

Why you'd better never have to ask the way when visiting the Northern Territory in Australia

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The way that different languages convey information has long fascinated linguists, anthropologists, and sociologists alike. Murrinhpatha, the lingua franca spoken by the majority of Aboriginal people in the Moyle and Fitzmaurice rivers region of Australia's Northern Territory has many interesting features, with the absence of verbal abstract directions a prominent one among them. And if a language doesn't have terms to denote specific space concept, how can speakers communicate the direction of one location with respect to another?

A new paper published in *Open Linguistics* investigates directional pointing and demonstrative usage in an ecologically valid direction-giving task. As co-speech gesture is normally thought of as 'extra-linguistic', the necessity of pointing for direction-giving in Murrinhpatha calls for a conception of language that incorporates the visual/corporal modality.

Rather than using abstract directionals, speakers of Murrinhpatha make reference to locations of interest using named landmarks, demonstratives and pointing. And because pointing is necessary for direction giving, people of the region point a great deal. Certain demonstratives (e.g., kanyi, 'this'/'here') are quite likely to occur with points, whereas others don't. The choices speakers make about which demonstrative to select, and whether or not to point, is influenced by whether the current speaker is soliciting information about a location, or providing information only.

Both demonstrative selection (e.g., this way vs. that way) and the likelihood that directional pointing will occur are closely tied to the sequential organization of talk, and depend on the current speaker's knowledge about the relevant location relative to their addressee's knowledge about that location.

This is the world's first methodologically entirely innovative study to investigate the relationships between pointing, demonstrative use, and the sequential structure of social interaction. Murrinhpatha speakers use place names and pointing to convey spatial directions that can't be otherwise expressed through abstract means. Points are most likely to occur with proximal demonstratives (this X, here) and least likely to occur with anaphoric demonstratives (that X previously mentioned). Irrespective of demonstrative type, points are more likely to be used when information is being solicited than when it is being provided.

In non-signed languages, pointing is normally relegated to co-speech gesture; that is, as a helpful addition to language proper. A small number of researchers have argued that points and certain other gestures are sufficiently language-like as to be brought in to the larger language faculty. The present authors call for a broader conception of language that subsumes gesture.

More information: Joe Blythe et al, Pointing out directions in Murrinhpatha, *Open Linguistics* (2016). [DOI: 10.1515/opli-2016-0007](https://doi.org/10.1515/opli-2016-0007)

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