BACK: A postural gesture of surprise

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This talk describes the distribution of the BACK gesture, which consists of a movement of the head and optionally the upper body away from one's addressee, and argues that this gesture should be analyzed as a surprise marker. That BACK encodes surprise can be seen from its incompatibility with continuations conveying a lack of surprise, as shown in (1).

(1)   A: I'm a Capricorn.
        B: …BACK #Of course./#I'm not surprised that you said that.

I show that BACK can target both at-issue and not-at-issue content of a preceding linguistic update to the context. BACK can also comment on the form of an utterance, on the fact that the utterance was made, or even a non-linguistic event in the discourse context as in (2).

(2)   A: *takes off shoes and puts them on hands*
        B: …BACK

This behaviour can be captured by assigning this gesture a use-conditional meaning (cf. Gutzmann 2015) encoding that the author of a BACK utterance is surprised by a salient preceding update. This correctly predicts that BACK is infelicitous out-of-the-blue.

Most formal semantic work on gestures (e.g., Ebert & Ebert 2014, Schlenker 2018) has focused on manual and facial gestures; the present study expands this empirical landscape to include a postural gesture. Among mirative markers, BACK is special in that it does not comment on spoken material that it accompanies (cf., e.g., Rett 2021, Esipova 2019) in that it does not comment on spoken material that it accompanies, but instead always evaluates a preceding update. In this respect, BACK is a feedback gesture par excellence. Interestingly, BACK is felt to be most natural when it is produced with an emotive/evaluative facial expression (including but not limited to surprised, disgusted, skeptical, and impressed); it is odd when produced with a neutral facial expression. The interaction of BACK and co-occurring facial expressions thus provides a useful testing ground for exploring the integration of gestural meanings within the grammar.

References: • Ebert, C. & C. Ebert (2014). Gestures, demonstratives, and the attributive / referential distinction. Talk given Semantics and Philosophy in Europe 7. • Esipova, M. (2019). Towards a uniform super-linguistic theory of projection. *Proceedings of the 22nd Amsterdam Colloquium*, 553-562. • Gutzmann, D. 2015. *Use-conditional meaning: Studies in multidimensional semantic*s. Oxford: OUP. • Rett, J. (2021). The semantics of emotive markers and other illocutionary content. *Journal of Semantics* 38, 305-340. • Schlenker, P. (2018). Gesture projection and cosuppositions. *Linguistics & Philosophy* 41, 295-365.