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Exploring the gestural meta-brevity by means of the italian Gestibolario entries analysis

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EXPLORING THE *GESTURAL META-BREVITY*
BY MEANS OF THE ITALIAN *GESTIBOLARIO* ENTRIES ANALYSIS

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Résumé : Cet article a pour objectif d'introduire et d'examiner la notion de *méta-concision de gestes* en analysant deux entrées dans le nouveau dictionnaire italien de gestes qui a été développé en tant que dernière partie du projet de recherche *Gestibolario*. La notion de *méta-concision* a été notamment inventée pour décrire la manière dont l'italien a codifié les gestes coverbaux traités dans le dictionnaire comme des formes communicatives courtes et pour exprimer le contexte sémantique de *concision*. Les gestes, tirés du contexte politique, sont ceux de l'ex-Premier Ministre italien, Monsieur Matteo Renzi, choisi en tant que locuteur typique de l'italien langue maternelle (italien L1) élaborant un discours accompagné par des gestes. Le dictionnaire s'adresse particulièrement aux locuteurs slovaques L1 et aux interprètes traducteurs de l'italien langue étrangère.

Mots-clés : *méta-concision de gestes*, *Gestibolario* italien, dictionnaire italien de gestes coverbaux, contexte politique, Matteo Renzi, futurs interprètes de congrès L1 slovaque et italien langue étrangère.

Abstract: This paper aims to introduce and investigate the notion of gestural meta-brevity analyzing two entries in a new synchronic Italian gestures dictionary that has been developed as the last part of the research project called *Gestibolario*. The notion of gestural meta-brevity has been specifically coined to describe how the Italian codified coverbal gestures, treated in the dictionary as short communicative forms, articulate the semantic sphere of brevity. Gestures are drawn from the political context and produced by the ex Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, selected as typical speaker of Italian mother tongue (Italian L1) for gesturing in speech. The dictionary is particularly addressed to Slovak L1 and Italian Foreign-Language (IFL) future conference interpreters.

Keywords: gestural meta-brevity, Italian *Gestibolario*, Italian coverbal gestures dictionary, political context, Matteo Renzi, Slovak L1 and IFL future conference interpreters.

INTRODUCTION TO THE *GESTURAL META-BREVITY* AND AIM OF THE RESEARCH

In this work we first introduce the notion of *gestural meta-brevity*, which will be detailed and discussed later, and elucidate the aim of the research conducted for supporting it. Along with the concept of *gestural meta-brevity*, we will explicit a terminological label that defines how gestures, which can be intended (for now in a very general way) as short communicative forms in speaking, convey certain meanings belonging to the semantic sphere of brevity.

On the one hand the aim of this study is to probe this concept by analysing two gestural entries taken from the *Gestibolario*, which, on the other hand, will allow us to look into the portion of the sphere of brevity corresponding to the analysed entries.

The *Gestibolario* is a research project (further referred to it as PRG = *Progetto di Ricerca Gestibolario*) focused on the development of a model used to refine a survey tool, currently unpublished, for studying Italian gestures, within the context of teaching and learning Italian as a foreign language (IFL) by Slovak students enrolled in an interpreting and translation studies course. The PRG is structured into two sections. The first section shows the results of some activities carried out in this specific context, on the basis of new procedures (on which necessity, cf. Giovannini, 2014) that suggest practical exercises and lead to theoretical reflections about gestures starting from authentic inputs, both written and spoken, and that may be included in a redefined academic curriculum of linguistic education (Poggi, 1997), that fosters the continuous and complete development of future interpreters and translators' verbal and nonverbal communication skills. The second section, with respect to which the first one serves as empirical basis, includes a new short dictionary of Italian gestures. This is exactly the section of the PRG into which we will delve deeper, in order to achieve the aforesaid aims.

Before detailing the structure of the dictionary, we will briefly present the two research approaches adopted in the literature to delineate and classify gestures (cf. Telmon, 2009).

TYPOLOGICAL AND PARAMETRIC APPROACH TO GESTURES

In its etymological and common meaning, a gesture is a movement, particularly of hands and arms (signal), produced to carry out actions. A gesture communicates if, instead, it is produced by a speaker to convey certain meanings (Poggi & Magno Caldognetto, 1997a; Poggi, 2006, p. 55). In this research paper we will only refer to communicative gestures¹.

For the purpose of tracing a typological taxonomy of gestures, we will take into consideration the early works of Ekman & Friesen (1969; 1972) where the authors recognise three types of hand movements:

¹ A non-communicative gesture becomes communicative depending on the context. For example, the gesture of *grabbing and putting the phone down forcefully on the table* can replace the Italian utterance “*Posalo e ascolta la lezione*”, “Put it away and listen to the lesson”, when produced by a teacher addressing a student in a classroom situation. We will write in *italic form* the aspects related to the signal, and we will put between “quotation marks” the meanings and the verbal utterances that can replace or accompany the gesture production.

- emblems (or symbolic gestures), which within a specific language and culture have a direct and clear verbal translation because they are codified. They can stand on their own and, in fact, they can replace a verbal utterance completely;
- illustrators are not produced in the absence of speech, in fact, they are closely linked to it (the batons articulate, stress or emphasise a specific word or phrase like stick movements (up and down, down)); ideographs trace the path or the direction of a thought; deictic movements are used to point out a present object; spatial movements are used to describe a spatial relationship; rhythmic movements are used to reproduce timing; kinetographs are used to depict a movement of the body; pictographs mimic their referent);
- adaptors help us adapt to a specific communicative situation in order to cope with diverse emotional states (self-adaptors consist in self-manipulation of one's own face or body; alter-adaptors are produced by a sender towards a receiver; object-adaptors involve the use or manipulation of some supporting object).

The types and subtypes described earlier can be arbitrary (if the relationship between signal and meaning is not motivated), iconic (a gesture is iconic and, therefore, motivated, if its movement visually delivers its meaning)², or intrinsic (a gesture *does not stand* for a meaning, but it is its meaning).

The typological approach would have subsequently influenced the gestures classification of McNeill (1992; 2005), who not only reintroduces the emblematic and illustrator types under *gesticulation* (a set of gestures accompanying speech, iconic or metaphoric if related to an abstract idea or concept by analogy with the represented object or event), but also distinguishes three other types of hand and arm movements, which are less and less definable as gestures with reference to the following order:

- gesticulation;
- speech-linked gestures, parts of a sentence's structure;
- pantomime, a gesture or a sequence of gestures produced in the absence of speech, which performs a plot narration;
- emblematic or conventionalised gestures;
- signs, *words* of a sign or signed language used by the deaf-mutes communities (i.e. the *Italian Sign Language* or LIS, *Lingua Italiana dei Segni*; the *American Sign Language* or ASL).

The author lines up these gestures on a *continuum* (known as Kendon's *continuum*, as it refers to Kendon, 1988: gesticulation ⇒ speech-linked gestures ⇒ pantomime ⇒ emblems ⇒ signs)³ from left to right, conceived with regard to a gradual loss of speech as necessary verbal concomitant, and a progressive presence of linguistic features coincident with the gradual loss of idiosyncrasy.

Poggi (2006, p. 56) observes, however, that: «sometimes [...] the typological classification confines gestures to fixed categories» (my own translation). For this reason the author suggests a parametric approach (already in Poggi & Magno Caldognetto, 1997b), according to which it is possible to describe gestures by making a distinction

² Illustrators are iconic gestures by definition, because depict the speech that they accompany.

³ The graphic representation in the text is an adaptation by the author.

according to several parameters at the same time, without arranging them into pre-established categories. The aforesaid parameters are:

- type of semantic content (information on the world, on the speaker's identity or on the speaker's mind);
- type of communicative aim (individual, biological, governed by a social rule);
- awareness level of the communicative aim (conscious, unconscious, implicit);
- modality of cognitive construction (we can make a distinction between creative, iconic and motivated gestures, because they are invented extempore on the basis of a selection of diverse aspects characterising the referent to represent, and codified gestures, i.e. those ones firmly represented as entries of a culturally and socially shared gestural lexicon in the speaker's mind)⁴;
- signal-meaning relation (here the distinction is made between motivated and arbitrary gestures);
- relation with other communicative modalities (we identify speech-independent gestures or autonomous gestures, which accompany or replace speech, and speech-accompanying gestures or co-verbal gestures, which, instead, are produced in concomitance with speech. The first ones include emblems or symbolic gestures, whereas the second ones include illustrators).

In this paper we will stress the integration of the two approaches (typological and parametric). We could apply it, for example, to the study of the Italian gesture of *putting the index finger into the middle of the cheek and screwing it while expressing satisfaction (1/4 of a complete rotation, clockwise first, then anticlockwise)*, which bears the meaning of "I like this food very much". We deduce that: it is an emblematic or symbolic gesture produced for a speaker's inner purpose, conscious, codified, arbitrary (Caon 2010, p. 42 claims that: «In France, the *hand turn on the belly* gesture is used in order to express food liking [...]. In Afghanistan and Morocco, the Italian gesture assumes a meaning equivalent to "having a toothache."») and autonomous.

If it is true that the Italian gestures dictionaries published so far (Munari, 1963; Diadori, 1990; Poggi, 2002; 2004; 2006; 2007; 2014; Caon, 2010; 2012) include symbolic gestures used, or at least spread and understood at the pan-Italian level (a detailed review is in Autore, 2017), it is even true that a dictionary of co-verbal gestures (also codified and, therefore, part of a listable lexicon, which accompany and illustrate the speech conveyed by a speaker/gesturer of Italian mother tongue L1) is still missing. This observation encouraged us to prepare a new dictionary, to be deemed as the PRG's final output, which we will describe in wider terms in the following paragraph.

TOWARDS THE NEW DICTIONARY OF ITALIAN GESTURES WITHIN THE *GESTIBOLARIO*

The comparison with other dictionaries shows that the PRG's one introduces the following three innovations:

⁴ Originally a gesture is necessarily creative (*parole* level), before codifying itself (system level) with the passing of time, losing iconicity and motivation.

- an observational study of video sources (played with the sound off first, then with the sound on in order to verify the analysis) displaying monologic speeches in the political-institutional context and related to a recent and delimited time period (synchronic criterion);
- the analysis of one Italian L1 speaker/gesturer, i.e. the former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, chosen on the basis of his distinctive feature of gesturing (single typical case sampling), which, as pointed out by Cortelazzo (2015), characterises his communication behaviour;
- its addressee, i.e. in particular those Slovak students of IFL specializing in conference interpreting (Pöchhacker 2004, p. 16).

Once the gestural entries had been collected, they were both ordered and numbered according to a semasiological order, taken and readapted from Poggi (2007, pp. 157 ff.), and submitted to a small Slovak and IFL student homogeneous sample representative of the dictionary users, through short video clips played with the sound off. These students were asked to answer an open questions questionnaire in Italian for each entry about a possible verbal utterance accompanying the gesture and its meaning. The experiment, whose results are put together in a section which follows the macrostructure of the dictionary, was conducted to examine the knowledge of the entries contained therein, and, therefore, to test its usefulness indirectly.

The exploration of the gestural meta-brevity, by referring to two entries according to the order in which they are arranged in the dictionary and from a differential perspective, will be possible in the next paragraph, only after having defined specifically the meaning of co-verbal gesture as a short communicative form. From our point of view, a co-verbal gesture is short because we assume that it emerges on the surface as a synthetic unity of parts into which it is articulated and deeply decomposable (these parts correspond to the pertinent and distinctive values assumed by a gesture with respect to the four signal formational parameters: hand configuration, palm orientation, location and movement), which may recur in other gestures and each of which conveys a specific portion of the overall literal meaning of the gesture. We will identify these parts with the name of *gesteme*. Ergo, an Italian co-verbal gesture is decomposable into *gestemes*, through which we can analyze its signal and overall literal meaning (for more detail see Autore, 2019).

In our terms, this latter meaning, taken out of a concrete political speech situation, with general value and articulated in *gestemes* (semantic level), must be taken separately from the contextual one, which is linked to the first one anyway but depends on three factors of the speech situation: the speaker/gesturer (Matteo Renzi); his verbal utterance concomitant with the gesture; the context and, in particular, the very short sequence in which the gesture is produced, extrapolated from the source videos (pragmatic and idiosyncratic level).

That said, let's proceed to the empirical investigation of the notion of gestural meta-brevity in order to achieve the set goals.

***GESTURAL META-BREVITY* ANALYSIS THROUGH TWO DICTIONARY ENTRIES**

We start by analyzing the entry n° 12. in fig. 1 that reproduces a pictograph realized at minute [09.37] of the video showing Renzi's closing discourse of the six-month Italian

Presidency of the Council of the European Union at the European Parliament in Strasbourg on January 13, 2015.

Figure 1 – Gesture n° 12. in the PRG's dictionary



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fs1seuQdJO>

The tab. 1 points out the analysis of the gesture signal according to the four parameters, i.e. hand configuration, palm orientation, location and movement.

Table 1 – Gesture n° 12. signal analysis

Hand configuration	Palm orientation	Location	Movement
finger bunch right hand shape (mano a grappolo) or purse hand shape (mano a borsa)	palm upward	front space far from the speaker	the hand is raised forward

In light of the above, the gesture seems to be decomposable into the two gestemes in tab. 2, to which an own isolable meaning is linked, that distinguish *the* gesture as *that* gesture.

Table 2 – Gesture n° 12. analysis into gestemes

Values of formational parameters	bunch hand shape	to raise the hand forward and towards the audience
Corresponding meaning	“something is being condensed”	“to pick up something to show it to the interlocutor”

Therefore, we are being led to express the overall literal meaning of the gesture in terms of “to point out, and so to make public, calling the interlocutor’s attention to it, the concept, the element, the most important result of an argument, a matter, an activity”, a gesture to which some Italian verbal utterances correspond, that is “(ecco) questo (è il risultato)”; “questo è veramente importante (da dire/ricordare)”; “in questo si può riassumere tutto”, “so/well, this (is the result)”; this is really important (to say/to recall); “this sums up everything”. Indeed, when the gesture is performed Renzi says: *questi, these (ones)*, referring to the two main results of the six-month Italian Presidency of the Council of the European Union. This result confirms Kendon’s (2004, p. 228) early statement that: «the grappolo hand shape is involved in gestures which appear to mark the topic of a speaker’s discourse». Our example also highlights the interlocutor’s attention according to the movement parameter value of the gesture.

Now let’s compare the gesture n° 12. with the n° 21. (fig. 2): once again we are talking of a pictograph produced at minute [02.57-02.58] of the video showing Renzi’s opening speech of the six-month Italian presidency (July 2, 2014).

Figure 2 – Gesture n° 21. in the PRG’s dictionary



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVgOINVDGoE>

The tab. 3, as for the gesture n° 12., includes the values assumed by the gesture n° 21. for the four formational parameters of the signal.

Table 3 – Gesture n° 21. signal analysis

<i>Hand configuration</i>	<i>Palm orientation</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Movement</i>
the left hand thumb and index are extended, parallel to each other at short distance	palm vertical towards the audience	space in front of the speaker	forward impact-locked hand movement repeated two times

The tab. 4 shows the two gestemes deducible from the gesture n° 21.

Table 4 – Gesture n° 21. analysis into gestemes.

Values of formational parameters	the hand thumb and index extended, parallel to each other at short distance	forward impact-locked repeated hand movement
Corresponding meaning	“a substandard dimension or quantity”	“for emphasizing or intensifying”

Then the gesture would mean “to give prominence to something because of its substandard dimensions or quantities”, and it may be produced in concomitance with such Italian verbal utterances as “proprio/davvero/così corto/piccolo (per dimensioni)”; “proprio/davvero/così poco (per quantità)”, “indeed/really/so short/small (in terms of dimensions)”; “indeed/really/so little (in terms of quantity)”.

Within the short sequence from which the gesture was drawn, however, taking into account the accompanying speech (*in modo sintetico, in a few words*, to summarize the general state of Europe), Renzi seems to take advantage of the gesture of smallness or littleness in order to deliver the meaning “to express an argument in a very brief, short way”, and so a concise summary that has both the external features of smallness (in terms of length) and littleness (in terms of quantity of words used).

At this point, what we really want to highlight as essential result of the analysis is that the two examined and sampled gestures and their meanings would correspond to two diverse potential partitions into which the semantic sphere of brevity is divisible: a) brevity as condensation (Held, 2011) of the speech subject (intra-discourse level); b) brevity as the intention of the speaker to give a short speech unbound from the content of its argument (extra-discourse level).

Only one of the Slovak students involved in the gesture interpretation experiment has chosen “lo dico a lei”, “I’m telling it to you”, as accompanying utterance of the gesture n° 12., which is a wrong answer because it reveals that only one part of the second gesteme in tab. 2 (that related to the movement parameter), i.e. the attention to the interlocutor, was identified. We observe, instead, a considerable number of correct answers related to the gesture n° 21. (“solo un po’/così piccolo”; “poco”; “sarò breve”; “è serve così poco a fare⁵, “just a little/so little”; “little”; “I will be brief”; “it takes so little to do it”). Also in this case there have been wrong answers, which refer to a meaning even opposite to the one of the gesture (“così tanto”; “è così grande, un bel pò”, “so much”; “and so big, a lot”), not expressed (as well as for the gesture n° 12.) by none of the respondents.

⁵ We quote true and fair answers, without correcting the errors of Italian grammar, which were not taken into account during the analysis phase, except those compromising the comprehension and evaluation of the answers.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

In conclusion, in this paper we have firstly introduced the notion of gestural meta-brevity, and then examined how co-verbal gestures, defined as short forms of communication that accompany and depict speech, convey meanings belonging to the semantic sphere of brevity. In order to achieve this goal we have conducted a contrastive analysis on two entries of a new dictionary of Italian gestures, illustrating its structure through abstraction of gestures from a political-institutional context, i.e. by “observing” and listening to the speech of the former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, chosen as a representative sample, and its innovative aspects. This dictionary is part and final result of the PRG, which is a wider and more complex research project named *Gestibolario*, developed within the context of teaching and learning IFL by Slovak students enrolled to a degree course in interpreting and translation studies. The analysis of the two meanings of the aforesaid entries has brought to light two different sections (corresponding to those meanings), which would articulate the semantic sphere of brevity conveyed by the Italian co-verbal gestures, and which in turn would line up on two different levels.

It has also been said that the first addressee of the dictionary is a future Slovak L1-IFL interpreter, to whom we want to hand over a new consultation instrument based on an authentic communication context, that seems to be useful during and at the end of the university professional training process in order to overcome the difficulties linked to the analysis and overall interpretation of the Italian co-verbal gestures.

In the future, we intend to continue the theoretical and practical exploration of the gestural meta-brevity through a more in-depth analysis, which involves both other dictionary entries and other languages and cultures.

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Atlantide est une revue numérique en accès libre, destinée à accueillir des travaux académiques de haut niveau dans le domaine des études littéraires, sans restriction de période ni d'aire culturelle. *Atlantide* reflète la diversité des travaux du laboratoire L'AMo (« L'Antique, le Moderne », Équipe d'Accueil EA-4276 de l'Université de Nantes) et de ses partenaires, qui œuvrent à la compréhension de notre histoire littéraire et culturelle. Sous le double patronage de Platon et Jules Verne – l'aventure de la modernité cherchant son origine dans le mythe immémorial – elle a pour ambition de redécouvrir et d'explorer les continents perdus des Lettres, au-delà du *présentisme* contemporain (François Hartog). Les articles sont regroupés dans des numéros thématiques. Toutefois, certains articles, hors numéros thématiques, pourront être publiés dans une rubrique de « Varia ».

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