Communication involves a combination of language and gestures, acting in concert (Kita & Özyürek, 2003; Tomasello, 2003). Deictic communication refers to the combination of words and gestures used for “pointing” to salient elements in space and discourse. Deictic communication is vital in communication, as it allows speakers to use language and gesture to direct the attention of their interlocutor and thus in an efficient manner ensure common ground during discourse.

The primary words used for spatial deictic communication are demonstratives – words including this/that/here/there in English. Demonstratives can be found across all languages, are among the highest frequency terms within a language (for English see e.g. Leech, et al., 2001), and philologically emerge as the earliest traceable words in languages (Diessel, 1999, 2006). In some languages it is obligatory to use a deictic gesture together with a spatial demonstrative (e.g. Kilivila, see Senft, 2004).

Demonstratives are among the first words all children acquire (Clark, 2009) and are more closely associated with deictic gestures than other linguistic items (Diessel, 2006). Use of deictic gestures predicts language acquisition (Iverson & Goldin-Meadow, 2005), underlining the importance of studying deictic communication when trying to understand linguistic development.

The study of deictic communication is paradigmatic for the study of communication, both because it is omnipresent, but also because it points to how language hinges on other cognitive systems (e.g. attention, working memory and spatial cognition - see Wallentin, et al., 2008) and context. Deictic communication thus highlights that language is a tool for interacting minds (Tylén, et al., 2010) rather than a self-dependent domain specific modular system (Coltheart, 1999). Yet empirical research on deictic communication and its relation to cognition is only starting to emerge (Coventry, et al., 2014; Gudde, et al., 2016). This theme session will present some of these emerging results from cross-disciplinary research on deictic communication and cognition, ranging from developmental studies, studies of sign-language, studies of relations between deixis and semantics and brain imaging studies. The researchers are all part of the DComm project (dcomm.eu), funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Sklodowska-Curie Actions grant agreement No 676063.
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