

Multimodal pragmatics: language and the body in interaction

Judith Holler

Donders Institute for Brain, Cognition & Behaviour Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics

Abstract

The natural home of human language is face-to-face dialogue. In such an environment language is multimodal, meaning we use words as well as a host of visual articulators and signals. In this talk, I will present a series of studies that show that the body plays a core role in the semantics and pragmatics of dialogue. Not only do bodily signals carry important semantic information, but they are also linked to communicative intentions and the perception thereof, and they significantly contribute to the coordination of minds in dialogue by facilitating mutual understanding through the processes of grounding and repair. I will attempt to demonstrate that in order to appreciate the full potential of the body in this domain we need to consider manual and non-manual signals (even the most subtle ones), speakers and addressees, and the conversational embedding of multimodal communicative acts. Trying to understand the role of both words and the body in dialogue may allow us to go further in discovering why the human communication system has evolved as the multimodal system that it is.