

Why Gesture Semantics?

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While gestures have long been studied within linguistics (e.g. Kendon 2004, McNeill 2005, Ladewig 2011), only recently have they been investigated in formal semantics. Three areas have particularly been explored: the definition of an iconic semantics (e.g. Giorgolo 2010); the integration of gestures into discourse representations (e.g. Lascarides and Stone 2009); and co-speech gesture projection, pioneered by Ebert and Ebert 2014. There is now little doubt that gestures interact in subtle and challenging ways with logical semantics. But we will argue that four additional considerations justify making gestures first class citizens of semantic studies. First, co-speech gestures are essential as a point of comparison for iconic enrichments in sign language (it is often thought that they yield comparable semantic effects, but this now seems doubtful). Second, pro-speech gestures (= gestures that replace spoken words) turn out to obey sophisticated constraints, sometimes reminiscent of sign language grammar, for instance in the areas of anaphora and plurality. Third, gestures occupy virtually all slots of the inferential typology of language, yielding entailments, presuppositions, implicatures, supplements, expressives, etc. – hence a rich source of new inferential data. Fourth, pro-speech gestures make it possible to generate new words virtually at will, and to minimally vary their informational content so as to assess how it gets productively divided among various inferential components. We will survey ongoing results that bear on these questions.

Relevant manuscripts:

Schlenker, P.: accepted with minor revisions, Iconic Pragmatics. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory*. [LingBuzz]

Schlenker, P.: 2017, Gestural Grammar. [LingBuzz]

Schlenker, P.: 2017, Gestural Semantics. [LingBuzz]