

Using Mapping and Anchoring Gestures to Establish Common Ground

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Do gestures communicate? Framing the question like this tends to evoke the conduit metaphor of communication, e.g.: Do beat gestures convey prosodic emphasis? Do depictive gestures convey visual aspects of scenes or metaphoric source domains? Do emblematic gestures, like lexical items, convey conventional symbolic meanings? Unfortunately, the conduit metaphor blinds us to another potentially significant function of gesture in human communication: establishing common ground.

Intersubjectivity is achieved when participants share a definition of the situation, i.e., when they conceptualize it in compatible ways. In my studies of the gestures teachers make during instruction, I find two related ways that gestures contribute to common ground by giving conceptual content a physical presence:

1. 'Mapping gestures' link conceptual entities to environmental structures or locations that sustain these elements and their relations in the ensuing discourse.
2. 'Anchoring gestures' act as proxies or surrogates for conceptual entities, mapping conceptual content to the gesturer's own body.

These grounding functions become apparent when we analyze how talk and gesture prompt for mental space building, cross-space mapping, and conceptual blending. Examples will illustrate the role of gesture in constructing both single-scope conceptual blends (based on one conceptual model) and double-scope blends (combining two or more conceptual models) in the shared physical space of the discourse.

Once conceptual entities have been anchored, they can be directly referenced and manipulated to generate inferences. Mapping gestures and anchoring gestures thus produce conjoined conceptual-physical referents that participants can use to test their intersubjective understandings while they jointly accomplish cognitive work.

References

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