

Documenting West African gesture repertoires

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Abstract

This poster presents an elicitation format for the collection of conventional gesture repertoires in West Africa. The format is developed for the establishment of a database of West gestures of speakers from various parts of West Africa. In a pilot study, the format was used to collect gestures with three participants.

Keywords: Emblems; West Africa; documentation; gesture repertoire

Conventional gestures in West Africa

Studies on gestures in West Africa are scarce and so are studies on the methodology of gesture documentation. Documenting the gestures of hearing Mofu-Gudur (Northern Cameroon), Sorin-Barreteau (1996) has collected a repertoire of over 1500 conventional gestures. Many of these gestures have noun- and verb-like meanings, such as 'man', 'woman', 'food/eat', and 'water', but also more abstract meanings like 'refuse', 'dead', 'beg', and 'useless'. Observations of spontaneous spoken interaction in various (West) African countries suggests that large repertoires of conventional gestures are common in other parts of West Africa as well, even sharing the same gestures. West African speakers also seem to differ in some gestural strategies, for example when tendency to measure out the size and shape of entities on the hand or arm, rather than in space (as is common e.g. in the Netherlands) (Sorin-Barreteau 1996; Nyst, 1997; Claessen 1984; Creider 1977; Hohegger 1978).

A elicitation format for gesture repertoires

To test the above observations, systematic documentation and comparison of gesture repertoires in West Africa is needed. To this end, a structured format for gesture elicitation was designed. This format contains a recognition task, a production task and a guided interview.

For the recognition task (inspired by Morris, Collett & Marsh, 1980) video clips were recorded of 20 conventional gestures that have been observed to be shared transnationally. Participants watch each clip and are asked to provide intuitions on the meanings of these gestures as well as for their (observed) use.

The production task targets gestures describing size and shape. They consist of 10 images of 3 similar objects (e.g. tomatoes), mainly differing in size or shape. Participants are

asked to show the size and shape of the objects with gestures.

The interview is guided by a questionnaire with phrases and words regularly expressed in gesture across cultures. The questionnaire is in part based on the list of messages used by Ekman and Friesen in various studies (incl. Johnson, Ekman and Friesen, 1975; Ekman, 1969, which in turn build upon Efron, 1972 and Saitz and Cervenka, 1962, 1973), complemented with phrases and words deemed relevant for the current study.

I will present the documentation format, together with an evaluation of its effectiveness in a pilot with three West African speakers.

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