Pointing Gestures in Direction Giving: Interactions of Malaysian English Speakers

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Abstract — When we speak we perform various body movements that convey information such as movements of the hands, head, gaze, and body posture. These movements are known as gestures and are regarded as all visible bodily actions employed intentionally and meaningfully (Stam & Ishino, 2011). This paper presents a description of the pointing behavior of Malaysian English speakers when giving wayfinding directions to a foreign student inside a university campus. The analysis in this study is based on 30 videos of naturalistic direction giving interactions. Data analysis focused on the forms and functions of pointing gestures used in direction giving. To analyze the data, the study adopted McNeill's (1992) classification of gesture types as a starting point. The forms and functions of gestures were further analyzed qualitatively using a data driven approach. Results of the study indicate that pointing in Malaysian culture is achieved through the use of the hands, eyes, head and torso orientation. Moreover, each gesture form carries a distinct function.

Index Terms—Deictic gestures, Direction giving, E-culture, Linguistics, Pointing.

I. INTRODUCTION

People of diverse cultural backgrounds do not only perceive the world differently but also communicate differently as cultural values affect not only their thoughts and behaviors, but also the way they gesture and speak. This paper describes the gestural behavior of Malaysian English speakers when giving wayfinding directions to a place. The importance of examining gestural behavior among speakers of different cultures lies in the fact that where as one form of gesturing maybe the norm among a specific speech community, the same gesture could be regarded as an inappropriate gesture in another. An important yet almost completely neglected problem in the study of deictic (i.e., pointing gestures) is the matter of distinguishing between different functions they may serve (Enfield, 2001, p. 195).

The communication of spatial information in wayfinding direction giving is a good example of an interaction in which pointing gestures have the potential to play a particularly important role. Many aspects of the direction-giving interaction are expressed, enhanced or modified by gestures (Kendon, 2004).

A. What are Gestures?

The study of gestures has captured the interest of scholars from different disciplines who study communication including linguists, semioticians, psychologists and anthropologists. Consequently, the term gesture has many different meanings and researchers have used it to examine aspects, which are not always the same (McNeill, 2012). McNeill (2012) states that gesture is a rather problematic word to define as it is seriously ambiguous and includes very diverse phenomena. Stam & Ishino (2011) provide a broad definition of gesture as “all visible bodily actions employed intentionally and meaningfully.” Thus, gestures are bodily movements, which carry meaning and are not arbitrary. Likewise, Kendon (2004, p.15) defines gesture as “those actions that have the features of manifest deliberate expressiveness”. He points out that gesture thus do not refer to actions “of thoughts or feelings that are deemed in advertent or are regarded a something a person can not help” (p.8). In this respect, gestures do not refer to incidents of clothing adjustment, hair patting and movements people make when they are nervous which don’t not have any apparent intention to express or communicate anything.

Gestures have been described in terms of their forms (i.e. types), their functions, and their relationship to discourse and dialogue context.