The direction giving pointing gestures of the Malay Malaysian speech community

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When we speak, we do not only produce a chain of words and utterances, but we also perform various body movements that convey information. These movements are usually made with the hands and are what McNeill (1992) terms gestures. Although gesturing is universal, the way we gesture and the meanings we associate with gestures vary cross-culturally. Using a qualitative approach, this paper describes and illustrates the forms and functions of pointing gestures used by Malay speakers. The data discussed is based on 10 video recorded direction-giving interactions. Findings show that pointing among Malay speakers is achieved through the use of various manual pointing gestures and other bodily actions involving gaze, torso and head movements, which communicate distinct functions. This study has indicated that although some gesture forms and functions are shared among Malay speakers and other cultural groups, some direction-giving pointing behaviors are Malay specific.

Keywords: direction giving, pointing gestures, non-verbal behavior, Malay

Introduction

People of diverse cultural backgrounds do not only perceive of the world differently but also communicate differently as cultural values affect not only their thoughts and behaviors, but also the way they speak and gesture. Von Raffler-Engler (1980, p. 136) notes that “beyond a very early state, there is no motion in the body which is not influenced by culture” (as cited in Schneller, 1992, p. 217). Gestures are in fact a feature and a property of every culture and speech community. Speakers of different cultural backgrounds formulate norms of gesture use within their own cultures typically regarding the forms, range, rate and expanse of gestures (Gullberg, 2006). Several studies have shown how gestures can change shape, size and meaning or function across cultural communities and different contexts of
use (e.g., Kendon, 1992, 2004; Morris, Collett, Marsh, & O’Shaughnessy, 1979; Orie, 2009; Wilkins, 2003).

Among the major reasons cross-cultural differences prevail in gesture patterns is a difference in the form-meaning associations (Kita, 2009). Different cultures assign different meanings to particular gesture forms. As such gestures are conventionalized and their meanings remain opaque and often incomprehensible to members of other cultures. Pointing gestures are a group of gestures, which are also governed by culture specific conventions as different cultures associate certain forms of pointing with contrastive meanings (Kita, 2003, 2009). Several studies have shown how variation in forms of pointing can correspond with identifiable variation in semiotic functions (e.g., Enfield, 2001; Kendon & Versante, 2003; Kendon, 2004, Chapter 11; Orie, 2009; Wilkins, 2003). In Naples, for instance, pointing with an index finger palm down brings the referent into focus while using an index finger with a palm vertical orientation designates a referent that is relevant to the current discourse but not its primary focus (Kendon & Versante, 2003). In comparison, pointing using the lips has been documented in Laos in Southeast Asia to serve the same function as the index finger palm down variant described in Kendon and Versante’s (2003) study. According to Enfield (2001) lip pointing among the Laos is observed in use when the referent or object is the focal element of the speaker’s discourse or when the gesturer assumes that the addressee is likely to know what the referent is.

More importantly, pointing gestures differ cross-culturally due to diversity in gestural pragmatics, which is reflected in issues such as gestural politeness. Just as it is possible to be rude to a person through speech, it is also possible to be disrespectful through the gestures one uses (Kita, 2009). Pointing gestures for example are subject to culturally determined norms which condition who or what a person can point at as well as which body part can be used for pointing (e.g., index finger, open hand, thumb, mouth, head, nose, chin etc.) and whether the right or left hand can be used. For instance, although lip pointing is attested among the Yoruba in Nigeria, it is considered inappropriate to point with if one is pointing to a person who is older or higher in social status than the one doing the pointing (Orie, 2009). In a similar vein, the use of the index finger in pointing is described as being an impolite form of pointing among Malays who prefer the use of a hand shape in which the thumb is laid on top of fully retracted fingers and directed toward what is being pointed at (the “forward thumb” hand shape, as we later refer to it) (e.g., Abdullah & Pedersen, 2003; Harris, Moran, & Moran, 2004).

Differences in norms of gesturing among speakers of different cultures whether due to variation in the form-function association or gestural politeness may result in misunderstandings in communication. Nonetheless, despite the importance of studying cultural differences in communication, research examining the gestural...
behavior of speakers of different cultures is scarce. A brief review of literature on research examining pointing behavior indicates that pointing gestures have only been examined among a limited number of cultures and languages thus far. These include Guugu Yimithirr (Haviland, 1993, 1996) and Arrernte (Wilkins, 2003) in Australia, Ghanaian (Kita & Essegbey, 2001), Yoruba (Agwuele, 2014; Orie, 2009), Japanese (Kita, 2003), Lao (Enfield, 2001; Enfield, Kita, & Ruiter, 2007), and Neapolitans in Italy (Kendon & Versante, 2003) as well as the English in the British Midlands (Kendon, 2004). Within the relatively little existing research that allows us to examine cultural differences in pointing gesture production and comprehension, little can be found on the pointing gestural behavior of the Malay Malaysian speech community. To our knowledge, this is the first study, which systematically examines the pointing behavior of Malay speakers. 

This paper describes and illustrates some of the pointing gestures of the Malay speech community when giving route or wayfinding directions. In the present study, we take McNeill’s (1992) category of deictic gestures (i.e., pointing gestures) as the starting point of our investigation. Pointing is mainly realized with the hands, but may also be achieved by certain movements of the eyes, elbows, feet or lips (Kendon & Versante, 2003). The present study treats pointing as gestures “indicating an object, a location or a direction, which is discovered by projecting a straight line from the furthest point of the body part that has been extended outward into the space that extends beyond the speaker” (Kendon, 2004, p. 200). Kendon (2004, p. 200) further adds that this object or location maybe something that is visible to all participants or it may be an object or a location that exists somewhere in the real word but cannot be seen. Additional movements of the head, body or gaze may also accompany pointing gestures used in giving route directions. Specifically, this study aims to identify the variety of different forms and functions of hand pointing gestures as well as bodily actions used in route direction giving interactions of Malay speakers.

Before determining the various forms and functions of deictic gestures and associated bodily actions used by Malay speakers in giving directions, it is essential to provide some background information on the Malay speech community. Malaysia is both a multilingual and multiethnic country consisting of people from different backgrounds (Ismail & Lawrence, 2012). Malays make up 50.4% of the population while 23.7% are Chinese, 11% indigenous peoples, 7.1% Indians, and 7.8% non-Malaysians (Noor & Chan-Hoong, 2013). Differences among the various ethnic groups in communication have been attested in a number of studies (e.g., Gill, 2014; Omar, 1992). These differences arise due to differences in cultural values, language, religion and way of life (David, Ching-Hei & Mohd Don, 2002). The data discussed in the present study examines only the Malay speech community.