Gesture in Sub Saharan Africa

Brookes, H.; Nyst, V.A.S.; Müller, C.; Fricke, E.; Cienki, A.; McNeill, D.

74. Gestures in the Sub-Saharan region

Abstract

Most of the studies on gesture in sub-Saharan Africa focus on documenting the forms and meanings of conventionalized gestures such as pointing, repertoires of quotable gestures and counting gestures. An important aspect of these studies, particularly work on pointing, has been to highlight how cultural an interactive norms shape gestural behavior. The role of gestures in oral-story telling and other art forms has also been a particular area of interest in the African context. In work on oral narratives, there has also been a focus on the relationship of ideophones and gestures. Studies on gestures in the African diaspora give support to other work showing the persistence of gestures over time. Many of these studies on gesture in sub-Saharan Africa highlight the conscious and often explicit importance attached to gesture and bodily conduct in many African cultures.

1. Introduction

The first comprehensive overview of studies on gestures and gesture use in Sub-Saharan Africa was published in French in 1971 by Baduel-Mathon. In her overview, Baduel-Mathon provides a bibliography and description of gestures that occur in three West African language families: the Agni-Ashanti, the Manding, and the Yoruba. Since then, there have been a number of studies published that also make an important contribution to knowledge about gestures and gestural behavior particularly in relation to pointing, quotable gestures, oral narratives, and ideophones.

2. Pointing

There have been two substantial studies on pointing practices in Sub-Saharan Africa. Kita and Essegbey (2001) analyze pointing in Ghana and Orie (2009) examines pointing among speakers of Yoruba in Nigeria. Both studies demonstrate that pointing practices are shaped by socio-cultural factors. Kita and Essegbey (2001) and Orie (2009) describe how different functions and social values are ascribed to the left and right hands and to the use of both hands. These functions and values affect how speakers use them when gesturing and pointing. Many African cultures associate the left hand with negative values and actions, and therefore there is a taboo against using it for giving, receiving, or eating (e.g. Beidelman 1961; Needham 1967; Zverev 2006). Pointing with the left

hand is taboo among Yoruba speakers in Nigeria, in Ghana and in many cultures in sub-Saharan Africa (see Kita and Essegbey 2001; Orie 2009; Wilkins 2003). Pointing with the left hand is also taboo among the Igbo, the Iyala and the Hausa (Nigeria), the Gikuyu and the Luya (Kenya), and among the Chichewa (Malawi) (Orie 2009).

Orie (2009) suggests index finger pointing is also socially circumscribed in many African cultures. In her study of the Yoruba, hand pointing is generally viewed as more polite. Orie (2009) points out that index finger pointing to people may be taboo under certain conditions because of cultural beliefs about its supernatural powers. Index finger pointing is subject to social restrictions in terms of social hierarchy relating to age and status with status more important than age (Orie 2009). Orie (2009) documents a range of different forms of pointing among the Yoruba regulated by social and occupational status and context. The Yoruba also use five different lip points with gaze as a key component. Mouth pointing is also governed by social status and age. Nose pointing is derogatory and head pointing also has restrictions in relation to status and age. Again lip pointing, head pointing, eye pointing and gaze are governed by social cultural constraints relating to age, status and context.

The only other study of head gestures in Africa that we have found is McClave's (2007) study of head movements among the Turkana who were nomadic pastoralists in northwestern Kenya. She bases her analysis on data from films made in the 1970's by anthropologists David and Judith McDougall. McClave compares Turkana head movements (Turkana belongs to the Nilo-Saharan language family) with head movements among speakers from four different languages belonging to three unrelated language families. The Turkana do not have head movements for "yes" and "no." However, similarly to speakers of Egyptian Arabic, Bulgarian, Korean, and African-American English, the Turkana have the same head movements for indicating inclusivity (lateral head sweep), to mark individual items on a list, and head orientation to refer to and locate a non-present referent in space.

3. Repertoires of conventional and quotable gestures

A number of publications contain descriptions of conventionalized and quotable gestures belonging to different cultural groups. Some of these accounts go back to the nineteenth century, such as Sibree (1887) who lists some gestures used in Madagascar. Another early account of African gestures is given in Westermann (1907) who describes gestures of the Ewe in Ghana as well as other forms of non-verbal communication, for example, conventions for marking the way or relevant spots in an area. Glauning and Huber (1904) describe gestural conventions for greeting in East Africa. In his account of the Hausa people and culture, Tremearne (1913) gives a list of 30 Hausa gestures.

After these studies, there seems to be a break in the study of gestures in the first half of the twentieth century. The publications of Baduel-Mathon (1969; 1971) signal a renewed interest in (quotable) gestures. One of the most important contributions to gesture studies in Africa is Creider's work. Creider (1977) published various gesture studies including repertoires of conventional gestures for four Kenyan languages. In addition, three publications appear on Swahili gestures and one on gestures in Central Africa (Claessen 1985; Eastman and Omar 1985; Hochegger 1978). Creider (1977) documented a total of 72 quotable gestures in East Africa among the Luo, Kipsigis, and Samburu who speak Nilotic languages and the Gusii who speak a Bantu language. The Luo, Kipsigis, and Gusii are geographically adjacent to one another. Sixty-eight percent of

the quotable gestures identified were common to all four groups. He also compared their gestures to gesture vocabularies for North America and Columbia (Saitz and Cervenka 1972). The east African groups had 24 percent and 31 percent of gestures in common with the North American and Columbian repertoires. The gestures that were common are also found among many other groups as they represent common human interactions, actions, or depictions of space and size. In addition to this work, Creider (1978) presents an analysis of the relation between intonation, tone, and gesture in Luo, followed by a cross-linguistic comparison of this relation in Luo, Kipsigis, Gusii (1986). Creider (1986) shows that, "there is a close relationship between the character of certain kinds of body movements and the intonational structure of a language" (1986: 148). He finds cross-linguistic differences in the alignment of body movements/gestures with speech depending on a) whether stress is used to mark pause groups, and b) whether stress is used to mark emphasis.

Eastman and Omar (1985) describe verbal independent gestures that are used only without speech and verbal dependent gestures that are only used with speech among Kenya coastal Swahili speakers. The latter they call verbal/visual or gestural/speech units because speech and gesture combine to create a specific meaning that separately would be meaningless. In the case of verbal independent gestures, these range from gestures that can be glossed with a sentence to gestures that are purely exclamations and have no verbal gloss or equivalent. In 1983, Omar and Morell produced a video recording of Swahili gestures demonstrating their form and use. Claessen (1985) also gives an account of the gestures of native speakers of Swahili, including a set of body-based measure gestures, in which the arm is used as a measure stick that is delimited by the other arm/hand. A similar type of gesture is mentioned for the Luo in Kenya (Creider 1977). Hochegger (1978) gives a richly illustrated repertoire of conventional gestures in Central Africa, but does not specify the language groups involved. Kirk and Burton (1976) take an experimental approach on conventional gestures, using a judged similarity test with speakers of Maasai and Kikuyu to determine whether speakers classify gestures according to their meaning or to their form. Speakers were found to assess similarity among emblems according to their verbal glosses rather than formal features. More recently, Brookes (2001, 2004, 2005, 2011) has published several articles on South African quotable gestures and their communicative functions among urban Zulu and South Sotho speakers in Johannesburg townships.

4. Counting gestures

Several studies have focused on the use of gestures for counting in various African cultures (e.g. Caprile 1995; Zaslavsky 1999). Gerdes and Cherinda (1993) describe counting among the Yao of Malawi and Mozambique, the Makonde of Mozambique, the Shambaa of Tanzania and Kenya, and the Sotho of Lesotho. Hollis (1909) cites a unique set of fourteen counting gestures among the Kenyan Nandi. Gulliver (1958) claims that speakers of Arusha Maasai use virtually the same counting gestures and so does Creider (1977) for speakers of Luo, Kipsigis and Samburu. All languages in which this set of non-iconic counting gestures is found are part of the Nilotic language family. A more recent publication is Caprile (1995), who analyzes the relation between counting gestures and the spoken numeral systems in four Central Sudanic languages as spoken in Chad. Another recent publication is Siebicke (2002), who presents an analysis of counting,

including counting gestures, in Samo, a language of Burkina Faso. Number gestures seem to occupy a special position in oral narratives in Iraqw, a Cushitic language of Tanzania. In Iraqw stories, numbers are typically not pronounced by speech, but rather by gesture. The audience then verbalizes the number, which in turn is confirmed by the storyteller (Maarten Mous, personal communication, August 30, 2013).

5. Gestures in oral narratives

There have been a number of studies of gestures and the use of the body in oral narratives (Calame-Griauel 1977; Klassen 1998; Konrad 1994; Kunene 2010; Sorin-Barreteau 1996). In Africa, oral storytelling is still a significant part of daily life and informal storytelling is saturated with gestures (Klassen 1998). Klassen (1999) has studied hand gestures, body movements, and posture in Shona storytelling in Zimbabwe. She examines the semantic relation of gesture to speech and identifies four ways in which gestures in storytelling are imitative. Gestures can reenact an action or diagram it, they can metaphorically illustrate an abstract concept, gestures can place a story and its components in the gestural space of the speaker to represent various aspects of the story, and gestures can show direction, mood, pacing and attitude including showing the reaction of one character to another. Klassen (2004) also points out that the timing of gestures corresponding with what the speaker wishes to emphasize visually provides the shape of the story. Gestures increase when the story nears its climax and may even replace speech at this point (Eastman 1992; Klassen 1999). Gestures, and particularly bodily movements, represent character and map objects and actions as well as making transparent the form and moral dimensions of a narrative.

Klassen (1999, 2004) also points out how body posture cues the type of story being told, its believability and the level of artistry of the storyteller. The storyteller's position such as sitting may be a metaphor for social relations. Body posture and movement have strong moral connotations. Changes in body position often mark the structure of the story by changing when there is a change of scenes or genres (talking to singing) in the story (Klassen 1999). Similar kinds of observations are made by Calame-Griaule (1977) in her analysis of gestures accompanying a Touareg story from Niger, as well as by Konrad (1994) in her analysis of gestures accompanying a trickster story in the Ewe language of Ghana. Other work on storytelling is that of Sorin-Barreteau (1996), who gives an overview of over 628 conventional gestures for actions for the Mofu-Gudur language of Cameroon, as used in storytelling. In addition to oral literature, gestures may also play a role in other art forms. Thus, Groß (1977) presents an analysis of gestures and body positions in the Adzogbo dance of the Ewe people in Ghana. Thompson and Nsondé (2002) look in detail at conventional gestures and body postures of the Kongo culture in central Africa, as evident in (ceremonial) face-to-face interactions, dance, martial arts and statues.

6. Ideophones and gestures

There have been several studies of ideophone and gestures (Dingemanse 2011; Klassen 1999; Kunene 1965.) Gestures that accompany ideophones function differently from other gestures in storytelling (Klassen 1999). These gestures show the quality and length of the action and are essential to understand the ideophone's precise meaning because

these are usually idiomatic and only locally understood (Klassen 1999). Klassen also points out that ideophones for body movement have gestures and depict not only the movement but the moral character of the story character. Among the South Sotho, gestures co-occur with or substitute for ideophones and may even cause a new word to be coined (Kunene 1965). Dingemanse's (2011) extensive work on ideophones in Siwu, the language of Mawu people in Ghana, found that previous claims that gestures almost always occur with ideophones too strong. He argues that discourse type plays a role in the occurrence of gestures with ideophones. Gestures are more likely to occur with ideophones in "telling". He also found that depictive gestures are more likely to occur with ideophones and be synchronized. Dingemanse (2011) suggests that the "tight coupling" of depictive gestures with ideophones are due to both being holistic depictions and two components of a single performative act.

7. Gestures in pre-colonial times: The trans-Atlantic slave trade and the diaspora

Extensive descriptions of conventional gestures do not seem to be found in publications prior to the nineteenth century. However, the use of gestures in communication in early contacts between Europeans and Africans has been mentioned in various earlier sources. Fayer (2003) reconstructs linguistic practices including the use of gestures in the Atlantic slave trade, based on data describing "sign language" in the journals of explorers, traders, travelers, missionaries, and plantation owners. The accounts of gesture use cited in this article go back as far the fifteenth century. Fayer concludes however that reliance on African interpreters largely outweighed the systematic use of gestural communication for bridging the linguistic gap between the various parties. What has become clear, however, is that African gestures have been retained and transmitted by Africans crossing the Atlantic, as evident in the analysis of gestures in African diaspora communities.

There are a number of studies describing gestures, body postures and stance taking in the African diaspora. A number of studies focus on the use and function of non-verbal communication in marking identities and framing conversations, e.g., Goodwin and Alime (2010), Kochman (1972) and Cooke (1972). Some of these studies focus on the African origin of non-verbal behavior in Africa diaspora communities. A well-known example of gestures found in various communities, both in Africa as well as in Guyana and the West Indies, are the "cut-eye" and the "suck-teeth" gestures, as described by Rickford and Rickford (1976). A detailed analysis of the use of the suck-teeth gesture in Guyana is presented in Patrick and Figueroa (2002). The study of Thompson and Nsondé (2002) mentioned above on gesture and posture in the Kongo culture actually aims at identifying similarities between the Kongo culture and African diaspora cultures in South-America.

8. Conclusion

Although we have tried to present a comprehensive overview of publications in this area, it is likely that we may have omitted studies published in languages other than English and French. Nevertheless this review shows that studying gestures in Africa gives insights into our understanding of the social, linguistic, and cognitive aspects of human gestural behavior. These studies highlight the conscious and often explicit importance attached

to gesture and bodily conduct in many African cultures. Eastman and Omar (1985), Creider (1977, 1978, 1986), and Orie (2009) give important descriptions about how people in many different African cultures have indigenous terminology to talk about gestural and other forms of non-verbal behavior. Olofson (1974) provides a detailed description of Nigerian Hausa language about facial expressions, gaze, and hand gestures, based on theatrical stage directions, as well as interviews. However, there is a dearth of studies on gestures and gestural behavior in Africa and much more needs to be done.

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Heather Brookes, Cape Town (South Africa)
Victoria Nyst, Leiden (The Netherlands)

75. Gestures in West Africa: Left hand taboo in Ghana

Abstract

Several communities in Ghana, as in many other African countries, observe a restriction on left-hand use (henceforth taboo). This paper reports on two studies carried out on left-hand taboo in Ghana. The first study was conducted with Sotaro Kita among the Anlo (Ewe) people in Keta in the Volta Region of Ghana. The second, and more recent study, was conducted among the Dwang people in Kwame Danso in the Brong Ahafo Region. The left-hand taboo occurs in three main domains, namely eating, giving and receiving, and pointing. These three domains belong to an implicational hierarchy such that people aware of giving and receiving taboo necessarily know of the eating taboo while those who know about the pointing taboo also know of the giving and receiving taboo. There are different ways to mitigate the negativity associated with the left-hand use, especially as regards giving and receiving. Furthermore, the taboo itself has given rise to a number of pointing gestures such as semi-pointing and hyper-contra-lateral pointing (cf. Kita and Essegbey 2001).

1. Introduction

Several years ago when I was an undergraduate student at the University of Ghana, I was eating rice with a spoon held in my left hand when a friend (let's call him Sam) came by. Following customary practice, I invited him to come and eat the rice from the same bowl with me. Sam picked a spoon and was about to commence eating when he noticed that I was holding mine in my left hand. He stopped and told me that he wouldn't be able to eat the food if I ate with the spoon to my left hand. A cousin also recently narrated an experience he had: he was buying a piece of cloth at a stall in the market when someone stopped by to enquire about the price of one of the cloths on