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Possible precursors of private speech: deictic, symbolic and aesthetic self-directed gestures

Silvia Español

The signs that humans can direct at others and at themselves are not restricted to the field of language; indeed, the possibility of self-directing signs does not arise with speech. At very early stages of development, certain pre-verbal signs -gestures- can be self-directed. However, also at a very early stage there seem to appear certain non-linguistic signs that do not fit into what is normally considered a gesture, which can apparently also be self-directed. The object of this work is to outline a specific evolutionary path of the capacity to self-direct signs. Firstly, I will address pioneering gestures in development, which have elicited particular attention in my current research, such as the pointing gesture or the object recognition gesture. Then, standing on less firm ground, I will comment the possibility of self-directing other type of gestures –the “enactive symbols”- described by Rivière. Finally, on increasingly shaky ground, I will conclude by commenting on the one hand, the early emergence of signs that cannot be strictly considered as gestures, related to what some also consider a language -dance- and, on the other hand, the apparent capacity to self-direct these same gestures. My goal is to stray from the fixed path leading from gestures to words or speech and to begin to follow side paths, branches if you will, with a significantly different signing foliage.

Pointing for oneself and object recognition gestures

The fact that children, towards the end of their first year, often point to themselves without clear communicative purposes has been remarked in several investigations (Bates, 1976; Camaioni, Perucchini, Muratore & Milone, 1997; Franco, Perucchini & Butterworth, 1992; Franco & Butterworth, 1996; Butterworth, 1998; Delgado, Gómez & Sarriá, 1999). Some of these have proposed this as a precursor of private speech. Perhaps for this reason, the solipsistic or social nature of this “pointing for oneself” has caused a certain debate. In a

previous investigation (Español & Rivière, 2000) we observed that pointing for self occurs more often in situations of interpersonal contact than when the interpersonal contact is nonexistent. This is, although at this age the child can perform self-directed gestures, these are mainly produced in the presence of others. Long ago, Vygostki (1934/1993) showed Piaget's mistake in viewing child monologues, or private speech, as a non-social phenomenon. His experiments proved that private speech is closely related to the social situations in which it occurs. Similarly, according to our data, the situations that favor the communicative pointing gesture are the same that favor the pointing for self gesture, which speaks for the basic social condition of pointing for self.

Unfolding, or the ability to be at once the emitter and receiver of a single sign, begins to appear under the form of a deictic gesture, and immediately seems to continue in object recognition gestures -a preverbal mode by which the child says "I know how to use this"- . Some authors suggest that these gestures are sometimes used with the same function as pointing for self (Bates, 1979; Masur, 1990). I am not aware of any experimental studies on the social (or solipsistic) nature of self-directed recognition gestures. In the two longitudinal studies I have conducted (Español, 2001), I have observed that they are sometimes performed without any interaction between the adult and the child, but are performed more frequently in sharing situations, which would indicate a social nature. However, it is obvious that a more systematic observation is required to elucidate the issue.

Original gesture creations: the self-directed enactive gesture

As shown in Ángel Rivière's works (1984/2003, 1990), at the age of eighteen months certain specific gestures arise that he conceived as "enactive metaphors". These are original creations of the children, preverbal forms by which they manage to communicate regarding objects that are not present. It may be that these gestures are also self-directed. I say "may" because the fact is I have only observed the following self-directed enactive symbol:

Habib is 1; 6 (17) and, in a situation of natural interaction with the researcher, he has performed some enactive symbols directed at the adult: he asked me to light a candle by blowing at an unlit candle; he performed the same gesture, while smiling at looking at me,

with merely declarative purposes. Also, after I had been tracing figure-eights in the air with the flame of a lighter, he seized the unlit lighter and made the same gesture, thereby making me repeat the same action. However, a short time later Habib grabbed the candle from my hands, blew at it and moved it sideways. I responded by taking the candle from him and lighting it; but Habib, who does not seem to have directed this sign at me, grabs another candle and moves away tracing figure-eights, for himself, with the candle unlit. (A more detailed analysis is available in Español, 2001)

The child's action appears to be a self-directed statement, as if saying to himself "this is something that used to have a flame and made shiny shapes when it moved". It is true that this is a single example, which can detract from the value of the observation, but it is equally true that enactive symbols are uncommon, and moreover, self-directed gestures in general are much less frequent than their communicative counterparts.

An invitation to dance and "dancing for oneself"

The same child, at the age of nineteen months, performed an "aesthetic gesture", an abbreviated or ritualized action with a clear communicative intent related to an art form, inviting his father to dance flamenco with him:

Habib stretches back his neck in an overstated manner while he searches eye contact with his father. The father doesn't answer and the child insists performing a wavy movement (typical of the flamenco dance) with his arm. The father responds making the same movement; then the child moves alternately his feet and waits quiescent, looking at his father who answers copying him. This last dance steps get repeat.

This aesthetic gesture can only be constructed because the child knows, in fact knows a lot of, the dynamics and design of the characteristic motions of flamenco (Español & Shifres, 2003; Español, 2002, 2003 provide arguments in favor of the existence of an early sensitivity for temporal arts -music and dance-).

Habib has danced flamenco with others or in front of dancers on television in many occasions. But what I wish to point out here is that in one occasion we have observed him dancing alone, for himself, detached from the surrounding adults, television images and even from music. The quality of his movements maintain the features of flamenco and their execution is directed at himself. If dance can be considered a language, his dance can be considered a case of private speech.

But beyond this general statement, which I am not sure that I wish to make, what is most interesting is that, in view of the present description, the ability to make self-directed signs and signs directed at others seem to appear at the same time in human development, and signs that can be self-directed change as new signing modes are acquired. The universe of signs is large, and their self-direction without doubt provides grounds for reflection and psychological configuration. I am still far from being able to understand the idiosyncratic mode of these occasions for reflection, of these non-verbal modes, paradoxical cases of private speech that I believe may be the tip of the iceberg of psychological aspects that we generally overlook.

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