Recurrent gestures in Savosavo:
The case of sweeping and holding away

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Gesture research has seen a growing interest in the study of gestures, which show a stable form-meaning relation, are conventionalized and culturally shared, and often fulfill pragmatic functions. Examples of such "recurrent gestures" (Ladewig 2014) include the (Palm Up) Open Hand used for asking questions or offering something (Kendon 2004; Müller 2004) or the Ring marking the topic-comment structure of the utterance (Neumann 2004). In recent studies, one group has received considerable attention: gestures specialized for the expression of denial and negation. Studies identified similar gestural forms with comparable meanings and pragmatic functions in a range of Indo-European languages, such as English, French, Italian, German, or Spanish (e.g. Bressem and Müller 2014; Calbris, 2011; Harrison, 2009; Kendon 2004; Teßendorf, 2014). Gestures of denial and negation take over modal function by operating on the speaker's utterance and rejecting or negating topics of talk. They assume discursive function, when marking the topic-comment structure of utterances or the end of a topic or turn. And they fulfill performative function when used to appease or stop the other. Gestures of denial and negation thus seem to constitute a culturally shared class of gestures used for similar functions in a range of Indo-European languages.

This paper will present a first analysis of such recurrent gestures in Savosavo, a Papuan language spoken in the Solomon Islands in the Southwest Pacific (Wegener 2012). Following the method and procedure of Bressem and Müller (2014a, b) and based on 68 hours of video recordings and a total of 124 instances, the results of a study investigating two recurrent gestures in Savosavo will be discussed: the "sweeping away" and "holding away" gestures. The talk discusses their main forms and functions and shows that the gestures used by Savosavo speakers share formational and functional characteristics with the gestures investigated for Indo-European languages. In doing so, the talk presents a first analysis of conventionalized gestures in a non-Indo-European language. In pointing out commonalities in form and function, the study contributes to a better understanding of the nature of recurrent gestures used for denial and negation and their distribution across cultures and languages.

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