1. Introduction

We present an ongoing international project, From Pantomime to Language (PANTOLANG), aiming to develop a comprehensive, empirically grounded theory of the evolution of human language and the human mind, relying on the new paradigm of cognitive semiotics, which combines methods and concepts from the humanities and the sciences (Zlatev, 2015; Zlatev, et al. 2016).
between primary forms such as emotional empathy which were prerequisites for the emergence of pantomime, and secondary forms of intersubjectivity which evolved along with it, such as the following four features of human interactivity: alternation of turns, synchrony, conditional relevance and role-reversal (Sacks & Schegloff, 1973; Wacewicz & Zywiczynski, in press).

The second factor is that of narrativity, implying temporal and causal coherence between events, on the one hand, and their representations (narrations) on the other. As with intersubjectivity, we hold that there were pre-communicative aspects of narrativity, allowing ancient hominins to perceive, understand and remember event-sequences or episodes, and assist them in navigation (Ferretti et al., 2016, 2017). But it is only pantomime that made externalization possible, so that hominins were first able to re-enact, and thus embody narrative structures in a publicly accessible manner. Present-day elaborated versions of such embodied narratives may be seen in the performances of traditional societies (e.g. Green, 2014).

The third factor is cross-modality, understood as the interaction between different sensory channels (rather than “communicative modes”). While pantomime was primarily perceived visually, it was also “felt” via the cross-modal mapping between vision and proprioception (Zlatev, 2014). While vocalizations are unlikely as the initial channel for referential meaning (Zlatev et al. 2017), they would have become increasingly important over a prolonged period of time – but without ever fully displacing pantomime, which appears in reduced form as iconic gestures in spontaneous language use. This distinguishes our approach from those who assume that language was “multimodal” from the onset (e.g. McNeill, 2012).

3. Methods

Following the principle of methodological triangulation of cognitive semiotics, combining philosophy, (participant) observation and experiments, we (a) use phenomenology and conceptual analysis to propose clear definitions of central concepts (e.g. Zlatev, 2015), (b) study polysemiotic narratives in traditional societies, such as Paamese “sand drawings” in Vanuatu, where pantomime, speech and other semiotic systems such as depiction combine (Devylder, 2014), and (c) adapt experimental semiotics paradigms (Galantucci & Garrod, 2011) to study the communicative effectiveness of pantomime across different cultures, and its conventionalization and communicative “streamlining” through horizontal (Fay et al, 2010) and vertical (Kirby et al., 2014) transmission.
References


