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Viewers as Performers

Dynamic Approaches to Gesture Observation and Gestural Meaning-making

Gestures are spontaneously produced to articulate and communicate experience. Most prominent and frequent in conversational interaction are hand movements that 'manu-facture' (Streeck 2008) a variety of meanings. Whatever communicative functions are *performed* (depictive, cohesive, argumentative, conceptualizing, etc.), and whatever socio-cognitive processes seem to be *enacted*, gestural action is a 'fabrication activity' (Kendon 2004), a 'living' (Jousse 1955) and situated form of *symbolic action* (Calbris 2010) that few language students ever learn to *scrutinize*, *analyze*, let alone *utilize*. The aim of this presentation is to show that creative and dynamic approaches to gesture observation can be developed at different instructional levels; that dimensions of movement, patterns and motifs lend themselves to combined academic *and* choreographic explorations; that identifying gestural displays of 'angles', 'stances', and 'construals' may prove extremely useful to design controlled forms of *conceptual action* (e.g. producing body-based, imagistic concepts for modality) ; that giving kinesthetic form to sociogrammatical processes (e.g. interpersonal manipulation; linguistic politeness) helps learners understand that grammar has a body-based dramatic and conceptual structure.

Observing gestural activity dynamically, and reflecting on language using manual thinking methods may be done in different ways. The following illustrations, based on experimental research, will be given:

The 'term project' approach: students studying for a master's degree (in English language, culture and educational pedagogy) are asked to make a one minute *dance film*, using selected co-speech gestures as their dance or movement material. Strict guidelines are imposed regarding the type and number of gestures, as well as the reference video corpus. A sequence of 6 original hand movements is formed, studied, and interpreted from a combined scholarly and artistic perspective. The films are all shot on the same day, in the recording studio of the university, with a high definition camera. Each participating student is cast in the blended roles of 'researcher', 'choreographer', 'performer' and 'film maker'. The gesture sequence is performed a number of times, with progressively added variations, in silence or to the accompaniment of set musical pieces. An introduction analyzing the symbolic properties of the source gestures and explaining the student's artistic choices is required as a written supplement to the film. After shooting the video dance and completing the written assignment, students fill in a questionnaire (the results of which will be given during the presentation).



The 'workshop approach':

- University students (aged 20-28) are shown a short video excerpt (in mute mode) and asked to observe and imitate the gestural action of speakers during a conversational exchange. At this stage, the primary focus is on pure gesture form. A selection is made, combinations are formed and idiosyncratic variations developed. Eventually, choreographed gesture sequences are performed, alone, in pairs, and as a group. The video excerpt is shown one last time, with the sound turned on. The original gestures are aligned with their original functions ('depictive', 'cohesive', 'argumentative', 'grammatical', etc.) and meanings ('simple', 'complex', 'schematic', 'iconic', 'metaphoric', etc.). Having developed a conscious, embodied awareness of gesture, participants tend to show greater perceptiveness and involvement in gesture analysis.
- Schoolchildren (aged 9-11) are presented with a number of speech-related gestures that co-express grammatical meanings and processes (e.g. shifting back in time, repetition and on-goingness, positive or negative assertion, approximation, hesitancy). As they come to realize, grammar has a particular dramatic quality: it is visibly *acted out* by speakers and may be regarded as a form of concrete *symbolic action* performed on the *conversational stage*. The degree of understanding of this process can be assessed. An example is given, involving drawings of «modality» made after an intense «grammar and movement» session, in which pure bodily action was gradually turned into conceptual action.

References

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