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Different definitions lead to different findings concerning (iconic) gestures

Despite wide-spread agreement on the “multimodal” nature of human communication, there is little agreement on how to analyze the various “modalities” in question: in terms of sensory channels, production modes, or semiotic resources? Even concerning the definition of both an everyday notion such as “gesture” there is surprisingly little consensus, leading for example the editor of the journal *Gesture*, Adam Kendon, to propose that the term be abandoned as a theoretical notion. There is even less agreement among classification schemes for gestures, and terms such as “iconic”, “metaphoric”, “representational”, “deictic”, “emblematic”, “pragmatic” are used with different content in different studies, leading to incommensurable findings.

In my presentation, I briefly review the controversy concerning iconic gestures, especially as they emerge in childhood. Using the study presented by Zlatev (2014), I show how different theoretical conclusions can be drawn depending on how the concepts are defined and operationalized. The conclusion is not that one set of concepts should be adopted, but that a higher level of conceptual explicitness and meta-theoretical awareness are needed in the field of multimodal interaction studies.