

**Please cite as:**

Wilkins, D., Kita, S., & Enfield, N. J. (2007). 'Ethnography of pointing' - field worker's guide. In A. Majid (Ed.), *Field Manual Volume 10* (pp. 89-95). Nijmegen: Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics. doi:[10.17617/2.492922](https://doi.org/10.17617/2.492922).

---

**REGULATIONS ON USE**

**Stephen C. Levinson and Asifa Majid**

This website and the materials herewith supplied have been developed by members of the Language and Cognition Department of the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (formerly the Cognitive Anthropology Research Group). In a number of cases materials were designed in collaboration with staff from other MPI departments.

**Proper citation and attribution**

Any use of the materials should be acknowledged in publications, presentations and other public materials. Entries have been developed by different individuals. Please cite authors as indicated on the webpage and front page of the pdf entry. Use of associated stimuli should also be cited by acknowledging the field manual entry. Intellectual property rights are hereby asserted.

**Creative Commons license**

This material is provided under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike license (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0). This means you are free to share (copy, redistribute) the material in any medium or format, and you are free to adapt (remix, transform, build upon) the material, under the following terms: you must give appropriate credit in the form of a citation to the original material; you may not use the material for commercial purposes; and if you adapt the material, you must distribute your contribution under the same license as the original.

**Background**

The field manuals were originally intended as working documents for internal use only. They were supplemented by verbal instructions and additional guidelines in many cases. If you have questions about using the materials, or comments on the viability in various field situations, feel free to get in touch with the authors.

**Contact**

Email us via [library@mpi.nl](mailto:library@mpi.nl)

Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics

P.O. Box 310, 6500 AH, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

## “ETHNOGRAPHY OF POINTING” – FIELD WORKER’S GUIDE<sup>11</sup>

David Wilkins, Sotaro Kita & N. J. Enfield

<b>Project:</b>	Multimodal Interaction
<b>Task:</b>	Description based on video recording and observation
<b>Goal of task:</b>	Collect empirical descriptions of pointing practices in different cultural settings

### Background

Pointing gestures are recognised to be a primary manifestation of human social cognition and communicative capacity (Kita 2003):

- The pointing gesture is the first type of gesture acquired by children (McNeill 1992).
- Children use pointing gestures to communicate well before they can talk (e.g., to inform, help, direct attention; Liskowski 2006).
- It has been recently argued that the ability to use pointing gestures is a crucial component of the uniquely human capacity for ‘shared intentionality’, and is a necessary prerequisite to the acquisition of language (Tomasello et al. 2005, Tomasello 2006).

Given that these claims about pointing relate to general human cognitive propensities, it is of special interest to us that practices of using pointing gestures are reported to show cultural variation, in both form and function – a single pointing form, say index-finger pointing, may vary cross-culturally in meaning when we consider its functional division of labor with other pointing forms in each culture (where such systems may include flat hand point, thumb point, lip point, or others; see Haviland 1993, 2000, Sherzer 1973, Enfield 2001, Kita & Essegbey 2001, and the papers by Goodwin, Kita, Haviland, & Wilkins in Kita 2003). Another way in which pointing practice may be culturally influenced is by prohibitions or avoidance on certain forms of pointing (Kita & Essegbey 2001). The ethnography based on this questionnaire will be a starting point for such documentation.

No hypothesis of uniformity of pointing form and function across cultures has been confirmed by broad empirical observation. For example, some researchers have conjectured that index finger pointing is universal, postulating biological reasons why it may be so. But there are virtually no descriptions of pointing *as a system* of practice in cultures, which means that we can neither verify nor refute cross-cultural claims. It is especially important to have empirical data on cultures in which index finger pointing is claimed to be absent or play only a minor role. In such cultures, other forms of pointing (e.g., lip-pointing, open hand pointing, middle finger pointing) may be dominant. It would be important to know in such cases whether index finger pointing is subject to avoidance or taboo and is thus suppressed, or whether index finger pointing simply does not enter into the gestural repertoire of adults. Furthermore, it would be good to document different functions index-finger pointing may have cross-culturally.

---

<sup>11</sup> This entry is extensively revised and updated by Enfield in 2007, based on previous versions, published in field manuals 1999 (Version 1, by Wilkins & Kita), 2001 (Version 2, by Wilkins, Kita & Enfield), and 2003 (Version 3, revised and updated by Enfield).

An important reason why we cannot regard formally similar types of pointing as identical across communities (e.g. index-finger pointing) is that such gestures have a place within a *system* of pointing gesture possibilities, where the contrasts of seemingly generic forms with other available options for pointing will affect local interpretation (Wilkins 2003). It is possible to think of there being a kind of ‘grammar of pointing’.

In addition, it is important to know whether such systems of pointing practices among adults are different or modified when children are involved – e.g. in adults’ pointing gestures for child addressees, or pointing gestures performed by children. (Cf. Liszkowski and Brown entry in this manual.)

### **Definition of pointing**

Pointing is here broadly defined as “a communicative bodily movement which projects a vector whose direction is determined, in the context, by the conceived spatial location, relative to the person performing the gesture, of a place or thing relevant to the current utterance” (Enfield et al. 2007). Pointing so defined may be done with the head, the lips, the eyes, the arm, the hand, the finger, the foot, a tool, etc. In the prototypical case, the vector defined by the body movement functions to direct an addressee’s attention towards a referent.

### **Observational method**

It is ideal to base these observations on extensive video recording of naturalistic interaction (cf. guide for recording, and MMI entry, this manual).<sup>12</sup> Note that in order to collect video recording of data for examining pointing, one may have to target this directly rather than relying exclusively on data recorded for a conversational corpus (see MMI entry for this volume). For example, video-recordings of outdoor interactions such as work activities will yield more pointing gestures – while this sort of data might not be ideal for looking at conversation (e.g. due to noise or diffuse nature of the interaction) it will provide valuable data on pointing.

Your observations will be most reliable if you stick to cases where people are free to use any body part to point. That is, while it is interesting to know how a person points while both hands are occupied, we also need to know whether they would have used some other pointing form if their hands had not been occupied. (Lip pointing is often claimed to be an alternative to finger pointing in situations where one’s hands are full; but observation quickly reveals that people finger point when their hands are full, and they lip point when their hands are free.) Similarly, in hand pointing, the precise form of the pointing hand can be compromised if the person is holding something in their hand (like a cigar or a flask of Johnnie Walker Red Label).

It is not always clear whether a gestural form is a pointing indication. To be most confident that you are getting deictic referential gestures, stick initially to the observation of adult pointing to visible targets which causes attention shift of the interlocutor (usually where the location or identity of something is the focus of the utterance, for instance in answering a ‘where?’ or ‘which one?’ question; see Enfield et al. 2007). Similarly, it is often easy to see

---

<sup>12</sup> It is possible to answer the many questions in this guide by direct observation (i.e., without any video recording), but in that case you will need to finely hone your observational and note-taking skills! Experience in gesture research shows that repeated viewing (as made possible by video) reveals a great deal of previously unnoticed detail.

that pointing is going on when a speaker is describing something and contrastively moving from one detail to another (e.g., *This one<sub>POINTING</sub> cost ten dollars, this one<sub>POINTING</sub> cost 15*). Once you become more confident about the sorts of forms you are looking for, you can then track whether these forms are only used for visually available objects or not, and can determine whether there is an even broader range of functions for the forms.

Become aware of other cultural factors that may have an effect on the use of pointing. For instance, does the community you work with use an auxiliary sign language? Is there any form of diagramming or teaching with pictures, such that people regularly point out features of other symbolic entities? Are there times when speaking is not allowed, such that interaction may be moderated by gesture?

Observe peoples' reactions to your own pointing behaviour. Pay attention when people correct you, and don't hesitate to elicit instruction from them as to how they think you should or should not behave.

Watch out for any sign of people instructing their children with respect to pointing behaviour. This is more likely to be proscriptive (e.g., "don't point with your foot"). It would be very interesting to document "PREscriptive" instruction of the appropriate pointing form (e.g., hand shape, direction) for a given context. (See Liszkowski & Brown entry, this manual.)

Things to look out for

*Pointing Shapes:*

Is there:

- Lip pointing  
Please observe the conventional form in as much detail as possible – is only the upper lip protruded, lower lip protruded, both lips protruded? Are the lips apart or together? Note that lip pointing usually also involves head/chin move, eyes, and other gestures.
- Head pointing
- Eye pointing
- Index finger pointing
- Middle finger pointing
- Little finger pointing
- Ring finger pointing (never before reported)
- Flat hand pointing (open hand, fingers together) [palm up, palm side, palm down]
- Spread hand pointing (open hand, fingers spread) [palm up, palm side, palm down]
- Thumb pointing
- Other

Please describe details of pointing forms (especially unusual ones) as best you can. Note that terms such as 'lip point', "head point", 'eye point' are vague, and they can be performed in different ways (and are usually combined). Be as specific as possible about exactly what you observe.

### *Handedness*

Is there any evidence of primary use of one hand for manual pointing? (Is this the person's dominant hand? Is this the culturally-constrained hand? See Kita & Essegbey 2001 on Ewe speakers' constraint against pointing with the left hand.)

Can any of the manual pointing shapes be used with both hands at the same time? What is the effect of the two-handed version?

Is it common to point ipsilaterally (not crossing the centre line of the body, e.g., pointing to the right with the right hand, and to the left with the left hand) and contralaterally (crossing the centre line of the body, e.g., to the right with the left hand)? In what context do you find each type?

### *Pointing Space:*

How do people point to the region behind themselves? Do they "thumb point" to back and/or side regions, as opposed to regions in front? Are they also observed to finger point to behind?

Are there formal differences between pointing to something close by (or touching while pointing) and pointing to an object at a distance? For example, American English speakers have been observed to use middle-finger and little-finger pointing in the context of very close pointing or pointing with touching (e.g., pointing to a transparency sitting on an overhead projector during a presentation), but not for distal pointing (e.g., pointing to the distally projected image from the transparency on the wall). Lao speakers also have been observed to use little-finger and middle-finger in touch pointing.


### *Use of "Pointing tools"*

Do people regularly pick up or use other objects for pointing: stick, grass, cane, etc.?

Is there any evidence that this is a dedicated pointer (for the time of use) rather than something that happens to be in the hand? For instance, a pointer may be shifted from one hand to another to make a pointing gesture.

Do people throw or drop things in order to indicate the object or place that is the target of throwing or dropping? For example, Enfield videotaped a Lao chicken farmer who dropped handfuls of grain onto a chicken, saying "this one", using the falling grain to single it out from the group.

### *Objects indicated and semantic distinctions*

What sorts of objects have you observed people pointing to? Is there any variation in form of the pointing gesture correlating with variation in form of the referent (location, area, solid individuated entities, liquid, etc.)? For example, we have observed pointing using a '5 hand' shape (fingers splayed out like this: ) when referring to a referent which is spatially distributed (cf. Kendon & Versante 2003).

### *Functions of Pointing forms*

Does hand shape differ, say, between pointing at a person, pointing at an animal and pointing at an inanimate object?

Can you see a distinction in form when a single object is indicated, versus multiple objects being indicated?

If you find more than one pointing form in common use, can you identify semantic distinctions which relate to each form?

Can you observe different pointing forms for direct ostension vs. deferred ostension? In direct ostension, the physical target of the pointing gesture is the intended referent (e.g., pointing to a house to indicate the house). In deferred ostension, the physical target of the pointing gesture is not the intended referent, but is associatively related to the referent (e.g., pointing to a house when referring to the *owner of the house*, or to an empty chair when referring to someone who was just sitting there).

How do people indicate 'here' (i.e., 'where we are now'). Note that 'here' could have different interpretations: 'here, where we are standing', 'here, in this village' 'here, in this house', 'here in this country', etc.

#### *Politeness distinctions in gesture morphology*

Are there any "polite" hand shapes? (E.g., a flat hand pointing is "addressee honorific" in Japan.) Does type and or frequency of pointing vary with formality of a situation?

Are there ways of pointing "secretly" which are distinct from overt pointing?

Do people suppress gesture for politeness or taboo reasons? How can you tell that certain gestures are suppressed? Under what circumstances do people nevertheless make impolite or taboo-defying gestures? (See also sub-section "Other meta-knowledge", below.)

#### *Estimation of frequency (in daily life)*

What hand shapes, pointing spaces, handedness are most commonly observed?

Impressionistically, how much/how often do people point and make other gestures? (This can be determined by observing a continuous stretch of conversation – live or on video – and noting the number of pointing gestures which occur over a specified period of time.)

### **Language and Pointing**

Is there any evidence of linguistic items that require an accompanying pointing gesture? (E.g., a demonstrative like 'this', an ostensive utterance like 'yay big', a presentational like 'voila', etc.)

For any linguistic items that you believe require an accompanying pointing gesture, is the form of the pointing gesture constrained to a certain type or form, or can any of the available types and forms meet the requirement? In other words, is there a highly conventional relation between word and pointing form, or is this only a loose general relation?

*Language about pointing and gesturing in general (Local categories and taxonomy)* These are often best identified and recorded by showing people videos, or demonstrating examples, of the relevant acts you want them to discuss.

Is there a word for "pointing" in general? Does it refer specifically to pointing with the hand? Pointing with parts of the body? Is it specifically related to human communication? For example, can a weathervane or crooked tree or stick or bird "point"? Does it also cover more abstract situations (e.g. all the evidence "points" to one conclusion)?

Are there words or phrases for particular types of pointing or gestural reference you have observed? (See Wilkins 2003:209 for a native Arrernte taxonomy of pointing forms.)

Is there a common way of talking about gesturing more generally?

What is the verb to refer to pointing? Can verbs of saying be used? (e.g., she is “saying”, ‘it’s this way’.)

What are the names of fingers? Do any of the names include the morpheme “to point”? (Cf. e.g., in Lao, *sii4* ‘to point’, *niv4 sii4* ‘pointing finger’ = index finger; Karì *cadoojq* ‘to point’, *kudoojq* ‘digit, finger/toe’.)

#### *Other meta-knowledge*

Here we are interested in a group’s own overtly articulated beliefs and understandings concerning pointing.

Are there taboos over pointing forms?

- handedness? e.g. it is rude to point with the left hand (Ghana)
- handshape? e.g. it is rude to make a “middle finger” point (U.S.)
- pointer? e.g. it is rude to point with chopsticks while eating (Japan),
- part of the body? e.g. it is rude to point with the foot (Laos)

Are there taboos against pointing to a particular object (e.g., in Laos it is rude to point at a person’s head; one should not point at a rainbow for fear of getting a bent finger as a result – the taboo against pointing at rainbows is reported in other cultures as well).

Are there taboos over pointing in or to certain places?

Is it considered impolite to point at people?

Is it considered impolite to point in the company of certain people?

Can people articulate specific politeness conventions concerning pointing?

Are there specific sayings which refer to pointing?

Can people talk about ways in which they learned to point, ways in which they teach pointing, or ways they teach not to point?

Are pointing taboos actually followed or merely stated as rules? Is there a discrepancy between what people say and what people actually do? (E.g. in Laos it is said to be rude to point at people, but departures are common and do not usually attract sanction; however, the prohibition against pointing with the feet is closely adhered to and departures are quickly and forcefully sanctioned.) Is there a systematicity in when people make taboo-defying gestures?

#### **Related gestures**

For the purposes of internal comparison of deictic gesture behaviour, it could be useful to observe other standard gesturing behaviours and see how these compare with pointing. For example, what gestures have you observed for beckoning a person to come or telling a person to leave or go off in a certain direction? Are there particular gestures of greeting or leave-taking (bowing, waving, nodding, etc.)? In indicating that a person should move from one place to another, how is that accomplished?

#### **Purpose of this guide**

The primary purpose of this guide is to give researchers a set of guiding questions for empirical descriptions of pointing conventions within the communities where they work. Even linguists who have spent years in a community are often unable to answer with certainty the

most basic questions concerning the use of deictic referential gestures in that community. On the basis of this questionnaire, you should be able to write a relatively confident description (a few pages long) concerning pointing conventions within the community that you work with. (Of course, such a description will include normal caveats about what is not known.) This should enable us to gain a clearer cross-cultural picture of pointing forms, pointing use, pointing frequency and pointing beliefs.

### **Outcome**

Collect empirical descriptions of pointing practices in different cultural settings with the aim of publishing the results for audiences in developmental psychology, gesture studies, conversation analysis, and communication. Enfield plans to convene a collection of such descriptions, to be published as a volume.

### **References**

- Enfield, N. J. (2001). 'Lip-pointing' - A discussion of form and function with reference to data from Laos. *Gesture*, 1, 185-212.
- Enfield, N. J., Kita, S. and de Ruiter, J.P. (2007). Primary and secondary pragmatic functions of pointing gestures. *Journal of Pragmatics*.
- Goodwin, C. (2003). Pointing as situated practice. In S. Kita (Ed.), *Pointing: Where Language, Cognition, and Culture Meet*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Haviland, J. (1993). Anchoring, iconicity, and orientation in Guugu Yimithirr pointing gestures. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 3, 3-45.
- Haviland, J.B. (2000). Pointing, gesture spaces, and mental maps. In: D. McNeill (Ed.), *Language and Gesture* (pp. 13-46). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Haviland, J. (2003). How to point in Zinacantan. In S. Kita (Ed.), *Pointing: Where Language, Cognition, and Culture Meet*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Kendon, A. & Versante, L. (2003). Pointing by hand in "Neapolitan". In Kita (ed.) 2003.
- Kita, Sotaro & Essegbey, J. (2001). Pointing left in Ghana: How a taboo on the use of the left hand influences gestural practice. *Gesture*, 1, 73-94.
- Kita, S. (2003). Interplay of gaze, hand, torso orientation, and language in pointing. In S. Kita (Ed.), *Pointing: Where Language, Cognition, and Culture Meet*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Kita, S. (2003). *Pointing: Where Language, Cognition, and Culture Meet*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Liszkowski, U. (2006). Infant pointing at twelve months: communicative goals, motives, and social-cognitive abilities. In: N. J. Enfield and S. C. Levinson (Eds.), *Roots of Human Sociality* (pp. 153-178). London: Berg.
- Sherzer, J. (1973). Verbal and nonverbal deixis: the pointed lip gesture among the San Blas Cuna. *Language in Society*, 2, 117-131.
- Tomasello, M. (2006). Why don't apes point? In: N. J. Enfield and S. C. Levinson (Eds.), *Roots of Human Sociality* (pp. 506-524). London: Berg.
- Tomasello, M., Carpenter, M., Call, J., Behne, T. & Moll, H. (2005). Understanding and sharing intentions: The origins of cultural cognition. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 28, 664-670.
- Wilkins, D. P. (2003). Why pointing with the index finger is not a universal (in socio-cultural and semiotic terms). In S. Kita (Ed.), *Pointing: Where Language, Cognition, and Culture Meet*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum.