

When we think of pantomime what comes to our mind is a theatrical performance or a game of charades. However, scientists have now good reasons to suspect that pantomime formed an important stage in the evolutionary emergence of language. For example, one striking fact about pantomime - communicating with your whole body - is that it is naturally understandable: even people who come from two very different cultures and do not speak the same language can quite effectively communicate by means of pantomime. The puzzle of language origins is one of the most fundamental and at the same time most difficult questions in the Western intellectual tradition. Some researchers even consider it “the hardest problem in science”, while the leading scientists in language evolution - the interdisciplinary area of study dedicated to the investigation of this problem - are of the opinion that pantomimic communication constituted an early stage of how language developed. To examine this possibility, we will address a number of specific questions pertaining to the nature of pantomime, such as its expressive power or its potential to evolve into more language-like forms of communication. Can pantomime communicate complex meanings without the use of any additional means of expressions such as words or picture? Will pantomime put in the so called transmission chain (i.e. communicated from person to person, like in Chinese whispers) become more simplified and communicatively efficient? Will repeating pantomime in this way many times lead to the emergence of structure - for instance, such that specific, individual gestures assume the role equivalent to “nouns” or “verbs”? Pantomimic means of expression are found in different forms of human behaviour - its elements are present in communication between different cultures, pub games, rituals or artistic performance. It is, then, a multi-faceted phenomenon and must be studied in a way that cuts across disciplines. To achieve this, we will create an interdisciplinary team, whose competences will range from linguistics and semiotics, to theatre and literature studies, to experimental psychology and gesture research. The core of the project consists in experimental research during which we will record pantomimic communication in a number of conditions and pre-arranged situations. The material obtained in this way will be analysed to identify characteristic, recurring patterns of body movements, and it will also be used as the stimulus in the experiments testing how it is processed by observers.