric reference. Pointing gestures can occur isolated,Indexical pointing signs as personal and spatial anaphoric markers in SSL

Pointing signs can usually be used as a personal or spatial reference. Pointing gestures are used extensively to convey personal and spatial anaphoric and iconic meanings. Pointing gestures are used to point to an existing location with its occupation status, marking a personal and spatial anaphoric reference.

Indexical pointing signs as personal and spatial anaphoric markers in SSL

Pointing signs can occur isolated, as deictic or anaphoric personal references as for other Signed Languages. That is never the case for anaphoric pointing gestures in CS.

They mostly occur in a reduced form in SSL, assuming a function either of full pronoun, or clitic index. Large pointing generally signal an intend of emphasize a reference.

SSL also combine personal and spatial references as subject markers with very reduced pointing signs

A specific pointing gesture for sign languages?

In addition to the pointing gestures directed toward a real or an abstract location, signers point also toward their hand. The reference is not associated with an abstract location, but with the hand-shape who just produced the referential sign.

Conclusion: a specialization of features already present in creole speaker’s gestuality

Cultural influence of speakers gestuality, itself influenced by language’s structure and social behaviors.

- Common frequent association of a personal reference and a pointing gesture for new referents.
- Common frequent association of personal and spatial references
- Preferential use of pointing gestures toward existing locations

Pointing gestures differ for speakers and signers, when they are part of SSL. But conventionalization, reduction and syntactic integration materialize a process of spatial construction which is already present in gestuality.

Sources and Illustrations

SSL corpus, 2017-2018, Alanis Gohart et Annie Risler, Handed by Seychelles’s Government and Usac

Maléna Broude 2018 PhD dissertation

References

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Henderson, K., 2008 Language and gesture: unity and duality, in McRae "Language and Gesture. Cambridge University Press, 67-93


Dem + N + DEM + Pronoun: a frequent construction for new personal references in CS which favors pointing gestures

Ex: Sa vawan la i pou koupé DEM NEIGHBOUR DEM PST INS CUT

My neighbour will cut

(= place of the pointing gesture here a metaphorical pointing)

The personal referent often occurs simultaneously with a pointing gesture. Redundant added grammatical particles in CS seem to favor the high frequency of points with new personal referents (Brueck 2016).

Specialized forms of pointings in SSL

Signers and speakers use a set of 5 handshapes, but differently. Only 10% in CS, but for more than 80% in SSL.

SSL pointing signs are indexical pointings. Conventionalized and grammaticalized.

a variant of index, for back or side-back direct pointings,

very usual hand-shapes for speakers (63%),

Conventionalized in SSL as lexical items for PATH,

Specific in CS for reference to speaker him/herself integrated in the SSL lexicon as individual self-reference.

N+ pt-IX: a frequent construction in SSL, coming from CS?

Pointing gesture usually don’t co-occur with personal or spatial referents, because of the gestual modality. New personal referents in SSL are followed by an index pointing (noted PT-IX), completely integrated in the gestural space.

Point toward the present person

The high frequency of this construction for new referents is similar to CS’s multimodal construction and tendency to combine a personal and a spatial reference anchored in the surrounding environment.

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I work everyday

Monday, Tuesday, ... Friday

Work

Pt-IX(later) Pt-IX(me) Work

Tuesday, Thursday, Friday

Work

Pt-IX(later) Pt-IX(me) Work

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In addition to the pointing gestures directed toward a real or an abstract location, signers point also toward their hand. The reference is not associated with an abstract location, but with the hand-shape who just produced the referential sign.

This construction is also attested in French Sign Language, and probably in other SL.

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