Open-Hand Gesture Family in Polish Repertoire of Recurrent Gestures – an example from Role Playing Game sessions

During this presentation the researcher aims to discuss a pilot study of recurrent gestures performed by Polish speakers. The talk will focus on the Open Hand gestures and other gesture families which can be observed during role-playing games (RPG) sessions.

As the title suggests, the study is concerned with gestures performed by humans. However, it is noteworthy that gestures are not unique to them – moreover, gestures that could be described as Open Hand ones were also observed among Bonobo (Pollick & de Waal, 2007). The apes use them in different contexts, just as humans, yet for both species an open hand extended to somebody could suggest asking for something (Müller 2004, Pollick & de Waal, 2007).

The topic of the study, recurrent gestures, is under research since Adam Kendon's (2004) and Cornelia Müller's (2004) works on the Palm Up Open Hand. They pointed out that speakers, belonging to different cultural backgrounds, perform spontaneous gestures that have stable form-meaning relationship and recur across different contexts (Ladewig, 2024). Unlike iconic or metaphoric gestures, those did undergo a stabilization process and are born through repetition.

Although observed with many different languages, such as German, English, SavoSavo or Italian, recurrent gestures are suggested to be cultural (Harrison, 2024). It is therefore productive to study and grasp the Polish repertoire of recurrent gestures, especially if compared to another, like in this example, German one. This way, it is possible to see any cultural similarities and differences.

The pilot study was conducted with three groups of players, totalling twelve people. Each invitee participated in a session led by the researcher, following a scenario in the 'Vaesen. Mythical creatures' system. The sessions lasted around 170 minutes. Afterwards, three ten-minute excerpts from each game were chosen for analysis: (1) the first 10 minutes, (2) the introduction of the player characters and (3) the sessions cumulative point. Altogether, 281 recurrent gestures were observed, almost half of which (128) occurred during the last excerpts.

From an insider's perspective, during every session the atmosphere was light-hearted. Due to the static nature of RPGs, the recordings are very suitable for analysing non-verbal behaviour. The RPG as a tool to analyse spontaneous language, providing a method to analyse data collected almost in vivo.

The most prominent gesture family in the dataset was an Open Hand one, and especially many Palm Up gestures were observed across different meanings. Moreover, a gesture in-between, Open Hand Sideways was observed. The movement was performed with either two hands facing each other, or only one. In both those cases, Open Hand Sideways was usually connected with a vertical motion. The variety of Open Hand gesture family in the data is vast, and will be explored in the presentation.

The pilot study brought many results, both in terms of using Role-Playing Games as a tool for spontaneous language analysis, and analysing Polish repertoire of recurrent gestures. The dataset of almost 300 gestures is enough to draw preliminary conclusions, and, most importantly, plan the next steps of the project.

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