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GESTURE MULTIFUNCTIONALITY IN FACE-TO-FACE DIALOGUE

WIELOFUNKCYJNOŚĆ GESTÓW W DIALOGU TWARZĄ W TWARZ

ABSTRACT: Although there exists a number of gesture typologies and classifications, gestures tend to escape definite categorisation. The present paper concerns the gestures which accompany spontaneous speech during face-to-face dialogue. The alternation of conversational roles, the dynamics of dialogue, the cooperative principle, in a way dictating combined effort, spontaneous meaning negotiation and tuning in with one's interlocutor semantically and pragmatically, produce gestures of a particularly multifunctional character. Dialogue involves a constant interplay of its spaces: ideational, modal, interactional and interpersonal. A clear-cut separation of these spaces or delineating uncrossable borders between them is not possible. Hence, gestures (signs) representing these spaces must simultaneously belong to and constitute signs of all four of them. The examples described in the paper show that gestures are intrinsically multifunctional: they fulfil several dialogue functions (representation of the ideational space, modalisation, interaction and interpersonal relations) at a time. These functions, though, are visible to different extents. Just as in Roman Jakobson's model of communicative functions, usually one function is foregrounded and can be easily recognised, while the other ones remain unprofiled. In reality, however, a gesture is always "opalescent" with different functions.

KEYWORDS: pragmatics, nonverbal communication, gestures, conversation

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: pragmatyka, komunikacja niewerbalna, gesty, konwersacja

Introduction

The idea of developing a definite classification of gestures is doomed to failure. The efforts aimed at categorising gestures, or rather assigning them to categories previously abstracted on different grounds, do raise doubts (Antas 2009; Bavelas 1994; Kendon 2004; McNeill 2000). This, however, does not contradict the fact that the attempts at systemizing gestures and creating some classification framework are in themselves, for obvious reasons, necessary for researchers and scholars. What must be always taken into consideration, though, is the methodology-induced reduction. Hence, saying that a gesture is of a particular kind (belongs to a specified class), we necessarily disregard its other characteristics or functions which it fulfils in a given context. It is beyond doubt that gestures are multifunctional.

Material

All examples described in the present paper have been taken from my own data base of TV material from programmes broadcast on Polish TV channels (TVP1, TVP2, TVN, Polsat) from 1999 to 2008. The material which I have collected and analysed comes from opinion and entertainment programmes. They have been selected for their research value, in terms of both content and technical aspects. My main goal was to locate interaction situations, dialogues between two persons. I have considered only such passages which can be treated as natural units, as they have not been interrupted by editing cuts.

Theoretical background

The complexity of the problem of gesture classification can be illustrated perfectly by an analogous model of the functions of linguistic message. Even by looking only at the classic model proposed by Roman Jakobson (1960), we can see that its universal simplicity results from the reductions and limitations necessarily made by its author. The model becomes fully comprehensible (and accurate) only when one takes into account Jakobson's remarks concerning its interpretation. The main point here is the awareness of the multifunctionality of a given message:

Although we distinguish six¹ basic aspects of language, we could, however, hardly find verbal messages that would fulfil only one function. The diversity lies not in

¹ The six functions in questions are Jakobson's referential, emotive, conative, phatic, meta-linguistic, and poetic function.

a monopoly of some one of these several functions but in a different hierarchical order of functions (Jakobson 1960, p. 352).

Thus, to say that a given message fulfils a given function in a given context is basically to assert that this function is the most salient, foregrounded one, while other functions, although also fulfilled by the message, are not as exposed as the one which was singled out. In other words, as far as a linguistic message is concerned, we can speak of its multifunctionality and the hierarchy, simultaneity and profiling of functions².

The same seems to hold true for a non-verbal message: a gesture which accompanies spontaneous speech. Even the most prominent scholars and authors of various classifications today speak of a classification continuum, of fuzzy borders, overlapping classes and kinds, of mutual conditioning and, one could say, of the periphery effect of a particular gesture category. It is no accident that we have here a term originating from the theory of categorisation, cognitive prototypes and category model developed by Eleanor Rosch (1978). Referring to Adam Kendon's division and classification, David McNeill speaks of "Kendon's continuum" (2005, p. 5, see also McNeill 1998), thus indicating that the successive kinds of gestures smoothly turn into other kinds, and the borders between them are not clear-cut. This in turn would mean that at those transition points in-between (that is *de facto* on the peripheries of a given sign category-class) there are to be found the gestures which we have the greatest difficulty in assigning, i.e.: untypical ones, differing the most from the prototypical cases, difficult to classify definitely. Kendon's continuum pertains to the scale of arbitrariness and independent occurrence of signs, in other words to their semantic independence and completeness. It concerns the placing of spontaneous gestures which accompany speech and cooperate with it especially on the semantic, but also pragmatic and syntactic communicative level.

In my opinion, however, such model (continuum, scale) cannot be employed with reference to the very category of non-verbal behaviours constituted by co-expressive gestures. First of all, this is because usually one such gesture fulfils several functions at a time in a given context and at a specific moment of narration or dialogue. An observation to a similar effect can be found in McNeill's description of "layering": "Basically, the term means that single gestures convey content on the discourse and narrative levels simultaneously" (2005, p. 172). Three discourse levels are referred to: paranarrative ("The narrator steps out of her role as storyteller and speaks for herself, addressing the listener. The PN level is interpersonal. Pointing in the direction of the listener is a characteristic gesture at this level"); metanarrative ("The narrator speaks within her role as

² Very interesting research: Harry Bunt (2011) and his Dynamic Interpretation Theory–DIT.

official storyteller and makes a reference to the structure of the narration qua narration. The MN level is intertextual. Metaphoric gestures tend to occur at this level”) and narrative (“The narrator speaks within the storyteller role and refers to an event from the story. The N level is intratextual. (...). Iconic gestures are dominant here.”) (McNeill 2005, pp. 172–173). The concept of layering clearly shows the multidimensionality and multifunctionality of co-expressive gestures.

I believe, though, that despite the complexity of gesture functionality, we can speak of one of several simultaneous functions of a gesture being displayed or profiled, and of its special role in the communication process at a particular stage. This does not mean, however, that other functions (of a particular gesture at a particular moment of speaking) do not exist, that they are not fulfilled by the gesture or that they are irrelevant.

The research on gestures to date is related to various perspectives: psychological, anthropological, cognitive and linguistic. These approaches result in many methodological proposals. In this context, it is worth recalling the works of Susan Goldin-Meadow (1999), Alan Cienki and Cornelia Müller (2008), Sotaro Kita and Aslı Özyürek (2003), Autumn Hostetter and Martha Alibali (2008), Herbert Clark (1996), Janet Bavelas (1994), Marianne Gullberg (2009). Many scientist’s work, even if the scientists themselves are not directly involved in research on gestures, is often used in that field (such as the theory of conceptual blending, cf. Fauconnier, Turner, 2002 or multimodality, cf. Forceville, 2009). The proposed model of multifunctional gestures presented in this article takes into account these approaches as theoretical background.

Results

The conclusions presented here are based on my research and observations, in particular my studies of gestures occurring during dialogue and their meaning-constituting role. The attempt to indicate the areas of dialogue in which gestures contribute to meaning constitution was successful. Dividing gestures according to these areas, however, assigning gestures to them, is not possible. The value of such procedure is only descriptive, model-oriented; its effects should not be treated as a classification.

The multifunctionality of gestures is especially apparent in dialogue, an interactional mode of communication. The alternation of conversational roles, the dynamics of dialogue, and, as Grice would put it (1975), the cooperative principle, which in a way demands combined effort, spontaneous meaning negotiation and tuning in with one’s interlocutor semantically and pragmatically, produce gestures of a particularly kind. These are ideational, modal, interactional, and interpersonal gestures. Yet using these adjectives (generic attributes) when describing

kinds of gestures amounts to a gross simplification. In fact, the above-listed adjectives refer to the planes of dialogue: ideational, modal, interactional and interpersonal (Załaźnińska 2006). Gestures constitute these planes together with words uttered by the interlocutors, as well as with other non-verbal behaviours performed by dialogue participants (e.g. mimic expressions, body posture, head movements).

The ideational plane

The ideational plane of dialogue is the layer which, in a semiotic sense, includes facts, ideas, content. A dialogue always concerns something, it is always about something. Even if its character is predominantly phatic (Malinowski 1923), it still relates to something outside language, directing human thoughts towards the extralinguistic reality.

The gestures from the ideational plane are a visual means of expressing the conceptualisations of ideas presented in dialogue by the speaker. However, they do not copy the words which they accompany, they do not repeat them in a gestural form, and hence they are not semantically redundant to the verbal message. This is because they express the meanings of ideas, rather than the meanings of words. According to Jolanta Antas, “ideational gestures are not pictorial images of the words uttered by the speaker, but rather the icons of thoughts hiding behind those words and phrases” (Antas 2009, p. 6; see also Antas, Załaźnińska 2004). They point to the way in which ideas are conceptualised, profiling the aspect of meaning which the speaker, at a given moment (context), finds the most significant, and emphasising the semantically relevant features of the complex gestalt of thought. An example of such a gesture is one made by the host of an entertainment programme on the Polish TV, who, speaking to his guest, said: “Sometimes when watching those various actors, I then try to imagine...”. The words: “watching those various actors” were accompanied by a gesture simulating remote control zapping (right arm stretched out, hand closed as when holding a remote control, thumb moving as when switching the buttons). The verbal phrase did not contain any indicator pointing to such conceptualisation; the gesture revealed what the speaker had in mind when he mentioned watching actors.

Another example is the statement “there are cycles in nature”, accompanied by the movement of the right hand drawing a curved line—a sine wave. Of course, it is not difficult to understand this statement without referring to the gesture that accompanies the words. Nevertheless, the word “cycle” connotes repetition and processuality. In an utterance constructed in this way, however, there are no lexical units that would indicate what kind of cycle the speaker is referring to. This meaning is shown only by a gesture in this context, “cycles” are alternately

rising and falling, increasing and decreasing the level. This is the repeatability of alternation.

The modal plane

Closely linked to the ideational plane, the modal plane is an epistemic and deontic framework for the presented content, ideas, concepts. The ideas expressed, presented or revealed in dialogue are never on their own; the speaker, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly, relates to the content of his utterance: he or she modalises it.

The gestures belonging to the modal plane serve to fulfil this task. They constitute a gestural framework for the signs from the ideational plane. The modal frame can be created nonverbally in three ways. Firstly, a gesture can constitute it together with a verbal modality marker. For example, when asked a question by his dialogue partner, the interlocutor said: "I don't know why," spreading his hands (forearms stretching out perpendicularly to the gesturer's body, hands spreading horizontally wider than in the initial position).

Secondly: a gesture can constitute the modal frame on its own. For example, when saying: "a Polish woman behaves towards a Pole differently than towards a foreigner," the speaker, seated at a table, gestured his right hand, lightly tapping the table palm-down several times, which (as other examples demonstrate) serves to emphasise that the assertion uttered is truthful and incontestable.

Thirdly, a gesture can modify the modal frame introduced by a verbal marker of modality. This is especially visible in utterances involving the performative verb "please" accompanied by gestures made with a hand clenched but for the straightened index finger, moving up and down several times (a gesture expressing command).

The interactional plane

The interactional plane of dialogue concerns an almost technically dialogic sphere: the interlocutors' activities which enable conversational turn taking, references to previous utterances, metadialogic indicators of the course of the dialogue process. The tangibility of this dialogue plane and its importance are closely related to the dynamics of this type of interaction.

Gestures from the interactional plane have been distinguished by Janet Bavelas and her team (1992, 1995, 2000). My research also shows that such gestures, on the one hand, play the role of signs of the dialogic structure, and, on the other, function as signs of the conversational activities undertaken by the participants of the dialogue. Thus, they can be said to be both metalinguistic and

metacommunicative. An example of a gesture from this plane is the hand movement of a person referring to her interlocutor's words. She said "earlier, you've talked about school," performing a gesture with her open right hand, palm directed down and left, fingers straight, tight together, perpendicular to the interlocutor. The movement of the hand was single, along a curve, towards the speaker and distinctly directed toward the left. This deictic gesture not only pointed to the conversation partner's utterance (referring to it), but also clearly indicated its temporal location in the near past of the dialogue (movement towards the left as a consequence of the cultural, spatial and linear conceptualisation of time).

The interpersonal plane

The interpersonal plane of dialogue is not only a psychological fact. Its significance was discussed for example by Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson, who demonstrated that all communication must have both a content aspect and a relational one (1967). The same observation can be deduced from Bühler's (1990 [1934]) axiom about three faces of a sign (symbolic, appellative and symptomatic). I believe that the interpersonal plane exists as a space of dialogue, as its irreducible area, but it can also be created and expressed by the interlocutors.

The interpersonal plane gestures are manifestations of the development and communication of relations (both positive and negative) between the participants of dialogue. From the point of view of interlocutors, such gestures are of utmost importance, and their effects influence not only the relations themselves, but also the dynamics, the course, and finally also the ideational plane of the dialogue. In the case of the interpersonal plane it is especially visible how different signs, traditionally called nonverbal, become the carriers of relational meanings. Gestures intertwine and co-occur with facial expression, changes in body posture, head movements and language prosody.

A complex example illustrating this point is the situation where one person interrupted the other's utterance, saying, in a raised voice (albeit using polite conventional phrasing): "excuse me, but the public opinion polls don't concur with the actual results". This was accompanied by a whole array of behaviours expressing a negative attitude: the author of the interruption turned her head away from her partner, her chin was lifted, eyes narrowed, there was no eye-contact. There also occurred a gesture: one hand, reached towards the interlocutor, with palm first directed downwards, was then raised and drawn closer to the gesturers face, creating a kind of a blockade, a barrier.

Hand gestures with the index finger pointing towards the interlocutor are extremely aggressive. Such a gesture is not only a pointing gesture, but it also expresses a relationship to a communication partner. It is offensive, aggressive and

introduces clearly negative emotions that are always felt by the recipient of such a message. This usually results in the transfer of even the most substantive discussion to the level of an argument, where it is not the content plan, but the relationship plan, that becomes the subject of attention.

Discussion

The division proposed in the present paper is not concurrent with any previously developed classifications of gestures. This is because it does not refer to the very semiotic nature of gestures, but rather originates from a suprasemiotic attempt at presenting the dialogue structure. What I mean is not the organisational structure of interaction (which has been presented in Poyatos's model (2002)), but the spaces semantically and pragmatically relevant for dialogue participants: spaces which constitute dialogue and whose signs (verbal and nonverbal) continuously reappear and intertwine in the course of dialogue.

That said, comparing my division of gestures to the one proposed by David McNeill (1992), one can distinguish evident and interesting analogies and references. The ideational plane is constituted mainly by iconic and metaphoric gestures. The modal one – by beats. As far as the interactional and interpersonal planes are concerned, though, such distinct (though not fully unequivocal) parallels are not easy to find. Gestures constituting these dialogue planes represent various McNeillian categories: iconics, metaphorics, beats, deictics, as well as cohesives. This does not, however, pose methodological problems, as the bases of the two classifications (dialogue-oriented and McNeill's) are of a different nature and hence they are not mutually contestable or cancelling.

There are, however, at least two other issues which might initially strike us as problematic and as such require some explanation.

Firstly, is it possible to separate the planes of dialogue in a definite way? Can one draw clear-cut, fixed borders between the ideational, modal, interactional and interpersonal plane? Dialogue involves a constant interplay of these planes. What concerns the plane of ideation gets modalised, interactionally negotiated and contains an emotional charge of the interpersonal plane. Presenting certain ideas to the partner in dialogue (ideation) requires taking a stance towards them (modalisation), and demands participation in the dialogue and the acceptance of its rules (interaction). At the same time, it reveals interpersonal attitudes, the relations between the participants of the interaction. Hence, the planes of dialogue are rather its spaces, which commingle and overlap, existing alongside and in one another. It is not possible to set them apart clearly, delineating uncrossable borders. Thus, the arrangement in question is just an abstract model, which is nevertheless necessary for a scholarly description of the communicational dialogic interaction.

Secondly, can signs (whether verbal or nonverbal) be classified definitely as representatives of the particular planes? Does the belonging to one plane exclude the belonging to another? In view of the answers to the previous questions, these seem obvious. If the dialogue planes commingle and contain one another, and their separation is an operation performed for the purposes of research only, the signs representing these planes must necessarily belong to all and constitute the signs of all these spaces (planes). Material analysis corroborates this logical conclusion.

A gesture representing one plane at the same time can (and usually does) constitute a sign of a different plane. An ideational plane gesture not only expresses the speaker's understanding of a given concept, but also actively shapes the understanding process on the part of the recipient. Consequently, it is a sign of interactional cooperation.

A gesture from the modal plane, in turn, must express the gesturer's attitude to something; its existence is based on a relation towards something. Its point of reference is the ideational plane. At the same time, it fulfils pragmatic functions. This implies references to the interactional plane; for instance, moving one's hands alternately in a pendulum-like manner during the interaction partner's utterance is an expression of reserved hesitation in the assessment of what he or she is saying, and hence a sign of modality, but at the same time also functions as feedback information, which is interactional by nature. The pragmatic functions entail also references to the interpersonal plane (e.g. the deontic commanding quality of the gesture of a down-pointing middle finger, expressing irrevocability and disregard for the interlocutor's opinion). It may also happen that a modal plane gesture clearly refers to both the interactional and interpersonal plane as well. To give an example: addressing his interlocutor, the participant of a dialogue utters the words "go ahead, please!". This is accompanied by a gesture: a dynamic and sharp pointing of the straightened index finger at the interlocutor (the whole arm is straight, stretching out perpendicular to the torso, the remaining four fingers clench into a fist). Such a gesture expresses command, thus modifying the actual pragmatic status of the utterance as expressed on the verbal level (i.e. a "request"). It also constitutes a sign of the interactional plane, concerning as it does the structure of the dialogue, namely a turn point in conversation. At the same time, it reveals the gesturer's attitude towards the interlocutor: the fact that, since an order has been used, the former leaves the latter no choice, no right to take an independent decision, clearly threatens the interlocutor's face (Goffman 1955; Brown, Levinson 1987). Thus, this gesture is a sign of the interpersonal plane.

More often than not, gestures from the interactional plane are a metadialogic confirmation of the conversational cooperation, and at the same time constitute signs of cooperation (agreement) on the ideational plane. This is especially true

for gestures of narrative empathy (cf. “motor mimicry,” Bevelas et al. 1986). Taking over, a dialogue participant sometimes copies a gesture of his or her partner (e.g. performs the same gesture expressing an idea). On the one hand, such a repeated gesture fulfils an interactional function, binding the dialogue together, referring to something which has already been said, expressed before (in this respect, it could be seen as a kind of McNeill’s cohesive), while on the other hand it indicates mutual understanding on the conceptual level of creating, negotiating and sharing the same mental images; it could be paraphrased as “I see and I understand what you’re talking about, I mean the same thing”. As a matter of fact, it would be difficult to develop a better definition of understanding on the ideational plane.

As far as the gestural signs of the interpersonal plane are concerned, there are relatively few or relatively many of them. This paradox lends itself to explanation when the perspective from which we approach gestures is taken into account. If we were to look for gestures which are predominantly signs of interpersonal relations, in most dialogues this group would not be very extensive. Moreover, it is easier to come across interpersonal plane gestures expressing a negative attitude; those expressing a positive attitude are more difficult to find. In the course of my research, I have repeatedly encountered this phenomenon. Perhaps it might be a culturally-specific characteristic of Polish conversations (I have not had the opportunity to conduct comparative studies). That said, the analysis of research material suggests an explanation of this tendency. Dialogic situations which would demonstrate positive behaviours indicating good partner relations are so difficult to find, because in such cases nothing seems to draw one’s attention to the interpersonal plane. It is not salient in the sense that there are no clearly discernible behaviours (gestures) belonging to this plane. This is because the relations are maintained smoothly: the gestures which build positive interpersonal relations are at the same time those which shape a successful dialogue on other planes. Thus, the paradox of the large and small number of interpersonal plane gestures can be solved: in fact, there are quite many of them, if we perceive gestures characteristic of other planes as those which to a large extent can constitute the signs of interpersonal relations occurring and undergoing changes between dialogue participants.

Conclusions

Adopting a model of dialogue based on the co-existence and interplay of its planes, or in fact its spaces, one consequently has to accept the categorial fuzziness of signs occurring in these areas, as manifested in word and gesture. The difficulty which one encounters when attempting a definite classification of a gesture

into a given plane does not result from misrecognition. The situation becomes clear when one looks at a gestures as a sign fulfilling several functions simultaneously: a sign which belongs to several planes. Jakobson's model of language functions becomes reliable only when one takes into account its author's claim of the multifunctional interpretation. This is also how the model of (nonverbal) dialogue structure is to be understood. Gestures are multifunctional, i.e. they fulfil several dialogic functions at a time: representing the spaces of ideation, modalisation, interaction and interpersonal relations. Indubitably, though (just as in Jakobson's view), in most cases one of the functions comes to the fore, dominates and is easy to recognise. Consequently, the remaining ones may slip into the background, staying unprofiled. At first glance, they seem not to play any role, as one function (the profiled one) determines the character of the gesture. A closer analysis shows, however, that gestures are "opalescent" with different functions. This is corroborated also by the reactions of dialogue participants, who relate to the semanticity of gestures in its whole complexity. Therefore, it would be especially worthwhile to pursue research on such dialogic situations in which the interlocutor (recipient) reacts to a non-foregrounded function of a gesture. Such investigations would help answer further questions on the multifunctionality of gestures accompanying speech in dialogue.

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STRESZCZENIE

Powstało dotychczas wiele klasyfikacji i typologii gestów. Gesty jednak wymykają się jednoznaczny przyporządkowaniom. Przedstawiony artykuł dotyczy gestów, które towarzyszą spontanicznej mowie podczas dialogu twarzą w twarz. Zmienność ról konwersacyjnych, dynamika, zasada współpracy, wymuszająca niejako współdziałanie, spontaniczne negocjowanie znaczeń i semantyczno-pragmatyczne dostrajanie się do interlokutora – wyzwalają gesty o szczególnie multifunkcyjnym charakterze. Dialog to nieustanne przenikanie się jego przestrzeni: ideacyjnej, modalnej, interakcyjnej i interpersonalnej. Nie jest możliwe jednoznaczne rozdzielenie tych przestrzeni i wskazanie nieprzekraczalnych granic. Dlatego też gesty (znaki) reprezentujące te przestrzenie muszą przynależeć do wszystkich i być znakami wszystkich tych przestrzeni. Opisane w artykule przykłady dowodzą, że gesty są w szczególności sposobem multifunkcyjnym: pełnią jednocześnie kilka funkcji dialogowych (reprezentowania przestrzeni ideacji, modalizacji, interakcji i interpersonalnych relacji). Funkcje te jednak widoczne są w różnym natężeniu. Podobnie jak w modelu funkcji komunikatu Romana Jakobsona, zwykle jedna z nich wysuwa się na plan pierwszy i łatwo ją rozpoznać,

a pozostałe są w ten sposób niewyprofilowane. W istocie jednak gest zawsze „opalizuje” różnymi funkcjami.

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