Modelling the Negotiation of Demonstrative Reference: a Comparative Study

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In my talk, I will discuss referential behaviour in the Great apes, preverbal human infants and adult humans, and provide what may be called a process account of (intentional) referential communication based on data from comparative and developmental psychology and gesture studies. I will focus on continuous, real time, primarily nonverbal strategies in all three cases, thinking of reference as taking place in socio-culturally embedded, embodied interaction. Reference relies on two basic factors: the behaviour dynamics between the agents involved in the communication episode, and the presence of various contextual enabling constraints that manifest themselves physically and so are perceptually available to the agents (physical, social, cultural, normative, etc). Referential communication exploits parallel processing on different levels and in different systems, along different time-scales. The processes that drive the interaction can be implicit or explicit. For instance, Gricean reason-based principles are not available to preverbal infants and nonhuman primates, yet both engage in referential communication.