

Pointing amongst the Kukatja

Pointing is one of the most ubiquitous and ontologically early communicative acts acquired by humans and has even been argued to precede and predict subsequent language acquisition (e.g. Butterworth, 2003). Despite a long-standing literature assuming its structural ‘universality’ and ‘simplicity’, it is only in the last 20 years or so that a clearer picture of cultural variation and diversity has started to emerge (Haviland 2000; 2003; Kendon & Versante 2003; Kita 2003; Levinson 2003; Wilkins 2003; Marghetis, McComsey & Cooperrider 2020; Mesh 2021). Pointing practices nevertheless remain seriously under-documented globally and detailed documentary studies are sorely needed. In this talk I explore the formal and semantic complexity of pointing practices amongst the community of Kukatja-speakers living in Balgo (Western Australia). This talk has two objectives: to provide an ethnographically grounded description of pointing in Kukatja inspired by the MPI tradition (Wilkins, Kita & Enfield 2007) and to assess whether Kukatja pointing practices can be said to align with Levinson’s so-called ‘absolute gesture systems’ (2003: 247–262). The novel data for this study comes from my PhD fieldwork (2021–2023) and makes use of best-practice methodologies for tracking geo-spatial information associated with multimodal speech (Cialone 2019; de Dear et al. 2021).

I: Pointing as part of a complex semiotic system in Kukatja

Pointing amongst the Kukatja is used alongside speech, gesture and sign (*marumpu wangka*: Lempert 2019). This talk will focus on manual pointing, referred to as *ngiltji-wakala*. Here, at least four discrete handshapes can be identified, termed **INDEX**, **DUAL**, **WIDE** and **FLAT**. I identify how these handshapes are functionally discrete (variably marking number and certain spatial properties) and illustrate how these points are used in their linguistic context. Points are shown to further inflect for i) distance to the *origo* (pitch of gesticulator) and ii) obscuring boundaries (flexion of gesticulator). Kukatja points also crucially differ with respect to their deictic anchoring. Following Le Guen (2011), I illustrate how points in Kukatja may be **DIRECT**, or they may be **TRANSPOSED**. Direct points literally point to their referent (from a speaker’s position) while transposed points assume an *origo* that is not the speaker. In the transposed condition there is evidence of two (typologically novel) subtypes, contingent on how a ground relation is represented which I term ‘overt’ and ‘covert’. In the context of Aboriginal Australia, this study extends many parallel observations of Wilkins (2003) for Arrernte and Haviland (2000, et al.) for Guugu Yimithirr while also identifying some seemingly unique (or perhaps underreported) properties.

II: Pointing as a ‘window’ into cognition

The early research reports of culturally-variable pointing practices were an important component of Levinson’s neo-Whorfian thesis claiming an influential relationship between language and cognition. Specifically, Levinson utilised these findings to hypothesise that speakers of languages in linguistic communities which showed a preferential use of a certain ‘frame of reference’ (viz. absolute-geocentric) would display *characteristic features* in their spatial gesture, distinguishing them from speakers with a different preferential spatial frame (viz. egocentric). I present a preliminary quantitative analysis of such properties in Kukatja and find—in conjunction with the qualitative data—positive evidence in support of Levinson’s hypothesis. Nevertheless, I highlight several necessary caveats and draw attention to how cognitive gesture studies might fruitfully re-orient from some current research trends.

References

- Butterworth, George (2003): *Pointing is the royal road to language for babies*. In Sotaro Kita (Ed.), *Pointing*, 9–34. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Cialone, Claudia (2019): *Placing spatial language and cognition in context through an investigation of Bininj Kunwok navigation talk*. Australian National University PhD dissertation.
- Dear, Caroline de, Joe Blythe, F. Possemato, L. Stirling & Rod Gardner (2021): Locational pointing in Murrinhpatha, Gija and English conversations. *Gesture* 20(3). 417–452.
- Haviland, John Beard (2000): Pointing, gesture spaces, and mental maps. In David McNeill (Ed.), *Language and Gesture* (Language Culture and Cognition), 13–46. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Haviland, John Beard (2003): How to point in Zinacantán. In Sotaro Kita (Ed.), *Pointing*, 139–170. Psychology Press.
- Kendon, Adam & Laura Versante (2003): Pointing by Hand in “Neapolitan”. In Sotaro Kita (Ed.), *Pointing: Where language, culture and cognition meet*, 109–138. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kita, Sotaro (2003): Pointing: A Foundational Building Block of Human Communication. In Sotaro Kita (Ed.), *Pointing*, 1–8. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Lempert, William (2019): Gesturing across settler divides in Marumpu Wangka! Kukatja hand talk. *Video Journal of Education and Pedagogy* 4(2). 11–20.
- Levinson, S.C. (2003): *Space in language and cognition: Explorations in cognitive diversity*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Marghetis, Tyler, Melanie McComsey & Kensity Cooperrider (2020): Space in Hand and Mind: Gesture and Spatial Frames of Reference in Bilingual Mexico. *Cognitive Science* 44(12). e12920.
- Mesh, Kate (2021): It’s as far as the arm can raise: Pointing height marks target distance among the San Juan Quiahije Chatino. *Lingua* 259.
- Wilkins, David (2003): Why pointing with the index finger is not a universal (in sociocultural and semiotic terms). In Sotaro Kita (Ed.), *Pointing*, 171–216. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Wilkins, David, P., Sotaro Kita & N.J. Enfield (2007): Ethnography of pointing - field worker’s guide. *Field Manual Volume 10*, 89–95. Nijmegen: Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics.