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Authors' Preface

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This study came out of a discussion between Harry van der Hulst and Sotaro Kita in 1996. Kita was the leader of the "Gesture Project" at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (MPI) in Nijmegen (The Netherlands). The Project mainly focused on gestures that spontaneously accompany speech, especially how psychological processes of gesture production and speech production are interlinked. Van der Hulst, who was at the General Linguistics department at Leiden University (The Netherlands), initiated contact with Kita and suggested a systematic exploration of differences and similarities between sign language and speech-accompanying gesture. Van der Hulst and Kita decided to focus on well-known constraints in sign phonology, and to tackle the Symmetry Condition, initially. Van der Hulst found a linguistic student at Leiden University, Ingeborg van Gijn, who was interested in carrying the Symmetry Condition project further. Van Gijn spent several months at the MPI to carry out the study under Kita's supervision and wrote a master's thesis under van der Hulst's supervision in 1998. We could not pursue publication for several years after the master's thesis because van Gijn was occupied with her PhD project on a completely different topic in sign linguistics at the University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands). A manuscript based on the master's thesis was eventually submitted to a main-stream linguistic journal, but rejected in 2004. Due to the rejection and to van Gijn's departure from the field of linguistics, the paper went "underground".

This study was unique in that the similarity (as well as differences) between signs and gestures was the main research question. Such a research question was hardly pursued in the mid-1990s, amidst the strong legacy of decades-long efforts by sign language linguists to make the point that sign language is not merely elaborate gesturing, but full-blown natural language. This study was made possible by the open-minded atmosphere at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics.

This study laid important foundations for further research on sign language and gesture. First, this project developed a coding system for how to segment gestures and signs into "movement phases", which was published separately (Kita,

van Gijn & van der Hulst 1998) and has been widely used in the field. Second, this project demonstrated how fruitful it is to compare signs and gestures, and this knowledge laid an important foundation for one of the studies on Nicaraguan Sign Language (Senghas, Kita & Özyürek 2004), in which comparison to gestures was crucial.

References

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