

TPrag 2011 Conference Abstract

In recent decades, a wealth of observational and empirical studies have informed our understanding of the gestural communication of great apes (many are summarised in Tomasello & Call, 2007). Interest in these gestures has been motivated by, among other things, the hypothesis that the gestural activities of early hominids are a more plausible ancestor of human language than primate vocalisations (Tomasello, 2008). However, while it has been widely recognised that ape gestures are intentional - in a way that their vocalisations are not - little consideration has been given to the appropriate intentional framework for their characterisation. While human gestures might typically be explained within a Gricean framework (Grice, 1957), since the cognition of Gricean intentions has been thought beyond the ken of non-linguistic creatures, this model has not been extended to the explanation of ape gestures. Indeed, one very prominent proponent of the gestural origins of language view has explicitly argued that ape gestures are not Gricean (Tomasello, 2008) - without offering an alternative intentional model for their characterisation. A second approach has simply ignored the intentionality of ape communication, and studied it as a 'dynamic' dance-like process of information transfer (King, 2004). Such an approach reminds us of the intricate ways in which gestures are bound up with non-communicative interactions. However, if we are interested in the cognitive processes that support communication, its intentional structure cannot be overlooked. By identifying a framework suitable for characterising the intentional structure of ape gestural communication, a lacuna in our theorising about the evolution of language could be filled.

In the proposed paper, I will argue that with only a few minor adjustments (following Neale, 1992), the Gricean framework can be used for this purpose. My argument for this claim will come in two parts. First, building on previous work (Abstract Author, submitted), I will argue that reasons for thinking Gricean intentions too demanding for the characterisation of ape gestures are largely based on intellectualised readings of what is required for their cognition. In particular, cognising Gricean intent requires neither the ability to pass a false belief test (contra Breheny, 2005), nor the ability to entertain fourth

order meta-representations (contra Sperber, 2000). Second, I will argue that there are compelling positive reasons for characterising ape gestures in terms of a Gricean intentional framework. In particular, ape gestures are produced purposively (in accordance with Grice's first clause intention); and they are produced ostensively (in accord with Grice's second clause intention; Liebal et al., 2004). Furthermore, since on all prominent accounts of the semantics of ape gestures, a speaker's message is context-bound and under-determined by the meaning of her gesture (Tomasello, 2008; Cartmill & Byrne, 2010), comprehending ape gestures requires inferring a speaker's communicative intention.

I will suggest that while human communicative acts may differ from ape gestures in a number of cognitively important ways - not least, their compositional structure; the complexity of their messages; and the motives with which they are produced - these differences may be irrelevant to the characterisation of their intentional structure. Finally, I will consider the sorts of empirical evidence that would settle the question of whether ape gestures are genuinely Gricean (and which my colleagues and I hope to test).

References

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