

“Multimodal representation of shared cultural knowledge in a Creolophone community”

Efron (1972) was one of the first researchers to systematically compare gesture use across cultures – a line of research being followed by several studies since then (Kendon, 2004a, 2004b; Kita, 2009; Kita & Özyürek, 2003; Le Guen, 2011; Levinson, 2003; Özyürek et al., 2008). While often these comparisons have focused on the interaction between gesture and speech, some studies have also taken into account the interface of gesture and culture, thus considering “[g]estural practices as cultural tradition” (Kendon, 2004b: 328). In this paper culture is approached as socially distributed knowledge that is available for interpretation and can be used as a resource for e.g. anchoring, orienting or linking referents to one another. Such shared cultural knowledge and its representation in the visual modality has been described for both gesture systems (e.g. Haviland, 1993; Levinson, 2003; Wilkins, 2003) and sign languages (Adone & Maypilama, in press, 2014; Nonaka, in press; Vos, 2012). Among the typical domains of shared cultural knowledge we find spatial orientation and conceptualization, kinship systems, person reference, or temporal reference.

This paper discusses multimodal representation of shared cultural knowledge in Kreol Seselwa, a French-based creole language spoken on the Seychelles. The first part will describe the nature of Kreol Seselwa as a creole language system and give a short overview of the vocal and gestural components used by its speakers. The second part will present elicited and spontaneous data collected in the Seychelles, focusing on the aspect of spatial reference as culturally shared knowledge. Preliminary evidence suggests that one striking feature of this Creolophone community seems to be a dynamic use of several spatial frames of reference in everyday communication. We will illustrate how the choice for a certain frame of reference can depend on context, modality, and culturally shared knowledge (cf. Pederson, 2003). On the gestural level, the data show how culturally shared knowledge of Kreol Seselwa speakers influences the phonological features as well as the use of abstraction in pointing gestures referring to existing places. Furthermore, the data illustrate the dynamics of merging deictic and iconic elements in gestures accompanying so-called locally-anchored narrations (Kita, 2001; Levinson, Kita, & Enfield, 2001), and how this reveals aspects of shared background knowledge. Finally, the third part of the paper will discuss the implications concerning the “micro-ecology” (Kendon, 2004b) shaping the gestural system of KS speakers, as well as the distribution of culturally shared knowledge between the two modalities in this community.

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