Hand gestures in L1-L2 conversations: a frame-based analysis

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Foreigner Talk refers to a repertoire of linguistic and non-verbal strategies that a language community regards as appropriate in interactions with less proficient L2 speakers (Fischer 2016). Such adaptations include a more elaborate use of hand gestures (Tellier et al. 2021). However, research on gestures in Foreigner Talk has almost exclusively focused on their ability to illustrate concrete actions and objects, limiting our understanding of how more abstract gestures can be helpful in interactions with L2 speakers. In this paper, we propose a qualitative analysis of gestures in four excerpts from a corpus of semi-spontaneous conversations between L1 and L2 speakers and we highlight gestures that motivate their meaning at different degrees of abstraction.

The excerpts are selected from our video corpus containing 138 dyadic conversations of 9 minutes each. In these recordings, 23 groups of three unacquainted participants, two L1 speakers and one L2 speaker of Dutch, had to get to know each other in pairs. The L1 participants were all university students (mean age = 22) and the L2 participants were recruited from language courses organized by the university (mean age = 27, CEFR level A2-B2). Speech was transcribed using the GAT2 conventions (Selting et al. 2009) and gestural behavior was annotated using the M3D coding system (Rohrer et al. 2021). In the excerpts used for the micro-analysis, we made a more detailed transcription of the temporal relation between speech and hand gestures using Mondada's (n.d.) guidelines.

Our analysis focusses on different levels of abstraction in hand gestures by referring to Mittelberg's (2019) frame-based approach. The core idea is that gestures indicate (i.e. through deixis) or depict (i.e. through iconicity) a part of a frame. If we understand a frame as a whole, we can make inferences about its parts. In line with Mittelberg, we distinguish between basic, complex and highly abstract or schematic frames.

In this paper, we show that L1 speakers use hand gestures to evoke all three types of frames in their interactions with L2 speakers. The findings problematize the prevailing view on abstract and/or metaphorical gestures in Foreigner Talk (Adams 1998, Tellier et al. 2021) according to which L1 speakers avoid metaphorical meanings in gesture. We demonstrate that abstraction (as the specificity with which something is being characterized, Langacker 1987: 132) allows for more flexibility and that it is a powerful means for communicative adaptation. The power of more abstract or schematic gestures is not only due to the fact that they can illustrate abstract concepts, but also to the fact that they take a structuring function: the entities being referred to in discourse receive a position in physical space. Different entities correspond with different portion of that space and, as such they become even more concrete.

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