

The Role of Gesture in Discourse

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Abstract: It is inevitable fact that the ubiquity of discourse has already seen in all fields of science. Number of articles by scholar and researches have printed in different subjects about discourse.

Keywords: discourse, gesture, discourse information, speech- synchronized gesture, body language, language of gesture.

This article is about the significance of gestures in understanding the context of speech of a speaker. At the process of communication speech-synchronized gestures are mostly used by communicators, that are considered the major sources of discourse cohesion. The gesture-to-cohesion relationship is more than an empirical correlation, although it is that also. The gestures are the main components of speech, not accompaniments or “add-ons” (Kendon’s 2008 term), but integral parts of it. They are the opposite of “body language”; not a separate “language of gesture” but gestures that are actually part of language, of speech. Much evidence supports this idea, but its full implications are not always recognized. Let’s imagine an example that the speaker has just watched a film and is describing one of the events to a naive listener. A character climbed a drainpipe on the inside and the gesture depicts this event. The gesture also carries discourse information. In its form and motion it highlights the interiority of the ascent, presenting this as not predictable, as newsworthy, and as contrasting to exteriority (and indeed, the immediately preceding film event showed the character climbing the same pipe on the outside). This one gesture thus has both denotative and discourse content. For the producer of the gesture, the “equivalence principle” (Jakobson 1960) of a contrast within an equivalence (which we will call a field of meaningful oppositions) drives the story forward, generating a trail of cohesive links as it goes. And for us, the analysts, this same principle enables us to find the discourse structure the speaker has created. Such a discourse contribution is hidden from view in orthographic transcripts. A gesture-based and a text-based analysis are both needed to uncover the discourse structure of a given corpus.

First, let’s clarify the concept of gesture, so what are gestures? Adam Kendon (2004: 12) defined gestures as “actions that have the features of manifest deliberate expressiveness.” We adopt his definition with one qualification and one proviso. The qualification is that gesture cannot be deliberate. As we regard them, “gestures” are unwitting and automatic, anything but deliberate (Kendon may have meant by “deliberate” non-accidental, and with this we agree; but the word also conveys “done for a purpose,” and with that we do not agree: gestures are unwitting, inadvertent, un-self-conscious, parts of thinking itself). The proviso concerns “action.” We regard gestures as movements orchestrated by significances other than pragmatic actions, created by the speaker him- or herself to embody significant imagery, not to attain goals, social or physical. To see the difference the proviso makes, the film gesture looks like the action of lifting something in the hand, but it is not lifting at all. It is an image of the character rising, of the interior of the pipe through which he rose, and of the direction of his motion upward, all in a single symbolic form, in none of which a lifting hand plays a part.

So our definition is this: A gesture is an unwitting, non-accidental, non-goal-directed action, orchestrated by speaker-created significances, having features of manifest expressiveness, that enacts imagery (not necessarily by the hands or hands alone), and is generated as part of speaking. These gestures are not exotic or special. They are everyday occurrences while speaking. In our daily

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conversations, route directions, narrations, and so on, speech-synchronized gestures are by far the most frequent kind. They are so much a part of speaking that one is often unaware of them, but, if you look around and watch someone talking in informal terms, you are likely to see the hands and arms in motion. These are gestures we mean.

By the way of conclusion, we may state that, the gestures and the synchronous speech jointly formed a peak of communicative dynamism. “Communicative dynamism” is the extent to which a given spoken or gestured form pushes the communication forward (Firbas 1971). Not only does the material form of reference register existing degrees of communicative dynamism but also each form is an active signal – signaling that the degree of communicative dynamism at that moment is being maintained or changed.

Thus we find discourse units formed by two persons, their gestures. This can take place in conversations or during instruction or even in the kind of virtual interaction that a gesture coder has with video images of another person’s gestures.

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