Gestures at the Semantics-Pragmatics Interface

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In this talk I will address the issue of how to best formally model the informational contribution of gesture with respect to our current understanding of verbal meaning. I will take for granted that gestures are used, both consciously and unconsciously, to convey information and that listeners make use of the information conveyed by gestures when decoding the messages of speakers. The open question is how this integrated interpretation is achieved and how we can model it given the toolkit offered by formal semantics.

I will start by overviewing a number of proposals in the literature that present alternative implementations of a unified semantics for verbal language and gestures. Some of these proposals feature a more semantic approach (e.g. Giorgolo [2010]) while other have a more pragmatic oriented point of view (e.g. Lascarides and Stone [2009]). I will explore the relevance of the distinction between lexical and compositional semantics and pragmatics for the issue of gesture semantics. In particular I will analyse the issues we face when modelling the semantic contribution of gestures in light of current developments in formal semantics that clarify the relationship between semantics and pragmatics and that point towards a multilayered picture of meaning contributions [Stanley, 2000, Potts, 2007]. I will reanalyse the results of Giorgolo and Needham [2012] according to this view and compare how gestures behave with respect to linguistic phenomena, such as presuppositions and different kinds of implicatures, that also live at the border between semantics and pragmatics.

The talk will not try to offer a final answer regarding the best way to model gesture meaning contribution. Instead, I will present what I believe are interesting open questions and how we can best tackle them combining theoretical insights and experimental work.

References


