

# ‘Lip-pointing’

## A discussion of form and function with reference to data from Laos\*

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‘Lip-pointing’ is a widespread but little-documented form of deictic gesture, which may involve not just protruding one or both lips, but also raising the head, sticking out the chin, lifting the eyebrows, among other things. This paper discusses form and function of lip-pointing with reference to a set of examples collected on video in Laos. There are various parameters with respect to which the conventional form of a lip-pointing gesture may vary. There is also a range of ways in which lip-pointing gestures can be coordinated with other kinds of deictic gesture such as various forms of hand pointing. The attested coordinating/sequencing possibilities can be related to specific functional properties of lip-pointing among Lao speakers, particularly in the context of other forms of deictic gesture, which have different functional properties. It is argued that the ‘vector’ of lip-pointing is in fact defined by gaze, and that the lip-pointing action itself (like other kinds of ‘pointing’ involving the head area) is a ‘gaze-switch’, i.e. it indicates that the speaker is now pointing out something with his or her gaze. Finally, I consider the position of lip-pointing in the broader deictic gesture system of Lao speakers, firstly as a ‘lower register’ form, and secondly as a form of deictic gesture which may contrast with forms of hand pointing.



*The electronic edition of this article includes audio-visual data.*

**Keywords:** lip-pointing, deictic gesture, spatial deixis, gaze, information status, Laos

### Introduction

Lip-pointing is an apparently widespread form of deictic gesture, attested as a systematic and conventionalized behavior in at least Southeast Asia, the

Americas, Africa, Oceania, and Australia. 'Lip-pointing' is not an ideal label, since there is more involved in these gestures than merely 'pointing with the lips'. The most salient aspect of the gesture is the action of making one or both lips protrude as if using one's lips to 'point' to or at a referent, but there is almost always an accompanying quick raising of the head and chin, and orientation of gaze towards the referent, with occasionally an eyebrow-raise in addition. The 'lip-pointing' itself is part of a general set of deictic kinesic actions involving the head and face, and is to be accounted for as part of the larger deictic gesture system in which it occurs. Within the relatively little existing research on pointing (Hewes, 1981; Haviland, 1993; Kita, *in press*, *inter alia*), lip-pointing is hardly mentioned. Apart from Sherzer's (1973) description of the 'pointed-lip gesture' of the Kuna people of San Blas in Panama (cf. also Sherzer 1983, 1993), little can be found on the topic, apart from occasional mentions, either in the context of discussion of gesture (e.g. Key, 1962, p.94; Hewes, 1981, p.265; Poyatos, 1983, pp.114–116; Wilkins, *in press*) or in linguistic descriptions of demonstratives and other deictic forms (e.g. Feldman, 1986, p.196).

This paper concentrates on description of the lip-pointing behavior of Lao speakers, with additional discussion of theoretical and descriptive aspects of lip-pointing more generally (with reference to available data from elsewhere). Speakers of Lao make up half of the 5 million population of Laos, and there are some 20 million speakers of Lao living in Thailand. The language belongs to the Southwestern Branch of the Tai language family and is closely related to Thai (Edmondson & Solnit, 1997; Enfield, 1999). The data discussed in this study are from a set of over 30 examples of lip-pointing observed in video recordings made during September–November 2000, in rural and semi-urban villages of Vientiane Province (in the villages of Vat Nak, Thong Kang, Done Koi, Sisavat, None Savang, and Doune Ian) and Sekong Province (in Se Noi Village), Laos. These recordings include informal interviews, locally-anchored narratives and descriptions, and ambient village activity, collected as part of a larger study of the deictic gesture behaviour of Lao speakers.

## Form

The term 'lip-pointing' should not be taken to suggest that only the lips are involved. None of the Lao examples involve the lips alone. Additional actions of chin-raise/head-lift, gaze direction, and eyebrow raise are usually involved. The

combination of all these could be termed a 'full-blown lip-point', as in the following illustration (Figure 1).

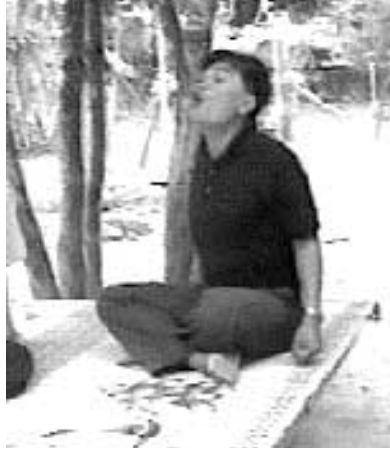


Figure 1. Full-blown lip-point, involving chin, head, gaze, eyebrows.



Movie 1. Full-blown lip-point, involving chin, head, gaze, eyebrows.

These various articulatory components are technically separable, but in the full-blown lip-point they conspire to point most emphatically, as if the speaker were giving all he could to the task of indicating something to his interlocutor. An important question that arises is this: To what degree do individual components of such multi-component gestures contribute to a 'compositional meaning', and to what extent does that overall meaning arise beyond the sum of the parts?<sup>1</sup> To answer this question would require more data than is available now. I am mostly concerned in this paper with the lips, although I also discuss associated kinesic actions involving head, face, and gaze, as well as forms of hand pointing.<sup>2</sup> Most importantly, in the section on 'function' (pp. 196–208), I claim a special role for the function of *gaze* in lip-pointing (and in related types of deictic gesture involving the head and face).

### *The lips*

There are six logical possibilities for two lips involved in a deictic gesture, varying on the parameters of (a) whether the lips are parted versus together, and (b) whether both lips or just one (upper versus lower) is the primary articulator:

**Table 1.** Six logical possibilities in lip-pointing form.

	lips parted	lips together
<i>upper lip primary</i>	1	4
<i>both lips</i>	2	5
<i>lower lip primary</i>	3	6

Of these possibilities, all except 4 are attested in the limited available cross-linguistic data.

Figures 2 and 3 are examples typical of Lao speakers, showing the lips parted, involving upper and dual-lip protrusion, respectively (i.e. instantiating cells 1 and 2 of Table 1).

The following two examples showing equal lip-protrusion, with lips parted, and together, respectively (instantiating cells 2 and 5 of Table 1), are from recordings of a speaker of Jahai (Aslian, Mon-Khmer) in peninsular Malaysia, collected by Niclas Burenhult (cf. Burenhult 2000), and kindly made available for this study.

The next example illustrates a Kuna speaker lip-pointing, with lips together, protruding equally (instantiating cell 5 of Table 1; Sherzer, 1973, p.117).

Finally, the following illustration of a Columbian lip-pointing shows protrusion of the lower lip (instantiating cell 6 of Table 1). The illustration is not especially clear, and the text does not help, stating that ‘lips are pursed’ (Saitz & Cervenka, 1972, p.33), suggesting to me that the lips are equally protruding. Sérgio Meira reports (in personal communication) that Brazilian Portuguese speakers lip-point with a protruding lower-lip, more or less as illustrated in Figure 7, while indigenous groups such as speakers of Tiriyo from Northwestern Amazonia use a very different looking parted-lips equal-protrusion gesture, more or less as illustrated by the Lao example in Figure 3.

In mentions of lip-pointing in the literature where no illustration is supplied, it is difficult to tell which of the formal possibilities in Table 1 are realized. Terms like ‘puckering the lips’ are suggestive of equal lip protrusion (with lips either parted or together), but it is hard to be sure. Key (1962) says the following about lip-pointing among indigenous Bolivians:

Many Indian tribes point with their lips; we recorded the Movima, Tacana, and the Ayoreo as using this gesture. But there were differences in executing this gesture; the Movimas do not accompany it with a thrust of the head as the other tribes do, but simply protrude their lips to point out an object.  
(Key 1962, p.94)



Figure 2. Lao speaker, lips parted, upper lip primary protrusion.



Movie 2.



Figure 3. Lao speaker, lips parted, equal lip protrusion.



Movie 3 & 8.

Lip-pointing among Navajo speakers is described as follows: ‘purse the lips together as if you were to kiss someone, keeping the lips pursed move the head in the direction of the object you wish to refer to’ (Larry DiLucchio, the Navajo Nation, personal correspondence; cf. DiLucchio, 1998/1999).<sup>3</sup>

Wilkins describes ‘mouth-pointing’ among the Arrernte in Central Australia as ‘made by orienting one’s head face-on towards a referent while simultaneously protruding both lips (sometimes just the bottom lip)’ (Wilkins, in press). Wilkins also cites Eckert and Hudson’s description of lip-pointing among neighboring speakers of Pitjantjatjara: ‘extend the bottom lip and raise the chin at the same time’ (Eckert & Hudson, 1988, p.87). Neither of these descriptions indicate whether the lips are usually together or apart, but clearly the lower lip is often the one primarily protruding (i.e. instantiating cells 3 or 6 of Table 1).



Figure 4. Jahai speaker, lips parted, equal protrusion.



Figure 5. Jahai speaker, lips together, equal protrusion.



Figure 6. Kuna speaker, lips together, equal protrusion.

Conventions of form in lip-pointing apparently display systematic formal variation across cultures, and existing descriptions have mostly been vague in specifying the exact forms. In further work on deictic use of the lips, it is important that the formal conventions be described in detail.



Figure 7. Colombian Spanish speaker, lower lip primary protrusion.

*Movements of the head, chin and eyebrows, and the direction of gaze in association with lip-pointing*

As discussed above, lip-pointing does not involve just the lips, but also the head, chin, eyebrows and gaze. A common pattern is for the lip-pointing gesture to be preceded or accompanied by orientation of the head towards the target (so that the lips will point in the right direction). In Figure 8a, the speaker is asked ‘Where is your house?’. She responds (in Figure 8b) by turning her head towards the referent (in full view, approximately 10m away) and making the lip-point gesture (without speech).

In the next example (Figure 9a), the speaker (whose hands and attention are occupied with looking at a photograph album) is asked ‘Where did you get married?’. She responds in Figure 9b by turning her head towards the referent and making a lip-point, saying ‘At home, over there in H. K. Village’ (a village about 1 km away, in sight).

In the following example, the speaker (on the left) does not turn the head in order to lip-point, since she is already facing in the right direction. In Figure 10a, the woman on the right asks ‘Where is Grandma and the others?’. The speaker replies (Figure 10b) by raising her head in combination with a lip-point, saying *phun*<sup>4</sup> ‘Over there.’<sup>4</sup>

The next example also demonstrates marked contrast between the poses before, and during, the gesture sentence<sup>5</sup> involving the lip-point. In Figure 11a, the speaker (at right, partly obscured) is suggesting to his colleague (at left) that they move to a cooler spot some ten meters to the right of the camera. The speaker’s face is quite relaxed. The colleague asks ‘Where?’, and the speaker replies in Figure 11b with the emphatic particle *ndêê*<sup>4</sup> ‘Here!’, at once turning



a.



b.

Figure 8. Head orientation with lip-pointing (see Movie 3 & 8).



a.



b.

Figure 9. Head orientation with lip-pointing.

the head to orient the face in the direction of the referent location, raising the head and chin (the latter visibly jutting out), orienting gaze to the referent location, and raising the eyebrows, opening the eyes wide.

In all the examples we have seen, speaker's gaze is aligned with the lip-point. That is, whenever someone lip-points in a certain direction, they are also looking in that direction. This is discussed further in §3, below.

A further finding concerning gaze in the Lao data is that lip-pointing is apparently restricted to cases when the addressee is looking at the speaker. In the following example (from the same sequence as the previous example), the speaker (at right, obscured) is suggesting to the addressee a better place to sit. At first, the addressee (at left) is not looking at the speaker, yet as the speaker





a.



b.

Figure 10. Head raise and chin jut with lip-pointing.



Movie 10.



a.



b.

Figure 11. Head raise, chin jut, and eyebrow raise with lip-pointing.

speaks he index-finger points (in Figure 12a). It is only when the addressee turns and looks at the speaker (in Figure 12b) that the speaker then performs the lip-point.



Figure 12. Lip-pointing when addressee is looking.

Further, as is also common throughout the Lao data, as soon as the lip-point in Figure 12b has been performed, the addressee then immediately directed his own gaze towards the referent (i.e. to where the speaker's gaze was directed).

Indeed, in *all* of the over 30 lip-pointing examples in the Lao data, as far as it can be ascertained, the speaker makes the gesture while the addressee is looking at him. Many kinds of hand pointing gestures, on the other hand, are made while the addressee is not looking directly at the speaker. This may have something to do with the possibility that addressees can note hand pointing gestures in peripheral vision more readily than lip-pointing gestures.<sup>6</sup> In peripheral vision, however, while one is perhaps more likely in the case of hand-pointing to see *that* one's interlocutor is pointing, one presumably would be no more clear about exactly *where* or *at what* the speaker is pointing. Accuracy is then a second problem.<sup>7</sup>

### *Sequencing of speech, lip and hand pointing*

The Lao data show that lip-pointing often occurs in structured combination with speech, and with other gestures such as various forms of hand pointing. The possibility of speech occurring together with lip-pointing is naturally better facilitated when speakers conventionally use a 'lips-parted' form (as they

do in Laos). Purely formal observations of the relative sequencing of hand and lip-pointing reveal that all logical sequencings — lip-point followed by speech and/or hand point, speech and/or hand point followed by lip-point, and lip-point and speech and/or hand point concurrently — are possible. The section, below (pp. 198–203), describes functions of some of these different sequencings.

## Function

So far I have discussed formal aspects of lip-pointing by Lao speakers, and I now turn to questions of function. I begin this section by discussing the basic spatially deictic function of ‘pointing out’ some entity in the immediate interactional space, and show that lip-pointing, unlike many forms of hand pointing, only occurs when the identity or location of the referent is the focus of the speaker’s utterance. I then describe some different sequencings of lip- and hand pointing in combination, and consider the functional interaction of these different deictic gestures. This is followed by the claim that lip-pointing is a ‘gaze-switch’ deictic gesture, part of a complex deictic mechanism in which the action of the lips (just as with other head-area deictic actions) functions to ‘switch on’ the deictic vector of gaze. Finally, I consider the status of lip-pointing in the larger deictic gesture system. This includes discussion of the ‘sociokinesic’ properties that arise given the partial functional overlap of lip-pointing and other forms of deictic gesture.

### *Distribution of lip-pointing in terms of semiotic function:*

#### *Focus on location/identity*

An important yet almost completely neglected problem in the study of deictic gestures is the matter of distinguishing between different semiotic functions they may serve. In this section, I want to discuss the distribution of lip-pointing in terms of semiotic function, and it will be shown that lip-pointing occurs in contexts considerably more restricted than types of hand pointing (such as index-finger pointing).

Recent research has shown that variation in *forms* of hand pointing can correspond with identifiable variation in *semiotic function* (Kendon & Versante, in press; Wilkins, in press; as well as my own research on Lao speakers in collaboration with Sotaro Kita). Some types of pointing by hand may correlate with utterance-level focus on the identity or location of a referent, while others

indicate non-focal entities, secondarily related (by ‘deferred ostension’; Quine, 1971, p.149) to what is conversationally in focus. Still other types of deictic gesture are involved in even more abstract deixis, in reference-tracking and other aspects of discourse organization (Marslen-Wilson et al., 1982; McNeill, 1992, Ch. 7; McNeill et al., 1993). It appears that lip-pointing does not cover such a range.

In the set of data I have collected, lip-pointing among Lao speakers is confined to *acts of direct ostension in which the location or identity of a referent in the physical environment is in focus*. Let me immediately make two points of clarification. First, in an ‘act of direct ostension’, the thing being physically indicated by the gesture is the thing being referred to in the utterance. For example, I point at John and say to you *I came with this guy here*. On the other hand, if I say the same while pointing at John’s empty chair when he is momentarily out of the room, this is *deferred* ostension, since I point not at the physical John but at the physical chair, and it is the chair which in turn ‘points to’ John (Haviland, 1993, p.32). Second, by saying that something is ‘in focus’, I mean that it constitutes the part of a proposition that makes an assertion beyond what is presupposed by that proposition (Lambrecht, 1994, Ch. 5).<sup>8</sup> For example, in *JOHN took your newspaper* (with stress on ‘John’ and not on any other constituent), the presupposition is that ‘someone took your newspaper’, the assertion is that ‘that someone was John’, and the focus is *JOHN*. ‘WH-questions’ usually presuppose everything but the question word (e.g. *Who took my newspaper?* presupposes ‘someone took my newspaper’), and, thus, minimal answers to ‘where?’ questions are focal. This is the precise status of lip-points in the Lao data reported on here. All of the more than 30 examples arise as answers to ‘Where?’ questions or as otherwise explicit focal assertions of location or identity (e.g. ‘It’s there’, ‘It’s this one’).

Consider the examples discussed in the above section (pp. 191–195). The lip-point in Figure 2 is in immediate response to a question as to where a certain kind of wood may be found in the local forest. Figure 3 shows an immediate response to the question ‘Where is your house?’. The lip-pointing gestures in Figures 9–12, above, and 14–16, below, show the same pattern, being answers to questions like ‘Where did you get married?’, ‘Where are Grandma and the others?’, and ‘Where is your old TV?’ (see discussion of the individual examples for details). In each of these cases, by virtue of being an answer to a ‘where?’ or ‘which one?’ question, the location or identity of the referent is in focus in the utterance involving the lip-point.

In none of the examples have I observed a lip-point being made when the referent location or object is *not* focal in the utterance. This narrow restriction on semiotic function is in distinct contrast with forms of hand pointing, which may occur in a much broader range of contexts, and, in particular, in contexts in which the gesture indicates something *non-focal* in the communicative exchange. Let us now consider an example.

A common type of deictic gesture in Lao discourse involves the index-finger (or often the thumb, if the referent is directly behind the speaker), where the arm does not get fully extended, neither torso nor gaze are turned in the direction of the referent, and the gesture is brief, casual, relatively close to the body, and usually not held. An example of this in the Lao data comes from a semi-structured interview about the history of a village, conducted by the investigator (at far left in Figure 13). The investigator asks the man second from left, ‘What grade do your two daughters study in?’, and the man replies by saying ‘Fourth and fifth grades, here in our village’, making the index-finger pointing gesture as he speaks.



Figure 13. Index-finger pointing to a non-focal referent.

Here, the pointing gesture is not held at all, and while gaze happens to be aligned with the gesture, it was not *turned* to the direction of the pointing gesture. The physical target of the gesture is the school (some 500 meters away and out of sight), yet the focus of the utterance is ‘fourth and fifth grades’. The location and identity of the school that the daughters go to constitutes *non-focal* information. In such contexts, hand pointing is normal, while lip-pointing is not attested.

*Coordination of lip-pointing with forms of hand pointing*

As noted above, it is common in the Lao data to observe close sequential combinations of lip-pointing and other deictic gestures. Some preliminary generalizations can be made as to how lip-pointing combines with other kinesic actions in Lao.

First, when a lip-point and some kind of hand point (usually an extended index-finger point) at the same referent occur in the same gesture sentence, as they do in nearly half the examples in the Lao data, it is more often (but not always) the case that a lip-point is *followed by* an index finger-point. This often seems to involve some kind of ‘up-grading’, as if the speaker, having lip-pointed, feels that this is somehow not enough, then ‘re-phrasing’ by finger-pointing.<sup>9</sup> It may be that the lip-point has a more ‘recognitional’ flavor (Sacks & Schegloff 1979), indicating a message from the speaker to the addressee along the lines of ‘I think you know where/what I mean’, i.e. that the thing or location being pointed out is presumed to be shared knowledge at some level (Enfield, to appear).<sup>10</sup> If so, then having lip-pointed, a speaker may feel that this expressed assumption of shared knowledge is perhaps too presumptuous, and this is then corrected by a more neutrally informative index-finger point. We now consider four examples which provide empirical evidence for this analysis.

In the following example, the speaker, who has just bought a new television set, is asked ‘Where is the old set?’. The set is in a room almost directly above him (he is sitting downstairs). He first replies (in Figure 14a) by lip-pointing with raised eyebrows and head tilted far back, gaze directed to the location of the referent, as he says *juu<sup>1</sup> theng<sup>2</sup> huan<sup>2</sup>* [be.at above house] ‘(It’s) up in the house’ (the speech and lip-pointing are simultaneous). He immediately follows this (in Figure 14b) with an index-finger point to the same location (with neither aligned gaze nor accompanying speech).

His interlocutor is a close relative who used to live in the same house (i.e. the house where the interview is taking place), but who has not been there for some time. I suggest that the speaker’s initial lip-point, with its element of ‘I think you know where I mean’, is ‘up-graded’ with an index-finger point, due to the speaker’s realizing that his interlocutor, no longer living in the house, probably indeed does *not* know where he means.

The next example is of similar structure, although the lip- and index-finger pointing are more closely aligned, the lip-point only fractionally preceding the index-finger point, and the two pointing gestures being mostly simultaneous. The speaker has just returned from a fruitless fishing expedition, and is discussing

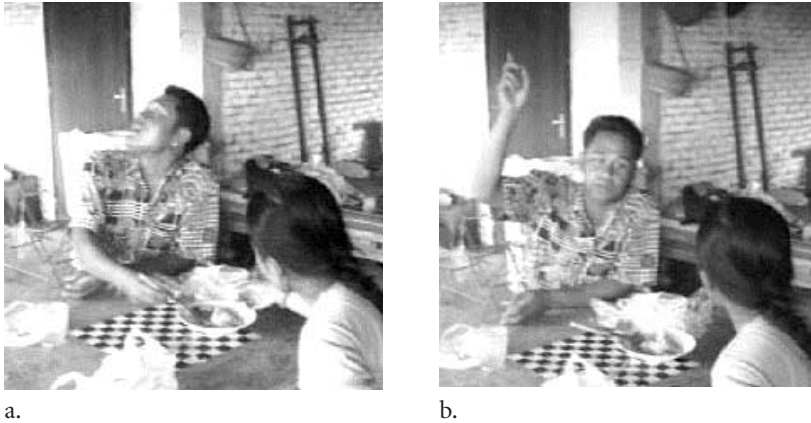


Figure 14. Index-finger pointing following lip-pointing.



Movie 14. Index-finger pointing following lip-pointing.

the relative merits of different local fishing spots. He is asked where he has just been fishing. He responds (in Figure 15a) by immediately beginning a lip-pointing gesture in the direction of the referent location (out of sight, about 200 meters away), turning his head towards the referent, and beginning to utter the demonstrative *nuun*<sup>4</sup>, a variant of the far distal adverbial *phuun*<sup>4</sup> 'yonder'. At this moment, his hands are occupied, and it is possibly because of this that he intends to lip-point. But given that the local fishing spots are only a limited set, it may be quite natural for him to use a lip-point anyway, to signal an assumed familiarity ('I think you know where I mean'). However, his interlocutor is not a local, and certainly could not be assumed to be familiar with the various fishing spots around the village. I suggest that once the lip-pointing action has begun, the speaker realizes that a lip-point alone could be presumptuous (since his interlocutor probably *doesn't* know where he means), and he decides that an index-finger point is required. Note that he does not abandon his lip-point already under way. Within three video frames (around 100ms) of starting the lip-point action, the index-finger point begins, and is accompanied throughout by the lip-point, until reaching almost full arm extension (Figure 15b), and then both pointing gestures are retracted together, head returning to initial position.

In a few cases, lip-pointing is immediately *preceded* by index-finger pointing. In the next example, the speaker has been asked where a certain person lives. She first index-finger points (Figure 16a) in the direction of the person's house (out of sight, approximately 300m away), with fully extended arm, held

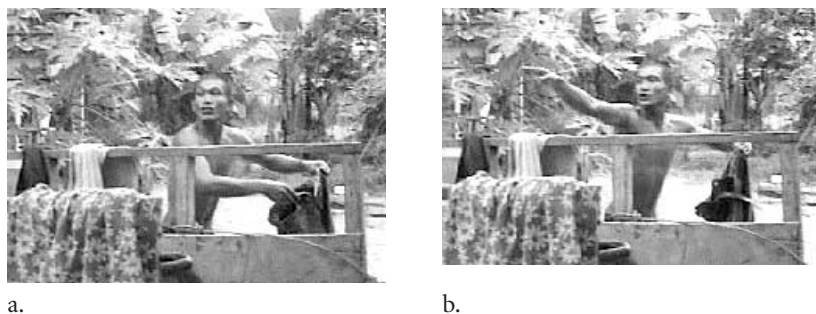


Figure 15. Index-finger pointing overlapping with lip-pointing.



Movie 15. Index-finger pointing overlapping with lip-pointing.

for nearly one second, as she says *beng<sup>1</sup> ndêê<sup>4</sup>* [look pcl] ‘Look, (it’s) here!’. Then, having retracted her index finger-point (in Figure 16b), she further comments *hùan<sup>2</sup> ñaj<sup>0</sup>-ñaj<sup>1</sup> sung<sup>0</sup>-suung<sup>3</sup> ndêê<sup>4</sup>* [house big-rdp high-rdp pcl] ‘The big tall house, here!’, lip-pointing as she speaks.

The same kind of explanation as offered for the opposite sequence (lip-then index-finger point), above, could also be offered in this case, but in reverse. The speaker first responded by index-finger pointing, apparently the neutral form of spatial deictic gesture in the Lao system. However, in this case the speaker knows that the interviewer is very familiar with the village, and is certainly familiar with the house in question, which is large and in a prominent location. I suggest that because of this, the speaker ‘re-phrases’ with a lip-point, to indicate that her previous neutral response (with index-finger point) was inappropriate. The recognitional meaning of the lip-point (‘you know which one I mean’) was more appropriate in this case.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, there are examples with index finger-pointing both before *and* after lip-pointing to a single referent. In one case (illustrated in Figure 17c), a single lip-point takes place when there is copious index-finger pointing already occurring (by the speaker and others present), directed at the same referents (the two small children at lower right).<sup>12</sup> The conditioning factor for the use of lip-pointing when much index finger-pointing is already taking place seems to be the particular information status relationship between the referent and the speaker’s utterance at the relevant moment. That is, as described above (pp. 196–198), lip-pointing *does not* occur when the location or identity of the referent *is not* in focus.





a.



b.

Figure 16. Index-finger pointing preceding lip-pointing.



a.



b.



c.



d.

Figure 17. Lip-pointing in a context of much index-finger pointing.

Figures 17a and b show speakers index-finger pointing, as they ask yes-no questions (such as 'Was this one born first?') and making statements about the children (such as 'Little Kim brought me some clothes, saying...'), index-finger pointing at the relevant child. Then the woman second from left (in a white

T-shirt) is asked a question (by someone off camera), to which she replies *puu*<sup>3</sup> (the name of the child on the right), while lip-pointing at that child (Figure 17c). Although the question the speaker in Figure 17c was asked is unintelligible on the video recording, we can surmise from the verbal response that the question must have been at least ‘which one?’. That this elicited a lip-point is compatible with the observation, noted above, that lip-pointing by Lao speakers occurs when the identity or location of the referent is in sentential focus (in particular, when it is the answer to a ‘Where?’ or ‘Which one?’ question). Soon after this lip-point, the same speaker makes an index-finger point at the other child (on the left), in Figure 17d. The index-finger points occurring in the same context as the lip-point in Figure 17c accompany simple declarative statements about the children (‘This child did this,’ ‘That child did that’) or yes-no questions in which there is no sub-sentential focus.

These observations about the function of lip-pointing in the context of its sequencing with respect to other deictic gestures are obviously preliminary, but they should at least demonstrate that these different pointing gestures are not merely interchangeable alternatives. Different deictic gestures evidently have distinct functions, and these functions are exploited in complex ways in the dynamic unfolding of discourse. The functions which speakers perform by combining such gestures in specific ways are worthy of more careful study.

### *The gaze switch hypothesis*

As far as can be determined in the Lao data, lip-pointing is always accompanied by aligned gaze in the direction of the referent. Discussions of examples illustrated in Figures 1–5, 9–11, 14–17, above, provide details of the pattern of alignment of gaze with the lip-pointing gesture. In this section, I want to propose a ‘gaze-switch’ hypothesis arising from these observations.

It is well-documented that people are highly attuned to the direction of gaze of their social associates (Gibson & Pick, 1963; Cline, 1967; Baron-Cohen, 1995, among many others), a fact of special importance in joint attention (Tomasello, 1999), and human interaction in general. Accordingly, I suggest that the primary ‘pointer’ in lip-pointing gestures is not the lips but the gaze, and that the role of the lips in these gestures is to index the deictic function of gaze, to ‘switch on’ the deictic vector that gaze ‘projects’. Gaze can point but cannot point all the time — for our interlocutor to be pointing with his gaze, we need to assume that he is at that time intending to indicate something with his gaze. When gaze points, nothing literally extends from the eyes. Just as in most other

forms of deictic gesture, it is the mind of the addressee which ‘sees’ the vector leading to the referent. Indeed, by pointing, you *create* the referent (Haviland, 2000, p.20; McNeill, in press), not in the sense that you create a physical thing, but in the sense that you set up and activate a conceptual entity (the *real* referent). This conceptual referent may be instantiated by a physical entity in the local scene, but the physical and the conceptual referent should not be conflated (a fact which becomes clear when you point to an empty chair, referring to the person who was just sitting there).

Thus, the lip-point is a handy way of ‘switching on’ the deictic function of gaze, a signal saying ‘I’m now indicating something to you by looking at it’. The same claim is made for the mechanism of other head-area spatial deictic gestures such as head-toss, chin-jut, eyebrow-raise and ‘bug-eye’ gestures (which all typically accompany lip-pointing). In support of this hypothesis are examples of lip-pointing in which gaze and face/lip orientation are not precisely aligned (cf. Figures 2 and 4, above). In these cases it is clearly the direction of the *gaze*, not of the face (nor the lips, since lips seldom orient at an angle away from the face), which we take to be ‘pointing to’ the referent.

This is in distinct contrast to the use of hand pointing, in which speaker’s gaze may often not be aligned with the direction of the deictic gesture at all, being instead employed for other higher-priority purposes, such as management of interaction between interlocutors.<sup>13</sup> Let us consider an example which illustrates that hand-pointing can allow the option of not aligning one’s gaze with one’s pointing gesture, when gaze is required for other purposes. Figure 18, from some two minutes earlier in the same sequence as Figure 13, above, shows the speaker (second from left) pointing at an out-of-sight referent in the village (a primary school some 500 meters away), and his extended index-finger point is not accompanied by gaze in the direction of the referent. Rather, his gaze is on his interlocutor.

However, in Figure 13, above, the same speaker makes the same index finger-point to the same referent, yet on that occasion aligns his gaze with the gesture. The difference between the two cases concerns the relationship between the speaker, his addressee (to the speaker’s right), and the current conversational ‘floor’. In Figure 13, the speaker was one of the two comprising the interactional dyad, which is currently dominating the ‘floor’. He was already engaged in conversation with the investigator, to his right (the other two men were listening and not interjecting), and did not need to use gaze for any handling of interaction at this point. In Figure 18, however, the speaker is *not* already holding the ‘floor’. In this case, a dialogue is taking place between the



Figure 18. Mismatch of direction of gaze and index-finger pointing (cf. Figure 13, above).

investigator and the man to the speaker's left (wearing a white shirt). The white shirt man has just answered the question 'Where is the village school?' posed by the investigator, and in Figure 18 the speaker (second from left) interjects with a parenthetical clarification, adding some elaborating information to what the man on his left has just said. The speaker is not claiming the floor, merely inserting a remark for the benefit of the investigator, and presumably for this reason he keeps his gaze focused on his addressee as he carries out the pointing gesture (i.e. signaling 'this is just between me and you'). In the case of Figure 18, the speaker's gaze was available to be used for higher priorities in the interaction, independently of the deictic hand gesture. As already stated, while this kind of non-alignment between gaze and the direction of the deictic gesture is very common with hand pointing, it is unattested in the lip-pointing examples.

#### *Place of lip-pointing in the deictic gesture system*

In the context of the observation that index finger-pointing 'is sometimes suppressed in some cultures' (cf. Wundt 1973[1921], p.75), Hewes (1981, p.265) refers to lip-pointing as 'an occasional alternative to finger-pointing'. However, the data suggest that lip-pointing is not to be negatively defined — i.e. as a mere substitute for a suppressed 'finger-point'. It has been shown above (pp. 198–203) that lip- and index finger-pointing can occur in the very same contexts (see Figures 14–16). In any case, as discussed above, it is essential to be clear about the status of a term such as 'finger-pointing'. If this refers to pointing by hand more generally, then generalizations are difficult, since different forms of pointing with the finger(s) and hand can have different functions, social and

otherwise (cf. Kendon & Versante, in press). Lip-pointing clearly holds its own place in a larger system, and is not to be defined merely in terms of its contrast with hand pointing, especially given that there are so many forms and functions of the latter. Lip-pointing needs to be treated on its own terms, for at least three reasons.

First, the empirical data from Lao show that lip-pointing is used when there is no reason to imagine that index finger-pointing is suppressed, despite suggestions to the contrary (e.g. Hewes, 1981). Lao speakers often reflect that lip-pointing is what you do when your hands are not free for hand pointing. Similarly, the lip-pointing gesture among Navajo speakers is said to be '[q]uite handy when someone asks you a question and your hands are full' (DiLucchio, 1998/1999). True, but this is more likely a convenient fact than a primary motivation for the convention. People consistently lip-point when their hands are free (see examples in Figures 2, 3, 11b, 12b, 16b, and 17c, above), and furthermore they use both lip- and hand pointing during the same communicative scenario, sometimes simultaneously or together in the same gesture sentence (see pp. 198–203, especially Figure 15b).

Second, just as hand pointing (or index-finger pointing more specifically) may be culturally suppressed in specific circumstances, so also may lip-pointing. Given that, as Sherzer (1993, p.195) points out, lip-pointing (among other gestures) can be associated with lower social identity, then it is logically just as likely that index-finger pointing could be motivated by a suppression of lip-pointing! Objections to a claim such as this would no doubt arise from the widespread assumption that index-finger pointing is 'basic' (cf. discussion in Wilkins, in press), but this assumption cannot be confidently made until we have greater breadth and detail of cross-cultural data on deictic gesture systems. So, while lip- and index-finger pointing may in some sense be alternatives, they are not to be *defined* as such. They each have their own value in the system.

Third, lip-pointing may carry specific meanings beyond a basic deictic function, and its semantics may thus require positive characterisation, not mere allocation to a residual category. Sherzer's (1973) data from the Kuna people of Panama pays special attention to meanings beyond basic spatial deixis (including various interpersonal 'joking' and 'mocking' functions), leading us also into a variationist perspective on gesture, to which we now turn.

### *Sociokinesics and gestural 'register'*

In a general sense, lip-pointing by Lao speakers is 'low' register or 'sub-standard'. When discussing lip-pointing with Lao speakers, one elicits the kinds of

response one would expect in discussions of ‘bad language’ or rural dialect linguistic forms, namely, amusement, embarrassment, and quizzicality as to why you would be interested in the phenomenon at all. In response to my correspondence about reported lip-pointing among Navajo speakers (for whom lip-pointing is customarily defined as a preferred option to index-finger pointing, since the latter is considered inpolite), Larry DiLucchio of the Navajo Nation said this:

I shared your letter with my office staff. Most were very amused that you would take such an interest in something so mundane... A photograph? Perhaps, if I can get them to quit laughing at the thought.

One explanation of this ‘low register’ status of lip-pointing is the following. Both lip-pointing and index finger pointing can serve a basic spatially deictic function, i.e. of simply indicating the location or existence of something in the immediate environment. If both forms of pointing become conventional in a culture, then they will not contrast in this function, and thus the basic deictic function of one is likely to become enriched in some way as to produce a contrast, and thereby both justify and maintain the existence of both forms in the one system. One logical possibility is for the two to continue to perform the same ‘propositional function’ (basic spatial deixis), but split in terms of social register. This would account for the ‘social level’ values of lip-pointing found in Laos and elsewhere. In Laos, there is also a great deal of personal variation — some speakers lip-point all the time, while others hardly ever do. A second possibility is for one of the forms to take on an enriched semantic value. For example, the ‘recognitional’ uses described here for Lao, the ‘mocking’/ironic meanings of lip-pointing among the Kuna, described by Sherzer (1973), or more fine-grained semiotic distinctions, as different forms of hand-pointing may have (Kendon & Versante, in press; Wilkins, in press).

### *Deictic gesture system typology*

Among Lao speakers, lip-pointing and many forms of pointing by hand co-exist. No form of spatial deictic gesture seems secondary or routinely suppressed in favor of others, and the system as whole appears highly structured (as current work on Lao deictic gesture more generally reveals). Wilkins (in press) describes a similar degree of structured systematicity among various forms of deictic gesture, including lip-pointing and a range of hand-pointing forms, among Arrernte speakers of Central Australia (cf. also Kendon &

Versante, in press, for description of systematic variation of hand pointing forms among Neapolitans). An important typological question arises: Given that there are deictic gesture systems with systematic conventions of hand pointing but no systematic convention of lip-pointing (such as is the case among English speakers), are there any with systematic conventions of lip-pointing but no systematic conventions of hand pointing? In some cases it seems clear that finger-pointing is less common and/or less salient than lip-pointing. Sherzer, for example, says that 'hand and finger pointing occurs infrequently' among Kuna speakers, and that lip-pointing is 'more common by far' (Sherzer, 1983, p.169). Wilkins (in press) suggests that there are gesture systems in which 'lip pointing is the predominant deictic behavior, and index-finger pointing appears to be non-systematic', but this is not supported by data or systematic observation. Wilkins' statement is restricted to index-finger pointing, but more generally, it seems most unlikely that a culture could be found without *some* form of systematic and conventional pointing by hand. Of course, we require a lot more information about such systems in cultures around the world. The question remains an empirical one.

### Concluding remarks

Lip-pointing among Lao speakers shows consistent conventions of both form and function. Lao speakers mostly lip-point with lips parted, usually with the upper lip primarily protruding. Also, in most if not all cases, a lip-pointing gesture involves other kinesic actions, especially tilting the head up, sticking the chin out, and opening up the eyes (with eyebrow-raise). Patterns of coordination between lip-pointing and other forms of deictic gesture (especially hand pointing of various kinds) can reveal functional distinctions. Lip-pointing by Lao speakers is distributionally restricted to cases in which the location or identity of the referent is in focus in the utterance — these gestures almost exclusively appear as answers to 'Where?' or 'Which one?' questions. Index-finger pointing, on the other hand, shows much wider distribution. Another functional distinction of lip-pointing is its 'recognitional' sense ('I think you know where/what I mean'), which accounts for its informal/familiar — and thus 'low register' — status in the Lao system. Finally, the observation that lip-pointing among Lao speakers is always accompanied by gaze directed towards the referent suggests that the deictic vector is not provided by the action of the lips, but by the *gaze*. The action of the lips indexes that the speaker is pointing with his or her gaze at that moment. To be a form of pointing, gaze needs to be

‘switched on’, since we cannot assume that our interlocutors are pointing something out whenever their eyes are open.

While this paper has concentrated on data from Laos, it is hoped that the observations here may stimulate further cross-cultural comparison. Basic descriptive work on the form and function of lip-pointing around the world is almost non-existent, and we are clearly in need. For any lip-pointing system, we ideally need detailed information about (a) the conventional form(s) of the lips in such gestures, (b) the possibilities and likelihood of accompanying kinesic actions, involving head, eyebrows, chin, and gaze, as well as speech, including the relative timing and functional interaction of these, (c) the precise range of deictic and other semiotic functions which lip-pointing may perform, with special attention to the relationship between the deictic act and the discourse/communicative context, and (d) the place of lip-pointing in the larger structured system of conventional gesture, in terms of both its semantic and social functions.

## Notes

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1. The same question arises with respect to facial expressions and their component parts (Enfield, 2001, p.166).

2. The term ‘hand pointing’ refers to any form of deictic gesture involving the hand, irrespective of distinctions in form (such as arm being extended or not, whether index-finger is extended or hand is open, and so on). Otherwise, I will specify ‘index-finger pointing’ or the like.

3. I was directed to this source by Wilkins (in press).

4. Superscript italicised numerals represent lexical tones in the Lao language.

5. I use this (perhaps less-than-ideal) term in an informal sense to refer to a coherently structured sequence of gestures which form a communicative whole. This may consist of more than one ‘gesture phrase’ (McNeill, 1992, p.83ff) and is meant to include multiple kinesic actions occurring together.

6. Thanks to Adam Kendon for pointing this out.

7. There is reason to question claims in the literature that lip-pointing has ‘diminished precision’ with respect to hand pointing (especially index finger pointing; Hewes, 1981, p.265). First, if lip-pointing is a ‘switch’ for the deictic vector of gaze, then it inherits the high accuracy of gaze as a pointer (cf. §3.3, below). Second, in any case, the ‘accuracy’ of a



pointing gesture is, as Adam Kendon puts it, more 'an achievement of the interaction' than a computation from geometric information. Space restrictions prevent further discussion of this issue here.

8. While this definition of 'focus' comes from a purely linguistic perspective, it nevertheless makes sense to characterise the information status of gestures in the same way, assuming that kinesic and linguistic signs form part of an integrated semiotic system.
9. I thank Steve Levinson for helping me develop this idea in personal communication.
10. This would accord with lip-pointing being considered more 'familiar' (see §3.4.1, below).
11. Linguistic evidence also supports this analysis. The speaker's linguistic encoding of the referent at the time of the lip-point involves a particular type of reduplication (see the example immediately above Figure 16), also of a 'recognitional' nature (specifying that the referent is assumed to be discernable by the listener among a range of possibilities).
12. Figure 17 is from a recording of a number of adults standing around two young cousins (between 2 and 3 years old), discussing similarities and differences between them.
13. Note Figure 14b, above, for example, in which the speaker is finger-pointing while his gaze is engaged with his interlocutor, while in the lip-point immediately preceding (Figure 14a), gaze is aligned with the lip-point.

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