The multimodal negotiation of service encounters

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multimodal discourse analysis

PHILIP LEVINE AND RON SCOLLON, EDITORS

The expanding scope of discourse analysis has moved those in the field to recognize discourse in various ways as "multimodal," constructed through speech and gesture, as well as through typography, layout, and the materials employed in the making of texts.

Editors have responded to the expanding scope of discourse analysis by asking five key questions: Should we study discourse and technology and multimodal discourse analysis? What is the World Wide Web in discourse analysis? How does one analyze multimodal discourse in social actions and interactions? How does one analyze multimodal discourse in educational situations? And, how does one use multimodal discourse analyses in the workplace? The vitality of explorations opens windows onto ever newer horizons of discourse and discourse analysis.


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**DISCOURSE AND TECHNOLOGY**
Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Philip LeVine and Ron Scollon, Editors

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This volume contains a selection of papers from the 2002 Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics, which has also been known as the Round Table and, perhaps most frequently, simply GURT. The theme for this fifty-third GURT was "Discourse and Technology: Multimodal Discourse Analysis." The papers were selected by peer review from among more than one hundred presentations and seven plenary addresses given during this groundbreaking conference. The editors of this volume are Philip LeVine and Ron Scollon.

The joint chairs for the conference itself were James E. Alatis, dean emeritus of the School of Languages and Linguistics at Georgetown University, and Ron Scollon, professor of linguistics at Georgetown. Professor Alatis has been the driving force behind GURT for many years, and we would like to thank him for his work in establishing the important tradition that these Round Tables have become.

Many of the talks given at GURT 2002 required complex presentation technologies. Arranging for the smooth display of sound and image demanded the coordinated efforts of students, faculty, and staff. Our thanks go out to all of the student and faculty volunteers, and to Georgetown Technology Services for their assistance. Our thanks to Jackie Lou for giving her time and considerable talents to the design of the GURT program. We would also like to express our appreciation to assistant coordinators Sylvia Chou and Pompimon Supakorn for efforts that began months before the conference took place.
Defining a conceptual framework that could account for both the linguistic side and the imagistic side of language use.

It is not my purpose here to recall comprehensively the methods, questions, and results of such a wide disciplinary field. Rather, I want to point out that gestures have for the most part been analyzed in the purely expressive realm of conversation. Nevertheless, as recently mentioned by Streeck, it seems important to consider that "the hands, the organs of gesture, are not purely and not primarily expressive organs" (1996b:2). In spite of their obvious expressive function, they are above all powerful instruments for handling, exploring, making things, and changing the universe of reference in which discourse takes place. Consequently, one should consider that the domain of nonverbal behavior should not remain restricted to that of talk-accompanying gestures, but refers to a vast array of complex and heterogeneous empirical realities consisting in physical acts and various communicative practices that are not strictly "affiliated" to speech (Filliettaz 2001d, 2002). In other words, what I would like to argue for in this paper is that a multimodal approach to social interaction should not only aim at describing how speakers are "moving" while talking, nor should it account exclusively for the imagistic side of utterance production; rather, it should also describe how agents "handle things" while interacting, and figure out to what extent joint activities are being mediated by communicational means.

It is this latter and rather broader conception of multimodality that I will briefly sketch in this paper. After presenting the data I worked on for this analysis, I will identify various gestural behaviors attested in one particular service encounter, and present a global theoretical framework that enables a systematic description of such a variety.

The Data

The results I am presenting here are part of a larger research project currently being carried out in the department of linguistics at the University of Geneva, and supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation. This two-year project is devoted to a systematic analysis of service encounters and develops a broad discourse analytical approach for the description of verbal interactions taking place in transactional settings (Filliettaz 2001a–e; Filliettaz and Roulet 2002).

The data used in my analysis are extracted from a large corpus of service encounters that were audio-recorded in a department store in Geneva during the spring of 2001. One of the aims of this data collection was to gather sufficient empirical evidence in order to understand how assistants and clients are coordinating their actions in the context of encounters referring to goods associated with complex technical knowledge. This is the reason why I focused on three specific settings: the sports department, the electronics department, and the do-it-yourself and gardening department.

While they interacted with clients, assistants were frequently moving from one place to another, which raised technical constraints for data collection and prevented the use of video cameras. In order to allow place shifting, a light recording device was used, consisting of a pocket-MiniDisc and a microphone fixed on the assistants'
the construction of the interactional process. For the reasons mentioned earlier, however, such a variety cannot be described adequately as long as it is conceived exclusively as a semiotic reality. In fact, accounting for the various classes of nonlinguistic components of this service encounter calls for a broad pragmatic framework that specifies how semiotic resources interact with social practices. Before turning to the analysis of concrete examples, I will briefly sketch such a theoretical framework by referring to Jürgen Habermas’s *Theory of communicative action* (1984).

Among the various pragmatic models proposed during the last decades, the *Theory of communicative action* constitutes a significant source of new insights for linguistic research, in the sense that it leads to a fine-grained conceptualization of the complex links relating social action and language use. More specifically, Habermas aimed at accounting for the complex character of communicative actions by describing their twofold organization. He stated, for instance, that discourse-mediated actions should be described both as *teleological* and *semiotic* processes. The teleological level refers to the goal-directed character of the joint activities underlying social interactions (Von Cranach 1982). As for the level of intercomprehension, it refers specifically to language use and to the various semiotic realities that “mediate” these interactions: it is by using language and negotiating the validity of utterances that interactants achieve intercomprehension and that joint projects may be coordinated on the level of goal-directed actions.

Such an articulation between those two levels of analysis has significant epistemological implications for research in discourse analysis. In line with recent currents of thought in language sciences (Bronkart 1997; Clark 1996; Scollon 2001; Van Dijk 1997a, 1997b), the pragmatic model developed by the German philosopher takes the position that talk should be described not only as abstract semiotic forms, but also in terms of the social activities engaged in by specific agents belonging to particular cultural communities. Moreover, by conceiving communicative actions as complex entities, he suggests that discourse realities should be conceived both as *praxeological* processes, namely collective goal-directed actions, and *communicative* processes, namely processes of intercomprehension. In doing so, he certainly contributes to a theory of mediated action in the sense that he captures the “dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s) which frame it” (Wodat 1997:173). On one hand, talk is shaped by a praxeological process in the sense that it is interpreted and described in relation to specific contexts and social actions; on the other hand, it shapes that context by mediating intentions and coordinating joint projects.

It is not my purpose to devote too much space to the presentation of this pragmatic model. Rather, what I would like to argue for is that this theoretical framework and its twofold organization may contribute to a fine-grained analysis of nonverbal behavior in social interaction. Indeed, depending on its intracommunicative or extracommunicative character, hand movements can be assigned various semiotic properties and give rise to various configurations regarding the praxeological and communicative aspects of social interactions. This is what I would like to point out now by identifying and describing some of the gestural behaviors attested in the excerpt of the service encounter under analysis. I will consider in turn four different configurations in which nonlinguistic components can be described successively as

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**The Role of Nonverbal Behavior in Social Interaction**

For this analysis of nonverbal behavior, I will narrow down my focus on a specific transaction recorded in the sports department in April 2001. This three-minute-long interaction takes place between a forty-year-old female client (C), accompanied by her eight-year-old son (B), and a forty-year-old male assistant (A). As the assistant initiates the transaction, the mother is looking for swimming goggles for her son. The young child has just tried on a pair of goggles and complains that they are too tight. In order to help them, the assistant adjusts the goggles to adapt to the child’s face and explains to the clients how to use them properly. After a successful second attempt, the child and his mother decide to buy the goggles and the transaction comes to an end.

What makes this transaction particularly interesting from the perspective of multimodal discourse analysis is that language use in this specific context is deeply interwoven with a great variety of nonverbal behaviors that play a prominent role in

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**Table 8.1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content of the Geneva-2001 corpus</th>
<th>No. of MiniSes</th>
<th>No. of Assistants</th>
<th>No. of Encounters</th>
<th>Ex. Goods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sports Department</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>walking boots, sports clothes, camping material, bikes, states, running shoes, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic Department</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>HiFi, computers, household appliances, telephones, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do-it-yourself + Gardening</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>painting goods, gardening tools, taps, hardware, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
coverbal behaviors, communicative actions, "addressed handling," and, finally, autonomous actions.

**Gesture as Coverbal Action**

This first sequence takes place at the end of the encounter. After having adjusted the goggles properly, the assistant (A) selects the child (B) as his direct interlocutor and explains to him how to use the goggles.²

(1)

A > B : alors, chaque fois que tu les mets avant d'aller a la piscine tu appuies un petit peu dessus d'accord ou avec la paume comme ça [A: lève les mains vers son visage et mime un geste de pression sur l'oeil] tu appuies un tout petit coup d'accord? parce que tout l'air qui est dedans il il part un peu . ça les ecrase contre les yeux et ça fait l'im: l'impermeabilite

so. every time you put them on before stepping into the water you just press slightly all right or with your hands like this [A raises his hands up to his face and imitates the application of fingertip pressure on his eyes] you press just a little bit all right? because the air contained inside goes out . it presses them against the eyes and it makes the whole thing waterproof.

The first point that should be mentioned here is the semiotic heterogeneity of the interaction at hand. As the assistant utters his explanations, he performs body movements that are deeply interwoven with talk. For instance, the gesture of raising his hands and imitating the application of fingertip pressure on his eyes can be seen as an exemplary illustration of what has sometimes been termed "communicative gesture" (Cosnier and Vaysse 1997). Such nonverbal behavior is clearly "affiliated" to talk in the sense that it has the property of being connectable in reasonably clear ways to specific components of the turn-at-talk (Schegloff 1984). In this particular case, an explicit indexical relation can be identified between the gesture and its lexical affiliate (with your hand like this). In other words, one should consider that hand movements and speech co-occur, that they present the same meaning, and that they perform the same pragmatic function.²

Another interesting property about this particular talk-accompanying behavior is its *iconic* character. Contrary to "emblems," whose meaning is based on social conventions, "iconic gestures" (McNeill 1992:12) are highly idiosyncratic and naturally motivated. The assistant's gesture can be seen as iconic, in that its interpretation results from knowledge about the world rather than relying on language-like conventions. Even though they are abstracted from the physical objects with which the original actions are performed, we understand those gestures because we know what they are doing in the world. In that sense, they can be seen as a "symbolic reenactment" of instrumental acts, to quote Jürgen Streeck's terminology.⁴

Considering the foregoing elements, it is now possible to specify the pragmatic status of this particular instance of nonverbal behavior. Our theoretical framework may help us in that perspective:

Figure 8.2 shows how communicational means contribute to joint activities in this particular transactional episode. It suggests that the interacting agents are engaged in a goal-directed action consisting in sharing knowledge about how to use swimming goggles, and that this praxeological process is mediated by a monological instructional discourse performed by the assistant. As indicated by the shaded surface, the gestures associated with the assistant's explanations do not manifest a teleological dimension on their own. On the contrary, they contribute to a turn-at-talk and function as an integral part of the instructional discourse in which they are embedded. In other terms, they should be considered as internal components of a complex communicative process rather than as an autonomous contribution to a goal-directed action. From that perspective, they can be seen as coverbal gestures.

**Gesture as Communicative Action**

Gestures and speech arise in a very different configuration in this second example, which takes place in the initial section of the service encounter, at the precise moment when the assistant has to identify why the goggles are hurting the client's son. As we will see, such an identification calls for both verbal and nonverbal contributions. In the following sequence, the assistant (A) asks the child (B) to remove the goggles and indicates how he intends to solve the problem:

(2)

A > B : essaie essaie juste de te les enlever sans . te faire mal d'accord [B enleve les lunettes] voila je vais te les ecarter un peu

try just try to take them off without . hurting yourself all right [B removes the goggles] right I will loosen them slightly for you.

---

**Figure 8.2. Pragmatic Configuration of Segment 1.**
In this excerpt, the nonlinguistic contributions to the interactional process present specific semiotic properties. For instance, unlike our first example, the nonverbal response to the assistant’s request does not metaphorically symbolize an abstract object; it physically involves this material object. Consequently, the act of removing the goggles should not be considered anymore as a “symbolic reenactment” of some physical doing; rather, it is a material action on its own. Because these categories of gestures involve physical objects and consist in goal-directed transformations in the real world, they should be interpreted as “practical gestures” (Cosnier and Vaysse 1997) or “instrumental actions” rather than as talk-accompanying gestures.

Nevertheless, assuming the instrumental character of the child’s hand movement does not mean that one should deny communicative effects to such nonverbal behavior. Streeck and Kallmeyer (2001) draw our attention to two very interesting properties of graphic acts (i.e., operations such as taking notes, calculating, drawing, etc.) in face-to-face communication. They give evidence for the fact that inscriptions may function as turn-constructional units and that they play a crucial role in the way the interacting agents dramatize their encounter. These observations strongly suggest that categorical distinctions between “instrumental” and “symbolic” acts are cut-out abstractions that do not account for the variety and complexity of practices found in social interactions.

Coming back to our example, it is noteworthy that the action of handling an object has important communicative implications. By removing the goggles from his face, the child not only transforms the state of affairs in the physical world, but he also “responds” to the assistant’s request and “satisfies” the preliminary and essential logical conditions associated with the directive speech act (try just try to take them off without hurting yourself all right). In doing so, the child “communicates” that he has understood the meaning of the assistant’s utterance and takes his turn in the interactional process at hand. There is more, however. The child’s nonlinguistic response is discursively ratified by the assistant (right) and can therefore be seen as a logical precondition for the interaction to be continued, as attested by the assistant’s following turn (I will loosen them slightly for you). Consequently, it seems essential to account for the fact that beyond its instrumental character, the act of removing the goggles is deeply interwoven with a dialogical communicative process.

Figure 8.3 summarizes our analysis and specifies the pragmatic status of this second instance of nonverbal behavior:

![Figure 8.3. Pragmatic Configuration of Segment 2.](image)

It enables us to visualize the complex nature of the action under analysis, and underscores its praxeological and communicative implications. As indicated by the shaded surface, the act of removing the goggles can no longer be seen as strictly “affiliated” to a communicative process. Unlike our first example, it does not co-occur with any linguistic utterance, but consists of a direct instrumental contribution to the praxeological process of identifying the problem. Nevertheless, communicative effects are not absent from the child’s response, for it is initiated and ratified by specific speech acts and therefore strongly articulated with discursive contributions. Because these nonverbal empirical units turn out to be both goal-directed and communicative, I will refer to them as “communicative actions.”

**Speech as Cogestural Communication**

The next sequence extracted from our service encounter offers another instance of the fuzzy and shifting character of the boundary between instrumental actions and communication. It immediately follows the excerpt analyzed in the preceding section and shows how the assistant (A) explains to the mother (C) how to adjust the goggles property:

\[
(A > C: [A prend les lunettes et effectue des réglages à chaque roue] donc pour les écrire vous les ss. sortez ça <C : ah d’accord> vous voyez sur le bord, puis après y a plus qu’à tirer légèrement parce que sinon après y a tout qui vient <C : oui> ... voilà je vous ai trop trop tirer d’un côté je vais aussi faire un petit peu de l’autre ...)

[A takes the goggles and adjusts them during the whole sequence] so in order to open them you take this out <C : okay> you see here on the side, and then you just have to pull slightly because otherwise everything will come out <C : yes ... right I don’t want to pull too much on one side I will pull slightly on the other.]

As we see, speech and gesture co-occur in the example above, but again, the hand movements cannot be interpreted as pure iconic gesturations. By handling the goggles and adjusting them, the assistant does not perform the “imagistic side” of a global utterance (McNeill 1992:1). On the contrary, he carries on a goal-directed action consisting in an instrumental act.

What makes this example of object handling particularly interesting from the perspective of multimodal discourse analysis, however, is its twofold functioning in the interactional process. By adjusting the goggles, it seems that the assistant achieves in fact two distinct goals. On the one hand, he transforms a state of affairs in the immediate environment and satisfies situational preconditions that determine a successful outcome of the transaction: the goggles should fit the child’s face in order to be sold. But on the other hand, he takes this opportunity to explain to the mother how to handle the commodity she is interested in and transforms a situated instrumental action into an extended “lesson.” In order to do so, he makes his instrumental action visible and accountable for his interlocutor, and performs what Streeck (1996a:373) would term a “broadcast version” of his handling.
Such a strategy has significant consequences on the communicative level. As indicated in the transcript, the assistant constantly comments on the instrumental actions he is performing. He uses talk as a means to make his nonverbal behavior interpretable by his interactional partner. Indeed, his utterances are explicitly indexical with the instrumental action they focus on, as indicated by the frequent deixis expressions like to open them; you take this out; you see here on the side, etc.

This being said, it seems that a specific connection between action and communication results from the pragmatic status of gesture in this example: As mentioned in figure 8.4, speech and gestures contribute to a complex praxeological process consisting in an action of adjusting the goggles "in a gestural fashion" (Streeck 1996a:373). But contrary to the configuration described in our first example, it seems inadequate to consider such a nonvocal act as "affiliated" to talk. In this particular case, nonverbal behavior refers directly to the praxeological level, and constitutes the focus of the ongoing interaction. As for the communicative process, it provides local comments that aim at making the action interpretable from the perspective of the client. Interestingly, this multimodal discourse sequence reverses the expected relation between speech and gesture: it is not so much gesture that occurs with speech and facilitates its interpretation, but speech that makes an instrumental action jointly accountable. Consequently, rather than considering nonverbal behavior as coverbil in this case, it seems much more adequate to consider speech as cogestural.

**Gesture as Autonomous Action**

Our last excerpt immediately follows the sequence analyzed above and introduces significant changes in the pragmatic configuration underlying the interactional process. After having completed his "lesson" for the client, the assistant (A) selects the child (B) as his interlocutor and provides some general information about how to use swimming goggles. But during this whole sequence, he goes on handling the goggles and finesses to set them:

(4)

A > B: [A continue de régler les lunettes] donc... c’est une lunette de natation, qui est tréte contre la buse et puis sous la longueur du temps, elle va revenir la bou bouée. Il faut pas: t’arrête de nager tu continues, et elle s’en va toute seule. Il faut me faire pas mal de nataion et; après deux trois cents mètres j’ai un peu de buse je continue de nager puis elle s’en va toute seule... mais quand elles seront devenues déjà un petit peu plus vieilles

[A goes on adjusting the goggles] so... those swimming goggles are specially treated against steam but after some time steam may reappear you should not stop swimming you should go on and it will disappear automatically do you get it? because I swim a lot and; after two or three hundred meters I get some steam I go on swimming and it disappears... but only when they will be a bit older

[termine je reglage : 11 secondes]

[finishes setting the goggles]

Again, the hand movements performed by the assistant are to be interpreted as instrumental acts and not as communicative symbols. An interesting element that should be mentioned about this episode, however, is that a disjunction seems to occur between this instrumental act and co-occurring talk. Unlike example 3, speech and gestures do not refer to the same entities, and the action of adjusting the goggles does not function as the discourse topic of the utterances performed by the assistant. As shown in the transcript, the explanations provided by the assistant refer to the ways goggles should be used and do not consist any more on local comments on how to adjust them properly.

Moreover, contrary to the "broadcast version" (Streeck 1996a:373) of handling performed previously, the assistant does not aim at making his nonverbal action accountable in this case. The action of setting the goggles remains strictly instrumental and "indicative" in the sense that it cannot be interpreted as the volitional product of an intent to communicate any propositional content (Laver and Beck 2001:17).

Consequently, it appears that the pragmatic configuration specific to this interactional episode is much more heterogeneous than the cases so far:

As indicated in figure 8.5, the interactional process going on in this sequence can no longer be seen as a unified communicative action. On the contrary, it splits into two distinct praxeological processes that are carried out in parallel and that

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**Figure 8.4.** Pragmatic Configuration of Segment 3.

**Figure 8.5.** Pragmatic Configuration of Segment 4.
assume rather distinct pragmatic properties. The imagistic side of the interaction refers to an individual goal-directed action consisting in adjusting the goggles. As for the linguistic side of the interaction, it consists of an instructional discourse that mediates the joint action of sharing information about how to use swimming goggles. In such a configuration, nonverbal behaviors are not only external to multimodal communicative practices, but they also take the form of distinct praxeological processes. In that sense, they can be seen as autonomous actions.

**Concluding Remarks**

The sequences described above are but a few instances of the various pragmatic configurations in which nonverbal behaviors may take place in face-to-face interaction. In no way should these examples be understood as an attempt to classify nonverbal components systematically. Rather than circumscribing a finite set of categories, the analysis I proposed aimed at contrasting various empirical expressions of hand movements consisting in handling material or symbolic objects, and to identify the different communicative implications associated with such nonlinguistic entities.

In spite of its preliminary character, my analysis points to interesting phenomena regarding the multimodal negotiation of service encounters. First, it shows that it seems too restrictive to consider gestures and speech as two sides of a single system (McNeill 1992:4). If this may be true with talk-accompanying gesticulations, it is certainly not the case with other nonverbal behaviors like instrumental acts, which co-occur with speech without necessarily contributing to a single semantic unit. Second, my analysis provides evidence for the idea that a clear-cut delimitation between "intracommunicative" (or symbolic) and "extracommunicative" (or instrumental) gestures faces significant difficulties when applied to empirical data. As illustrated by the description of service encounters, instrumental actions such as removing or adjusting objects do not always come down to mere teleological processes performed by isolated individuals: they may be performed in an ostensive way or require verbal contributions as a local support for being accountable. This strongly suggests that in spite of their instrumental nature, nonverbal actions are deeply interwoven with communicative processes, but with various modalities that a multimodal approach to discourse should be able to describe.

**REFERENCES**


Multimodal Discourse Analysis: A Conceptual Framework

Sigrid Norris
Georgetown University

This essay introduces a multimodal framework for discourse analysis that moves toward an explication of the multiplicity of (inter)actions that a social actor engages in simultaneously, allowing for the analysis of large parts of what has been termed context in traditional discourse analysis.¹

Discourse analysts have long been aware of the diachronicity between naturally occurring language and context. Although context has traditionally been viewed as encompassing everything that surrounds a strip of talk, more recently some concurrent actions have become part of the analyzed aspects.² The center of analysis, however, remained spoken language within focused interaction.

This framework for multimodal discourse analysis is practice-based and grew out of my use of the video camera to collect data of naturally occurring interactions within a long-term ethnographic study of two women living in Germany, whom I call Sandra and Anna, and my application of some theoretical notions of Scollon's (1998, 2001a, 2001b) mediated discourse analysis. I collected video data of everyday interactions and found that a primary focus on spoken language severely limited the scope of my analysis. I noted again and again that spoken language was embedded within complex configurations of actions, and the visual data revealed that studying the verbal exchanges without studying the nonverbal actions and the setting actually distorted interpretation of many of the ongoing face-to-face interactions. Mediated discourse analysis, with its focus on action, also encouraged a more holistic investigation.

The conceptual framework for multimodal discourse analysis that I present here permits the incorporation of all identifiable communicative modes, embodied and disembodied, that social actors orchestrate in face-to-face interactions. A communicative mode is loosely defined as a “set of signs with meanings and regularities attached to them” (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001), giving the analyst a choice to configure the communicative modes as is most constructive to the analysis.³ A communicative mode in this sense is not a bounded unit. Rather, it is a heuristic unit that is loosely defined without clear or stringent boundaries and that often overlaps (heuristically speaking) with other communicative modes.

The term heuristic emphasizes the tension and contradiction between the communicative modes as systems of representation and the dynamic unfolding of real-time social actions. Thus, when speaking of a heuristic unit, the element that indicates the system of representation serves as a means of investigation that we theoretically draw on in order to analyze the dynamic unfolding of real-time social actions.