

# How do we communicate with gestures?

## Comparing two theories of multimodality to assess the use of gestures accompanying the preposition “around”.

Jack J. Wilson

Since Grice’s classic work on linguistic Pragmatics, it has been widely accepted that communicative behaviour does not rest on a process of coding and decoding but rather on an inferential process of intention attribution. Communicative acts rest on attributing (at least) two layered intentions: (i) an intention to communicate something and (ii) an intention to direct the comprehender to (i) (cf. Sperber and Wilson, 1995). This captures the fact that what we say is often distinct from what we mean.

However, when the focus of study is shifted to co-speech gesture, a pragmatic theory focussed on intention struggles to provide a framework for understanding communication. This is due to the fact that while gestural contributions are often communicative, their intentional status is far from certain.

Generally, there have been two distinct approaches how gestures communicate. The first argues that gestures are just one element in composite signals and that they are communicative for the same reason as any other element of behaviour is communicative—because it is taken as a sign (Clark, 1996; Enfield, 2009). The second approach states that gestures are communicative because they serve some function beyond communicating (such as helping the communicator think about space) and their communicative function is derived from this proper function (Wilson and Wharton, 2006; Wharton, 2009).

In this paper I focus utterances including the preposition “around” (e.g., “the road goes around the house”). “Around” has been referred to as path specifying and is underspecific rather than ambiguous (Atlas, 2005). For example, it is not clear whether the road forms a full circle around the house or, if we take it that it does not form a full circle, then it is not clear whether the road sits on the left or the right of the house. Such spatial language is typically underspecified in this way and therefore requires the comprehender to fill in the detail. The examples of utterances including “around” that I will present show that this detail is frequently filled in by co-speech gesture. I will argue that the presence of gesture in this context strongly suggests that it is being used communicatively and therefore provides evidence that a theory of composite signals might more efficiently capture the mechanisms involved in the production and reception of multimodal utterances.

## References

- Atlas, J. D. (2005). *Logic, meaning, and conversation: Semantical underdeterminacy, implicature, and their interface*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Clark, H. H. (1996). *Using language*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Enfield, N. J. (2009). *The anatomy of meaning: Speech, gesture, and composite utterances*. Cambridge University Press Cambridge.
- Sperber, D. and Wilson, D. (1995). *Relevance: Communication and cognition*, volume 142. Harvard University Press Cambridge, MA.
- Wharton, T. (2009). *Pragmatics and non-verbal communication*. Cambridge University Press Cambridge.
- Wilson, D. and Wharton, T. (2006). Relevance and prosody. *Journal of pragmatics*, 38(10):1559–1579.