Title: Gestures and language documentation: A case study in of a Persian gesture

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Abstract

Language documentation aims to provide a “comprehensive record of the linguistic practices characteristic of a given speech community” (Himmelmann 1998). However, the fundamentally multimodal nature of speaking is often not fully taken into account in documentary activities. In this talk I will focus on the use of hand gestures in conversation. We use gesture to point to places and we indicate size and shape of objects with our hands. Communities have entire repertoires of gestures they use in conversation. After giving a brief overview of functions of gesture and the ways in which it interacts with speech, I will present a case study on the use of a specific conventionalized gesture in Persian conversation. The gesture can be found in Persian miniatures depicting conversational scenes. While speakers cannot describe the meaning of the gesture, context of use studies show that in everyday conversations speakers frequently use it to mark discourse structure. This shows how gesture and speech are temporally and semantically intricately coordinated, forming a fully integrated system of expression. The implications of this study will be discussed with regard to language documentation practices and methods.