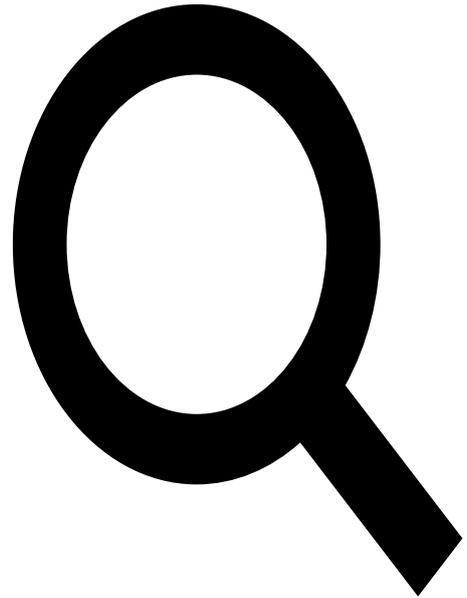


(This was originally posted as a comment but it seem to us so interesting and relevant that we have asked Olivier Le Guen to revise it into a blog post)



In a [recent post](#), Emmanuel Dupoux asked:

“- 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?”

I work with Yucatec Maya speakers in Quintana Roo (Mexico) among whom here is a term for pointing, *túuch'ub* from the verb *tuch'* 'raise over (one's hand).' There pointing to people is unproblematic. I don't think the considerations Emmanuel Dupoux mentioned are involved. Two factors are relevant here, as far as I can tell: (1) conception of space and place/person reference and (2) linguistic features of the pronominal system in Yucatec Maya.

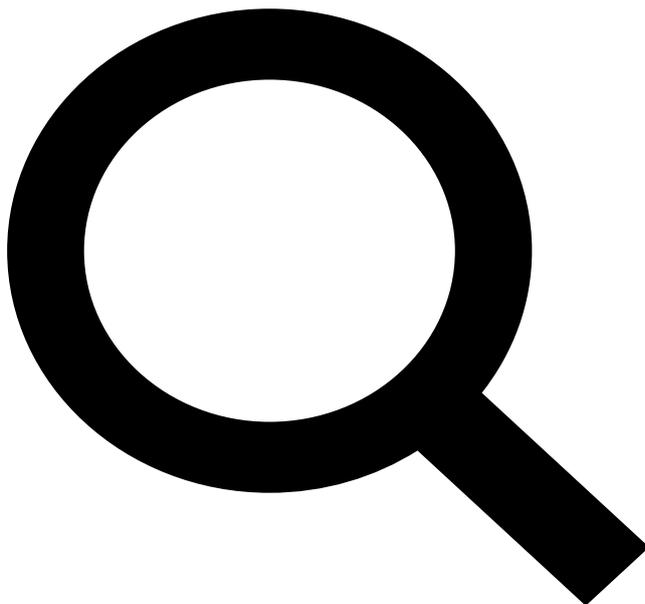
Why Yucatec Maya point at people

(1) *Conception of space*: Yucatec Maya use preferentially a geocentric frame of reference (Levinson 2003, Le Guen, in press). This means that they do not encode spatial relationship in terms of their point of view on a scene (saying, for instance, "the cup is to the left of the bottle") but instead in terms of extrinsic features of the environment (e.g. "the cup is east of the bottle"). This type of strategy has a consequence in term of pointing: people tend to point accurately to actual places or referents. Pointing accurately in term of angular information from one's body is not, however, part of the geocentric system, only a consequence of it. That is, geocentric speakers tend to not use abstract pointing (i.e. pointing in the air to refer to abstract places or to past or future time) (McNeill et al. 1993). No matter the distance of the target (if it is close and directly visible or several kilometers away), the speaker is always performing her pointing accurately with respect to the position of the target. During my fieldwork experience in the village, I have often been asked to point to my home

place (France). My Maya interlocutors explicitly wanted to know the correct orientation of France for future conversation. They wanted to be able to point towards it in case they mention this place and, conversely, to understand a potential gestural reference to this target produced by me. Since people point accurately to places and since they also use place reference as person reference (Hanks 2007), it is quite common to metonymically point to people's places to refer to them. Getting from pointing to people's places to pointing at actual people is not a big communicative jump. But this is not the whole story.

(2) The pronominal system: In the absence of linguistic genders, plural forms being optional, the third person pronoun, *le'ti'*, can mean in natural interactions 'him, her, it' or their plural counterparts (sometimes even nominal deictic can be used for people, e.g. *le'la'*, 'this (one)'). In multiparty conversation, or when people make reference to various non-present or present persons, the use of the pronoun is sometimes not enough to disambiguate who is the actual addressee and who is the referent. Obviously names and nicknames can be used, but, as everywhere, second or third mentions are commonly made by means of anaphoric pronouns in natural conversation.

(3) There is no cultural rule against pointing at people in general. The picture is an example of a woman pointing to me (OLG) with a knife while asking a question. Note that in this case the referent is unambiguous: second person is used with visual orientation to me.



Questioning Dupoux's question

I'm not convinced that Dupoux's questions are asked in the most efficient way. Cross-cultural investigation centered on a narrowly focused theme defined beforehand often turns out to be unproductive and can lead to some confusion in the description of the phenomenon. Moreover, asking people "*what are the pointing taboos in their cultures,*" as suggested by Dupoux, should only be one aspect of an investigation. People's representations of their own behavior is usually not really accurate. This has been shown, for example, in numerous studies in developmental psychology: parents, for example, do not necessarily have an accurate representation ('ethnotheory') of their children's behavior (or their own).

Regarding pointing, consider Kita and Essegbey's studies on pointing taboos in Ghana (Kita and

Essegbey, 2001). While they show that there is a norm: “pointing with the left hand is not appropriate,” people nevertheless perform such left-hand pointing. Pointing is, indeed, a communicative act and should be studied as such. For this, one’s investigation tools should include not only interviews but also video recording of people’s actual behavior. Conversational Analysis has developed some specific and fine-grained way of looking at natural interactions (see Enfield et al. 2007a on how to build a corpus).

In other words, asking people around will not be enough and may not give you a proper understanding about what is going on in the community. Using actual recording of interactions will provide you with a database that can be used, for instance, to count the number of pointing occurrences. It would also allow distinguishing the various kind of existing pointing (see Enfield et al. 2007b on form and meaning of pointing to places).

- Dupoux asks, “*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?*” Here too, one should be careful not to confuse taboos and appropriateness. Pointing at people is not taboo in the western world. Imagine a group of investment bankers getting in a bar or being at their annual formal meeting. One of the participants stands up and says: “We just signed a huge contract and made a lot of money thanks to ‘this guy’ [done with a pointing to the person in question]”. In this case, you don’t want to say that the person is reduced to object status. Indeed, the person is brought to attention — but he or she cannot do anything about it. You cannot control other people’s behavior (actually you can, during socialization, but if this occurs among adults and it is not sanctioned, it is therefore a potential and usable communicative act, as in our investments banker’ case). Probably no one among the participants would think this gesture rude. Now, children’s pointing to “weird people” (definition will vary depending on the cultural setting) in the street is not of the same type. What differentiates these two cases has little to do with taboo. It has more to do with appropriateness. The same consideration applies to addressing strangers in the street: while it is tolerable in the USA, it is much more problematic in Paris (France). Tia and Michel actually addressed this issue in their examples.

I believe Dupoux raised a very interesting and important issue that should be investigated with great care. Data from actual interactions may be the key to evaluate the content and describe the use of pointing to person.

Some useful references:

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