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Introduction

Gestural communication in nonhuman and human primates

Katja Liebal, Cornelia Müller, and Simone Pika

Hitherto researchers of gestural communication in human and nonhuman primates have not engaged in an intense discourse. A comparative approach to this topic and an interdisciplinary exchange were the goals of a workshop on “Gestural communication in nonhuman and human primates” held at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, March 2004. The special issue of GESTURE carries this enterprise a step ahead by inviting the interdisciplinary audience of GESTURE to join in this stimulating exchange between researchers interested in different fields of gesture research, but also investigating different species. This multidisciplinary perspective offers promising insights into such fundamental questions as the evolution of language and will enhance our understanding of the phenomenon of gesture as such: by throwing light on the multiple facets of cognitive, affective, and social functions of gestures, on their forms of uses, on the varying structural properties of different kinds of gestures, and on cognitive processes such as intention and abstraction involved in the creation and use of gestural signs. Studying gestures in nonhuman and human primates appears therefore a highly interesting enterprise; not only because of their shared phylogenetic history but because of their close relation to language. We know in humans that gesture is the modality which may take over the burden of vocal language if needed for physiological or ritual reasons (as in sign languages of the deaf and in alternate sign languages cf. Kendon, 1988, 2004); put another way, gestures may develop into a full fledged language under certain conditions — taking this potential seriously may help to throw new light on the hypothesis that gesture might have been the modality where vocal language has evolved from.