Cognitive Science Seminar (COGS 200)
Gesture and Cognition

Friday 5/14/04

David McNeill
(U. of Chicago, Psychology and Linguistics)

The Language-Thought-Hand link and the origin of Language

This talk highlights the IW case – a man who was suddenly deafferented from the neck down and taught himself to control his movements again with vision and cognition. IW can move perfectly well as long as he can see, but denying him vision makes instrumental movement impossible; yet under these conditions he still performs accurate gestures both semantically and temporally. I use this dissociation of action and gesture to argue that part of the evolution of language was the establishment of a new thought-language-hand link in the brain, whereby meanings co-opt actions (and provide a still intact means of control to IW). I conclude with an evolutionary mechanism for this to have happened involving the evolution of Broca's area.