

Pointing modes in gesture and sign. An analytic framework.

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This paper proposes a productive framework to examine tendencies in pointing strategies cross-linguistically and cross-culturally. Three types of pointings are considered based on previous research by the author (Le Guen, 2011): Direct, metonymic and metaphoric, see Figure 1. All types are defined by the relation between the intended referent (i.e., what is referred to in the utterance) and the actual target (i.e., what is pointed at). In the case of direct pointing, the intended referent is the actual target, no matter what the distance. For metonymic pointing, the target is in spatial or temporal relation with the actual referent it stands for, e.g., pointing at John's house to refer to John. As for metaphoric pointing, the target is a piece of empty air that is arbitrarily related with the referent in the utterance, a very useful tool for anaphoric references in discourse. A fourth type has been added, named "direct transposed" which is a direct pointing but done in a direct speech quotation, hence transposed.

Interestingly, the handshape or direction *per se* is not at stake here, but what is considered is the relation between the pointing and the intended referent. For instance, in Figure 2a-c, both pointings, despite being of very different in shape and orientation, are "direct pointing" since the referents are real entities in the world and the orientation of the hand is accurate towards the real location. In Figure 2c, the signer has his arm outstretched, indicating the house of his brother and, although the arm is directed towards the real location of the house, the referent is his brother, which make the pointing a metonymic one. In Figure 2d the signer points directly at his own body, but it is a metonymic pointing as the body stands here for another person from a video stimulus. Finally, the last pointing is produced in the frame of reported direct speech, and it is a "transposed direct" pointing, since the person who the signer embodies, points to another character in the conversation, while in the real world the signer just points at an empty space.

Examples will be drawn from a database of spoken Yucatec Maya and Yucatec Maya Sign Language constituted of natural conversations as well as narratives of real and fictional events.

Although simple, such framework is productive and in a certain way, is very similar to the researches done on space and spatial cognition using the three Frames of Reference proposed by Levinson (2003) or on topology by Landau and Jackendoff (1993). A correlation between FoR and pointing strategies can actually be asserted (see Le Guen 2011). The proposed framework

not only allows to compare tendencies in pointing in various cultures but also across languages and modalities as for instance between spoken and sign languages. Of special interest for gesture and well as emerging sign languages is the cultural easiness or reluctance to use space symbolically, i.e., metaphorical pointing. Not only this process is complex theoretically but also cognitively.

Landau, B., & Jackendoff, R. (1993). “What” and “Where” in spatial language and spatial cognition. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 16, 217–265.
 Le Guen, O. (2011). Modes of pointing to existing spaces and the use of frames of reference. *Gesture*, 11(3), 271–307.
 Levinson, S. C. (2003). *Space in language and cognition: Explorations in cognitive diversity*. Cambridge University Press.

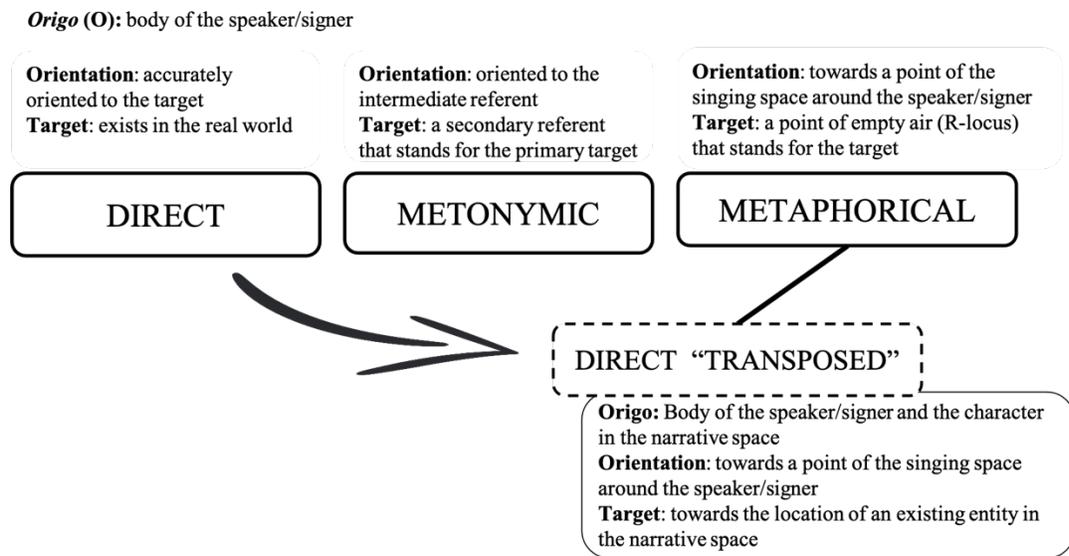


Figure 1: Theoretical framework of pointing analysis



Figure 2: instances of various types of pointings