

BOOK REVIEW: THE ANALYSIS OF GESTURES. A PROPAEDEUTIC BY BRÎNDUȘA-MARIANA AMĂLĂNCEI

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Having as a starting point the axioms of communication established by the Palo Alto School, which are also confirmed in the case of nonverbal communication, the author highlights, right from the beginning, the importance of cultural differences and of verbalization upon reception, in the decoding of gesturality. This includes, from the perspective of the present study, everything that could transmit a message in a manner which is different from verbal expression (facial expression/mimicry, body movements, touch, position in relation to others). After giving an overview of the different meanings attributed to gestures in the specialized literature, in her study the author adheres to the meaning attributed to the concept by Quintilian (1974; movements of the hands, arms and of the entire body, postures, actions of the head and face, the look) and mentions the foundations of the gestural act (metaphysical, psychological, cultural, gnoseological, praxeological), as described by Constantin Sălăvăștru in his work *Mic tratat de oratorie* (A Short Treatise on Oratory, 2006). The author continues with a discussion on the complexity of gestures in communication and the necessity of interpreting them depending on the context and communicational sequence, also mentioning the impossibility of generalization with regard to their meaning, which is rather difficult to determine. In connection with the manner in which gesturality is involved in communication, it is mentioned that this often occurs involuntarily but, in the case of hand gestures and head signs, we can speak of an obvious communicative intentionality.

The author continues with a presentation – without claiming it to be exhaustive – of the most important classifications of gestures, considering that it is necessary to group them into certain classes, on the basis of clearly established criteria and depending more on what they have in common rather than on what individualizes them. These classes are useful both for the comparative examination and understanding of different cultures and for the correct analysis of gestural practices. However, beyond these attempts made to systematize gestures, the theorization of nonverbal communication seems insufficient, requiring a classification based on much more rigorous criteria that would contribute to a better understanding of the categories of gestures and their functions in communication, as well as to their appropriate and efficient use in dialogic relations. The author observes that many of the classifications of gestures were made based on the relations between gestures and words, and that the one proposed by Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen (1969), determined by intentionality (Illustrators, Regulators, Adaptors, Affect Displays, Emblems), is one of the most pertinent, as it is often cited, and the types of gestures it contains are frequently referred to in systematization endeavours.

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The author continues the study by insisting on the functions of gestures in communication, stressing the importance of correlating them with the verbal messages even though, in some cases, nonverbal communication functions independently of the verbal one. In addition, the author shares the view of the theoreticians who support the essential role of eye-contact in nonverbal communication which serves, in its turn, a series of important functions, pointed out, among others, by Michael Argyle and Janet Dean (1965): information-seeking, signalling that the channel is open, concealment/ exhibitionism, establishment and recognition of social relationship, and affiliative conflict. However, these functions are not universally valid and lead to the conclusion that the interpretation of an isolated gesture outside the context in which it is produced constitutes an error.

In the chapter dedicated to the pragma-semantics of gestures, the highlighting of the relationships between gesture and action starts from Habermas' distinction between communicative action (interaction) – materialized by “speech” games – and discourse, in order to signal two important roles of gestures in relation to the verbal one (the roles of addition and substitution), as well as their intentional nature. The author restates the idea of giving meaning to a gesture only in correlation with other signs, given that gestures, taken separately, constitute partial utterances which desemanticize when integrated in longer syntagms. Those involved in the interaction must attribute the same meaning to gestures in order for them to be significant. Additionally, gestures contribute to the image the others build regarding the feelings, attitudes or emotional states of the speaker. When comparing the authenticity of the bodily “metonymic actors” with their appearance, the author mentions that facial expression, the look, gestures, postures, body movements, the use of space and the imposition of social distances fall in the category of indices, which constitute manifestations, parts, effects, etc., of an object, phenomenon or process, the designation being understood in terms of metonymic relations. However, the significance of behavioural indices is not certain, as they can have multiple interpretations, can be false or can vary from one culture to another or even from one period to another in the same culture, even if some authors bring arguments supporting their universal character. The author continues her study with a synthesis of possible meanings attributed to a series of gestures, grouped depending on the different body parts with which they are made, as presented especially by Quintilian (1974), Desmond Morris (1977/1978; 1994/2005), Allan and Barbara Pease (2005/2008), or Joseph and Caroline Messinger (2013/2014). Further on, the author attempts to observe the extent to which these meanings are confirmed in different contexts of the French presidential debates, between 1974–2012, admitting that some of the interpretations given can be qualified as “pseudo-theories”, having no scientific character, written for the general public; however, they are pertinent and terminologically ingenious.

In the end, the author stresses the importance of examining gestures not simply by limiting the study to an empirical description, but by means of a functional-pragmatic approach, grounded in communicational strategies and, most of all, on the complementarity gesturality-speech.

The book is a useful guide for postgraduate students and researchers who want to understand the complex nature of gestures, their roles in communication, and the connection between gestures and speech. Together with similar studies, the book brings its own contribution to the examination of the universality of gestures, as well as of their context-based and culture-specific meanings and roles.

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