
Why stop talking? The contribution of ‘stopping’ gestures to discourse management

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Recognizing language as inherently multimodal is not nearly as radical as it once was (McNeill 1985). In the last two decades, significant attention has been paid to incorporating co-speech gesture into formal semantic models (e.g. Lascarides & Stone 2009; Schlenker 2020). However, the same cannot yet be said for models of discourse structure, despite the well-documented use of interactive and pragmatic gestures in face-to-face interaction (Bavelas et al 1992).

This paper looks at two recurrent manual gestures used to ‘stop’ some action in an ongoing discourse: (i) ‘blocking’ gestures in which a speaker directs their open palm toward their interlocutor, as if to stop an object from entering their immediate bodily space (Wehling 2017), and (ii) ‘one-second’ gestures in which a speaker points upward with their index finger, as if to say “wait a second”. The ‘stopped’ discourse action may relate either to the speaker’s contribution or to an addressee’s potential interpretation. I explore the ways in which this polysemy is reflected in the polysemy of accompanying lexical discourse markers. All data comes from television interviews gathered using the UCLA Television News Archive.

In particular use contexts, stopping gestures are highly conventionalized – they can be used in the absence of speech to convey a pre-specified meaning. Blocking gestures are used as a command to stop movement, and are fully grammaticalized as signs in ASL and BSL. The one-second gesture can be used as a silent request to wait, and is incorporated into other emblematic gestures such as the “shush” gesture. When used with speech, it is more difficult to identify a conventional, pre-specified meaning. Both gestures occur in a wide range of use contexts, with and without co-expressive lexical discourse markers.

The misalignment in distribution of discourse management gestures on the one hand and lexical discourse markers on the other suggests that the two modes of expression contribute meaning independently. I argue that this misalignment between modes can help us to better understand the multidimensionality of discourse relations.

References: • Bavelas, J. B., Chovil, N., Lawrie, D. A., & Wade, A. (1992). Interactive gestures. *Discourse processes*, 15(4), 469-489. • Lascarides, A., & Stone, M. (2009). A formal semantic analysis of gesture. *Journal of Semantics*, 26(4), 393-449. • Schlenker, P. (2020). Gestural grammar. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory*, 38(3), 887-936. • Wehling, E. (2017). Discourse management gestures. *Gesture*, 16(2), 245–276.