

Embodied and Situated Cognition: from Phenomenology to Neuroscience and Artificial Intelligence

GESTURES IN THE EVOLUTION OF LANGUAGE. COMMENTS ON D. HUTTO'S AND J. ZLATEV'S THEORIES OF LANGUAGE ORIGIN

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Could hominids have used gestures on their "way" to language? Such a possibility is absent from most theorizing and speculation about the evolution of language. Often the possibility of an intervening stage of gestural communication is simply overlooked, or otherwise the scenario of a uniform evolution of language in the vocal-auditory channel is considered a more intuitive and parsimonious alternative: a kind of natural null hypothesis. In contrast to such a line of thinking, I shall argue for the necessity of a transitional gestural stage in the evolutionary emergence of language. The substantiation for my claims derives mostly from the cognitive difficulty of conventional signs, a problem that is significantly helped in the gestural mode.

In fitting my proposal into a larger-scale evolutionary framework, I follow the ideas laid out by Zlatev et al (2005) and Hutto (2007). In particular, I subscribe to ontogenetic ritualisation and mimetic intersubjectivity as the early bootstrapping mechanisms for, respectively, the conventional sign and theory of mind that are more parsimonious in terms of assumed cognitive complexity.

The accounts mentioned above, however, are not comprehensive, i.e. are incomplete in at least one major respect, namely, the original proto-cooperative motivation in hominids. From the evolutionary point of view, the intentional transmission of honest information is a highly unexpected phenomenon that requires explanation. I suggest that cooperative signaling might have been bootstrapped by means of kin selection on sibling groups or other kin groups.