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Pantomime in language origins

In current language evolution research, the importance of pantomime is revived in two highly influential accounts of language origins: by Michael Arbib (2005, 2012) and by Michael Tomasello (2008). However, despite the popularity of their proposals, the concept of the pantomimic stage is often considered a weak point in their scenarios (e.g. Tallerman 2007). Arbib describes pantomime mostly in intuitive terms and mainly from a neuroscience perspective, while Tomasello proposes pantomime and pointing to be the two types of communication bootstrapping the emerging language faculty but focuses on the latter, and does not go on to flesh out the pantomimic component of his conception with empirical evidence.

The underlying problem of those and similar pantomimic accounts is that the notion of pantomime has not so far been analysed in much theoretical and empirical detail. Across the language evolution disciplines, research into pantomime remains relatively limited and fragmented, with disparate findings not integrated into a more comprehensive framework. In this paper, we lay foundations for a coherent account of this topic, working from a broad understanding of pantomime, informed by Merlin Donald's (1991, 2001) and Jordan Zlatev's (2008) concept of bodily mimetic communication – volitional and holistic (but non-conventional) communication of complex messages, with or without nonlinguistic vocalisation. From this vantage point, we carry out further definitional work, consulting a wide spectrum of research positions, such as literary theory (Broadbent 1901, Callery 2001, Lust 2002) and narratology (Labov & Waletzky 1976, Genette 1980, Herman 2007), gesture studies (Hewes 1973, McNeill 1992, McNeill in press), sign linguistics (Emmorey 2002) or neurocognitive and neurotherapeutic research (Ferguson et al. 2012, Rose 2003, Nispen et al. 2012).

Finally, we discuss the consequences of such a more refined understanding of pantomime for the evaluation of Arbib's and Tomasello's proposals. At this juncture, we also consider the question of whether the "pantomimic" proposals fit better gesture-first or multimodal hypotheses.

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