

research note

Pragmatic Gestures in Russian Retellings of “The Pear Stories”

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Abstract. In this paper we investigate pragmatic gestures, which appear with speech and are often considered along with illustrators (spontaneous co-speech gesticulation). While illustrators have no standard form and are connected to the content of the story, pragmatic gestures deal with the process of speaking, the communicators’ interaction, the speaker’s intentions and assessments, and have some distinctive features that can be observed in various contexts. The findings presented in this article show that pragmatic gestures are language-specific, vary widely in their realization and can combine with illustrators successively or simultaneously. The study is based on the “RuPeCS — Russian Pear Chats and Stories” corpus (<http://multidiscourse.ru/>).

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Keywords: multimodality, gesticulation, illustrators, pragmatic gestures, recurrent gestures, gesture families, co-speech gestures

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Gestures are used by people to explicate meanings that duplicate or add to what is said verbally; they give structure to speech flow or communication process. According to Efron (1972), gestures used in everyday communication are categorized as emblems, illustrators or regulators. Emblems are units similar to language signs; they have stable form and meaning, their shape is not determined by their denotation and we learn them in the same way as we learn words of a spoken language. Illustrators change their form depending on the speaker’s intentions, and convey only important information (McNeill, 1992). Thus we have two distinct classes, although some gestures can change their meaning, moving from illustrators to emblems through the process of conventionalization.

As for regulators, their functioning in speech is less clear. Creating, maintaining and closing communication

are mentioned as their role. Moreover, some information given by interlocutors is not connected with the story being told but refers to their intentions, assessments and presumptions. This information is considered metadiscursive and in speech is expressed by special markers and constructions. In narration, examples include “I’ll tell you a story about...”, “It happened (not) a long time ago...”, “The story was quite strange...”; “And then we see...”, “And the boy we saw in the beginning...”, “At this time...”; “That’s all”, “So it ends up”. Phrases like these reveal the structure of a story and show the speaker’s attitude to the described events. At the same time, words are not always appropriate to transfer such information in communication, being too long or unclear, so it is often conveyed only through gestures which specialize in these meanings.

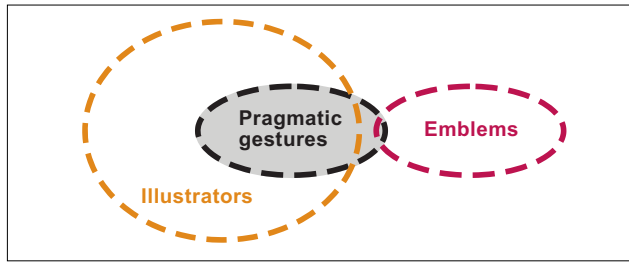


Figure 1. Types of gestures that combine with speech.

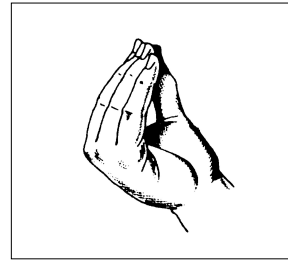


Figure 2. *Mano a borsa* – Purse hand (from De Jorio, 1832, Fig. 20-6).

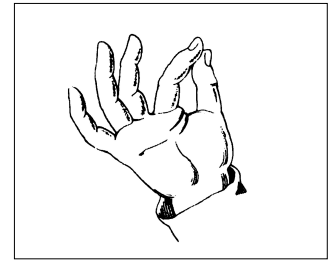


Figure 3. The ring (from De Jorio, 1832, Fig. 20-5).

Approaches to Describing Pragmatic Meanings in Gesture

Previous research has shown that some gestures are coordinated with information that does not concern the plot of the story or even what is actually said. These gestures are referred to as pragmatic (Kendon, 2004), interactive (Bavelas, Chovil, Lawrie, & Wade, 1992), recurrent (Müller, Bressemer, & Ladewig, 2013), performative or discursive (Alamillo, Colletta, & Guidetti, 2013). These labels reveal different aspects of their meanings and functions in discourse. Some authors describe these gestures as gesture families, indicating formal similarity (but not identity) of signs with comparable functions in different contexts (Kendon, 2004; Bressemer & Müller, 2014). McNeill (1992) gives examples of metaphoric, citing gestures with clear pragmatic functions, although distinguishing this category in a rather different way. Grishina (2017) also distinguishes pragmatic gestures from substantive ones (following Kendon's division; see Kendon, 1995). She also describes the functions of pragmatic gestures: showing illocutionary force of the utterance or the speaker's attitude towards a listener's words and behavior, regulation of speech flow and attracting a listener's attention to a part of the utterance.

There is a group of gestures usually related to illustrators, but with certain differences in meaning, form and use. By combining different approaches, we can see that these gestures retain some formal features in various contexts. They do not illustrate the content of the story, but rather indent it, placing it into a given context. They can signal a hidden question, mark a new protagonist, signal a switch to another topic and perform other pragmatic functions not always expressed in words.

These gestures are in some ways different from illustrators. First, pragmatic gestures are more stable in form, though not as immutable as emblems. Kendon (2004) introduced the term “gesture family” to describe gestures that display similarities in form and meaning. In spite of these similarities, there are very different realizations of, for example, the ‘palm up open hand’ gesture (PUOH, Müller 2004; see Figures 7a and 8), and their functions can be quite various. The other feature is the relation to the speech content: they structure the discourse or give some cues about how the words should be interpreted, rather than simply illustrating the words. Additionally, they can be observed in a variety of cultures, unlike emblems, although with slight differences in form.

Pragmatic gestures therefore seem to hold the middle ground between illustrators and emblems regarding recurrence in form (remarkable but not total) and relation to the story being told. On the other hand, they cannot be used without speech, unlike emblems, but some pragmatic gestures come very close to doing so. Taking into account that illustrators are very common in speech and have numerous potential realizations, schematically we can represent co-speech gestures as the circles shown in Figure 1.

Italian and German Pragmatic Gestures

Italian pragmatic gestures. For Italian, Kendon (2004) describes two examples of pragmatic gestures mentioned in the book by De Jorio published in 1832. They are the ‘purse hand’ (*mano a borsa*, see Figure 2) and the ‘ring’ (see Figure 3).

Following Kendon, the ‘purse hand’ function in discourse marks a question even in the absence of any overt request for information.



Figure 4. Cyclic gesture (based on Bressemer & Mueller, 2014).

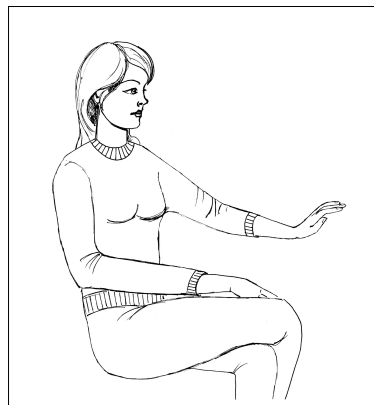


Figure 5. Holding away gesture (based on Bressemer & Mueller, 2014).

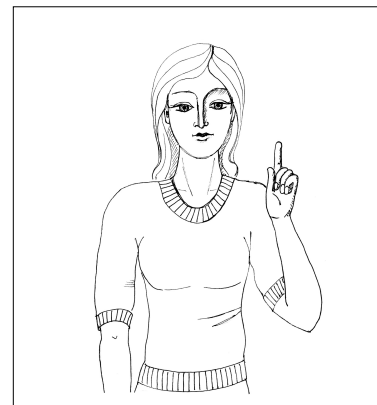


Figure 6. Stretched index finger — held (based on Bressemer & Mueller, 2014).

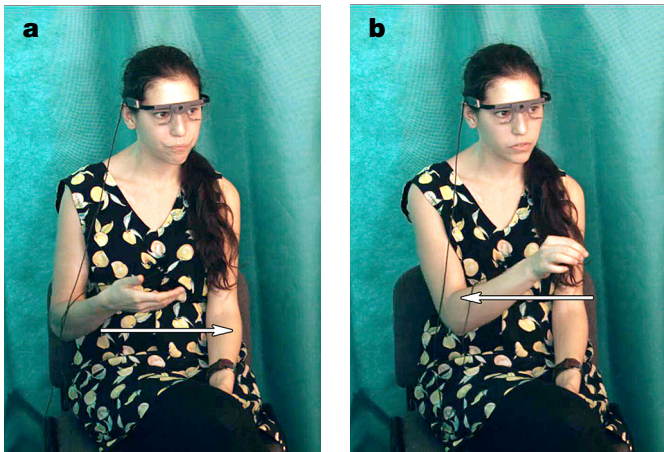


Figure 7. PUOH as presentation of an object (a) and successive iconic description of its form (b).¹

The meaning of ‘the ring’ gesture is quite vague; generally it conveys ‘exactness’ or ‘the main point’.

German pragmatic gestures. Cornelia Müller and her colleagues proposed a dictionary of German pragmatic gestures containing 16 entries with their formal characteristics, functions and illocutionary meanings (Bressem & Müller, 2014). The gestures are called recurrent, which reflects their repetitive form, and are divided into three groups. The first group unites gestures that vary widely in form and meaning and are used in conjunction with speech. An example of such a gesture is shown in Figure 4.

The cyclic gesture is a ‘continuous rotational movement, performed away from the body’ and is used when the speaker searches for or requests a word or a concept. There is a similar sign in Russian gestural behavior in the same context; it is also performed away from the body, although not to the side but rather towards the listener.

The second group of German recurrent gestures consists of units that also show variability of form, but here a few occurrences without speech are registered. An example of a repetitive gesture which assumes different realizations and can be used without speech is ‘holding away’, as seen in Figure 5.

The ‘holding away’ gesture is performed with “flat open hand(s), palm vertically away from speakers’ body, moved or held outwards” and explicates “refusal, stopping something from intrusion, stopping from continuation, rejecting a speaker’s or hearer’s topic of talk” (Bressem & Müller, 2014, p. 1601–1602).

The last group includes gestures that are much more stable in form and can replace speech, so they are similar to emblems in this regard. An example here is a stretched index finger held vertically (Figure 6). It is used to draw ‘the attention of other participants to new and particular important topics of talk as well as to signaling thematic shifts, such as when dismissing the statement of others’.

Pragmatic Gestures in Russian Speakers’ Narration

We investigated pragmatic gestures in narration using the material of Russian Pear Chats and Stories Corpus (for more details see Fedorova, Kibrik, Korotaev, Litvinenko & Nikolaeva, 2016; Kibrik, 2018). The participants watched and then retold and discussed the Pear Film (Chafe, 1980;

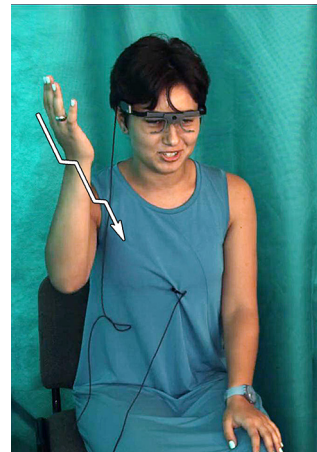


Figure 8. PUOH combined with iconic gesture showing trajectory of movement.

www.linguistics.ucsb.edu/faculty/chafe/pearfilm.htm). Some recordings can be found at www.multidiscourse.ru (currently under construction). We studied the context for pragmatic gestures and their functions.

The most common example of a pragmatic gesture in our corpus was the ‘palm up open hand’ (PUOH; see Müller, 2004), also called the ‘conduit metaphor’ (see McNeill, 1992). While pragmatic gestures may constitute up to 35% of a speaker’s total gestures, PUOH accounts for 30–40% of all pragmatic gestures. Here we should note that gesture features depend greatly on context and vary considerably between different speakers, so comparing the gestural behavior of different people is not always possible.

Although Italian and German examples of pragmatic gestures present clear and distinctly articulated single entries, in our recordings we often found combinations of pragmatic and illustrative gestures. They can be combined either successively (Figures 7a and 7b) or simultaneously (Figure 8). The gesture in Figure 7 accompanied the speaker’s words, “The bicycle with such a ... emm... with such a high... how it is called, such a stick”. The first part of the gesture is a PUOH (presentation of a bicycle to the listener) and the second one describes the frame of the bicycle.

Figure 8 shows that presentation of a character and depiction of its movement can be amalgamated into one movement. Here the speaker uses the gesture while saying, “When the man comes down the ladder...”.

The second most frequent gesture in our corpus was a swaying that explicated approximation or uncertainty, also mentioned by Bressem and Müller (2014). It is usually performed with one hand (Figure 9).

Also very common although not mentioned in other studies were gestures revealing different kinds of containers or referents. While PUOH depicts the bottom of a possible container entity, some gestures show the top (Figure 10) or its back side. The form and trajectory of the movements depend on the amount and the size of the meant referent. An arc is used for a large object or an abundance of things. The same gesture was used with the words “altogether” or “on the whole”.

There were a few less typical examples which still are worth mentioning because of their formal features. It looks plausible that while selecting examples of pragmatic gestures one should pay attention not only to hands but also to head and torso movements. Figure 11 presents a gesture

¹ All participants gave written consent to publish their photographs.



Figure 9. Approximation.

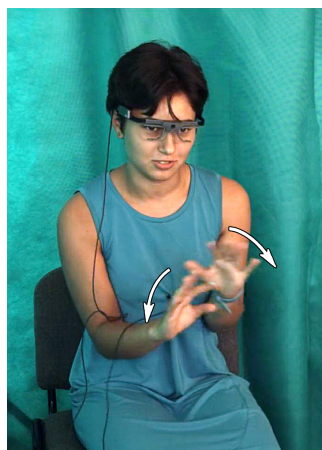


Figure 10. Reference to something in abundance.

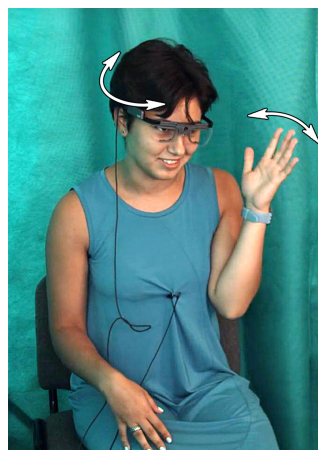


Figure 11. Listening and uncertainty.

which should be interpreted together with the head shaking simultaneously with hand rotation. The gesture accompanied the words “there is a sound from somewhere” and illustrated listening to something unclear and uncertain. This movement reveals the speaker’s cognitive processes (an attempt to recognize or figure out something).

Generalizations about the potential meanings for pragmatic gestures lead to the following three types. The first one includes meanings that can be easily expressed through words, which often takes place. Examples are:

- ‘Approximately, nearly’
- ‘It seems that...’
- ‘A kind of...’

The second type of meanings is rarely accompanied by words because kinetic expressions are much faster. For example:

- ‘It’s not important for the story’ (flat palm facing down moves horizontally away from the body; also possible is a short movement downward like throwing something)
- ‘It was unexpected’ (pulling back movement)

The next group of meanings is preferably explicated only through gestures. Among them are:

- Appearance of a new protagonist
- Difficulties during verbalization

We also met in narration the following gestures:

- ‘Landscape/Background’ (palms to the listener, fingers up)
- ‘Nothing’ (in cases like ‘Nothing left’ or ‘Nothing important’ (palms down, symmetrical movement from center to sides and down). It resembles the sweeping gesture from Bressemer and Müller (2014), but is performed with two hands.

- The gesture accompanying the Russian word “voobshche” (which can be translated as ‘in general’, ‘on the whole’ and ‘at all’), performed with two hands following a bow-shape, with palms down going sideways and down from the center.

The last two examples may illustrate the content of speech, but they can also deal with parts of the discourse as well as objects in the narrated world.

We do not consider the list of possible meanings for pragmatic gestures complete, as now their field includes all that is not overtly related to the storyline. The examples described here were found in a particular type of discourse, though combining monologue and dialogue parts. Undoubtedly, other discourse types and genres will reveal more samples and realizations of pragmatic gestures.

Discussion and Conclusion

Pragmatic gestures are often used in discourse but sometimes go unnoticed because of their variable form. Although typical realizations are distinctive and apparently similar between speakers of different languages, at least in European culture, in some cases they are of very small amplitude or not clearly articulated, in the same way people reduce most commonly used words. The most frequent gesture in narration is the PUOH gesture, which is sometimes performed as a movement of a thumb only.

Pragmatic gestures can be combined with illustrators, and this also complicates their recognition. To describe their meanings, one should take into account non-manual movements, because similar hand gestures might be interpreted differently depending on their nonverbal context.

These gestures can be attributed to speech units of very different sizes. As compared to illustrators, pragmatic gestures are more likely to stretch over a few clauses.

Studying pragmatic gestures can shed light on speech production and the speaker’s cognitive processes. For example, a new protagonist in the story and her/his description is often presented with a PUOH gesture, and is often followed by kinetic illustration of her/his actions.

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■ краткие сообщения ■

Прагматические жесты в пересказах «Фильма о грушах» (на русском языке)

Юлия Владимировна Николаева

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Аннотация. В данной работе мы рассматриваем прагматические жесты, которые сопровождают речь и обычно относятся к типу жестов-иллюстраторов — спонтанных жестов, иллюстрирующих слова говорящего и не имеющих стандартной формы. Форма иллюстраторов определяется содержанием слов, как следует из их названия, в то время как прагматические жесты связаны с процессом производства речи, взаимодействием участников коммуникации, намерениями и оценками говорящего, которые он выражает в дополнение к содержанию дискурса. Этим объясняется ряд формальных отличий прагматических жестов от иллюстраторов, которые сохраняются в разных контекстах. Материал, представленный в данной статье, показывает, что форма прагматических жестов может быть обусловлена языком и культурой говорящего; при этом прагматические жесты демонстрируют разнообразие реализаций в разных контекстах. Еще одна их особенность — возможность одновременного или последовательного сочетания с иллюстраторами. Исследование выполнено на материале корпуса «Рассказы и разговоры о грушах» (<http://multidiscourse.ru>).

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Ключевые слова: мультимодальная лингвистика, невербальная коммуникация, иллюстративные жесты, прагматические жесты, устный дискурс, спонтанная жестикуляция

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