

Emmanuel Dupoux sends a question to our community, on behalf of a team of psychologists studying pointing. The team includes Emmanuel himself, Laurent Cleret de Lagavant, Charlotte Jacquemot and Anne-Catherine Bachoud-Levi.



Pointing is a communicative gesture that enables one to attract the attention of a conspecific on a particular object. Communicative pointing is observed in all human cultures and acquired by infants before language onset. Pointing can be selectively impaired in neuropsychological patients: in heterotopagnosia, patients are grossly impaired in pointing towards humans. Typically, heterotopagnosic patients show a humanity/communicative gradient effect: their pointing performance gradually decrease as the target becomes closer to a real communicative human being (schematic drawings of humans, photographs of a person, dolls, real persons pretending to be a doll and real persons). Interestingly, in a task that is not inherently social like grasping, these patients perform flawlessly on all target types.

This selective impairment of pointing, that gets worse in communicative situations where the target is human, might (we suspect) have a cultural counterpart. In the culture where we have been raised, it is, as they say, "rude to point" at another human. Anthropologists have documented in great richness a variety of taboos associated to pointing in general, but it is still unclear whether these taboos have something special to do with the action of pointing at someone. This is where we could benefit from the unique expertise of anthropologists.

This raises two broad questions for the cognition and culture community.

- Is human pointing avoidance uniform across cultures? Could anyone point to cross-cultural studies, or ask their informants about what are the pointing taboos in their cultures?

- Could it be that pointing avoidance is linked to the fact that in a communicative situation, the target of pointing is reduced to the status of an object, and it may be considered inappropriate or rude to reduce, even implicitly, humans to mere objects? Or is pointing avoidance linked to embarrassment or fear to being brought into the focus of attention?

What do ICCI anthropologists think of these issues? Feel free to comment!

Some references

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