Gesture’s Role in Creating and Learning Language

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Abstract

Imagine a child who has never seen or heard any language at all. Would such a child be able to invent a language on her own? Despite what one might guess, the answer to this question is "yes". I describe children who are congenitally deaf and cannot learn the spoken language that surrounds them. In addition, they have not yet been exposed to sign language, either by their hearing parents or their oral schools. Nevertheless, the children use their hands to communicate - they gesture - and those gestures take on many of the forms and functions of language. The properties of language that we find in the deaf children’s gestures are just those properties that do not need to be handed down from generation to generation, but can be reinvented by a child de novo. They are the resilient properties of language, properties that all children, deaf or hearing, come to language-learning ready to develop.

In contrast to these deaf children who are inventing a language with their hands, hearing children are learning language from a linguistic model. But they too produce gestures. Indeed, young hearing children often use gesture to communicate before they use words. Interestingly, changes in a child’s gestures not only predate but also predict changes in the child’s early language, suggesting that gesture may be playing a role in the language-learning process. For example, gesture could influence language-learning by eliciting from adults the kinds of words and sentences that the child needs to hear in order to take the next linguistic step. Gesture thus not only reflects the language-learning stages through which a young child passes--it may play a role in language-learning itself.

Gesture is versatile in form and function. Under certain circumstances, gesture can substitute for speech, and when it does, it embodies the resilient properties of language. Under other circumstances, gesture can form a fully integrated system with speech and can predict when and how a child will learn.

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