

Nose-pointing: A facial gesture of the Yupno Valley, Papua New Guinea

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How does pointing vary across cultures and what factors give rise to such variation? Despite decades of sustained interest in the human pointing gesture as a universal and primordial communicative tool, our answers to these questions remain limited. This presentation describes a previously undocumented facial gesture of Papua New Guinea, which we call *nose-pointing*. Based on a video corpus of more than 80 examples produced by speakers of Yupno, an indigenous language of Papua New Guinea's Finisterre Range, we characterize the gesture's morphology and its parameters of variation, as well as illustrate its use in different interactive contexts. Yupno speakers produce the nose-pointing form in alternation— and sometimes in conjunction— with more familiar pointing morphologies, such as the index finger extended handshape, prompting the question of whether the gesture carries a distinctive meaning. Deepening the mystery of the form's meaning is the fact that it is also used *non*-deictically. We give examples of such non-deictic uses and briefly consider evidence in support of the proposal that a common semantic theme runs through both deictic and non-deictic versions of the gesture. Much remains to be understood about Yupno nose-pointing, including the full range of its uses, exactly how these different uses are related, and how it co-articulates with features of Yupno language and communicative practice. These open questions notwithstanding, the present work aims to galvanize further work on pointing practices in Papua New Guinea, where there is tantalizing evidence to suggest nose-pointing may be more widespread. After all, beyond merely adding to the gesture studies cabinet of curiosities, examples like the one described here throw light on key theoretical issues, such as the forces that shape variation and drive cultural innovation in even our species' most foundational communicative tools.