Living speech – or the bodily life of language

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Abstract
Speech is based on articulatory movements made by the vocal organs, in synchrony with other body parts. Hand movements, postural shifts and facial expressions are at play in the symbolic activity that speakers engage in as they "talk." The primary forms of language are thus moving, living forms.

Foreword

Unlike English, Romance languages routinely refer to "foreign" or "modern" languages as "living" languages: *langes vivantes* (French), *lingue vive* (Italian), *lenguas vivas* (Spanish), *llengües vives* (Catalan), *línguas vivas* (Portuguese), *limbi vii* (Romanian). Dutch and German speakers occasionally use similar phrases emphasizing the "living" quality of language: *levende talen, lebende Sprachen.* The title chosen for the original lecture-performance[186] was a pun on the "life" or "vitality" of language[187]: *Langues vivantes en vie* (lit. "Living languages are alive / have a life"). The underlying logic was the following: language, whether spoken or written, is rooted in *bodily motion*. Movement is a sign of life. Language relies on movement. Language is life.

The present English version contains video captures from the original French lecture-performance. The script was written and translated by myself. The performance was choreographed by Jean Magnard, assisted by Mélissa Blanc. All the illustrations given during the performance are taken from a corpus of authentic co-speech gestures

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[186] The lecture was delivered on the last day of the 21rst RANACLES conference, held at the University of Bordeaux on November 29-30 2013. It was not just **delivered** but **performed**, bare-footed, on the main desk, inside a lecture hall. As might have been expected, this caused a sensation. But the audience was supportive and responsive, greeting the three performers with unusual warmth:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=takomU73y3k
[187] *Vie* means life » in French. The derived adjective *vivant(e)* means "living" and the prepositional phrase *en vie* "alive."

made by native English speakers during interviews: talk show hosts, writers, film actors, and linguists.

This illustrated adaptation is dedicated to Pr. Pavel Stekauer, who has expressed support for my attempt at blending *science* and the *arts*, ever since we first met in Bordeaux some ten years ago. As a distinguished morphologist, Pavel is aware of the challenge posed by the union of semiology, gesture studies and performance studies. His own research into linguistic form is even more creative and inspirational. His unique sense of descriptive accuracy has no equivalent but his own unique sense of humor.

Introduction

Figure 1 Opening

Our words are not "spoken" but "played out" on the social stage. We don't just use our mouths to speak. We *perform language*. "We *engage* the wholeness of our bodies as we *present meanings to others*[188]" in a generous *semiotic offering*.

Figure 2 "in a generous semiotic offering"

Human languages are designed to be *performed*- and their form reflects this. There would otherwise be no stress, no tone, no stances, no gestures, no gaze activity, no facial expressions. A string of mechanical signals would be enough. "On-off. Dot-dot… dash-dot … dosh-dash-dash-dot…" – a disembodied *morse code* – flat… linear… predictable - would do the job!

Neither would there be any need for "acrobatics", "undulation", "breath control", "stances", "imitation", "variation", "involvement of the miming body"[189] to convey our

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[188] Jousse (1939) quoted in Sienaert (2013).
[189] Lecoq (1997).

experience of the world. There would be no "wholeness of expression."[190] Language would be completely *lifeless*.   Every word that I choose to *articulate* and *project* is part of a "movement framework"[191].

Figure 3 Illustration & choreographic variation.
"There are two sides to English teaching:
teaching production and teaching comprehension"

Am I aware of the *life* that permeates the *living tongues* of men?

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[190] Jousse (1976).
[191] Laban (1963).

Figure 4 Illustration & choreographic variation.
"What are we supposed to do when problems show up?"

The *life* that runs through me as I am speaking, the *life* that runs through your body as you are listening. The *life* that manifests itself in every utterance I produce, in every sound I articulate, in every meaning I *display*. A life so simple and elemental that is all too easily *frozen* and *forgotten*.

Life stand still!
(One) stilled life— (one) froze it. One forgot the little agitations; the flush, the pallor, some queer distortion, some light or shadow.
What was it then? What did it mean? Could things thrust their hands up and grip one; could the blade cut; the fist grasp? Was there no safety? No learning by heart of the ways of the world? No guide, no shelter, but all was miracle, and leaping from the pinnacle of a tower into the air?
Could it be that this was life?— startling, unexpected, unknown?[192]

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[192] Adapted from Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (1927).

Figure 5 Choreographic variation.
"Could it be that this was life…?"

As a *living human being*, teaching a *living language*, am I ready to be drawn into the *dynamics of gesture*? Am I willing to immerse my students into the on-going flow of inflections, oscillations and beats?

Or should I stick to the *written word* and cling to *stable formulae*? Should I cultivate "lexical fields," fix "rules," describe "structures" as most linguists do?
Should I *disembody* speech and *reduce all words to their letters*? Should I remove them from the living organisms that use them? Forget about vocal articulation and projection, about experience being "impressed" upon humans and "expressed" out of them (Jousse 1976)? Should I *underplay* how emotions and meanings are *played* and *replayed* on the interactional stage?

  - *Puisque tu l'aimes, pourquoi tu ne le luis dis pas?*
  - *Le hic, c'est que je suis timide.*
  - *Evidemment !*[193]

For everything *impresses itself upon* the speaker's body, then *expresses itself out of it* (Jousse 1976). Everything comes to life, everything acquires meaning through the human body. Even grammar does:

Figure 6 Illustration & choreographic variation.
The gestural grammar of concession: "Granted …"

What sort of "grammar" do I teach? What is my conception of syntax? An "assembly line" where sentences are "put together"? Or a stage on which "a living being walks and plays out his understanding of the world"[194]?

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[193] Based on Calbris and Montredon (2011). "Why don't you tell him you love him !" "The trouble is – I'm a little shy" "That's just what I thought !"
[194] Jousse (1939) quoted in Sienaert (2013).

For example, how do I address "time and tense"? How do I instruct my students about the grammar of "past time reference" in modern languages? Do I restrict myself to "bases" and "affixes", "main verbs" and "auxiliaries", "aspectual markers" and "tense inflections"? Or do I broaden the perspective to include *kinetic activity* and *cognitive processes*? Grammar is also about how we remember, how we "look back" or "travel back" in time, how we metaphorically "revisit" and symbolically reenact past situations.

Figure 7 Illustration & choreographic variation.
The gestural grammar of time: "Back in…"

When discussing formal aspects of "questions", should I restrict myself to the hard facts of syntax: "Q-words" and "subject-operator inversion"? Shouldn't I also be observing the postures and gestures that spontaneously *mark* the "interrogative mood"? Aren't questions tied to our social and mental life? Questions are not *asked* but *played out.* Questions we *form*, questions we *perform*!

None of the sentences we form could "live" and "work" in discourse without grammar. Syntax is a *life-giving force*: it brings utterances and sentences into being. Do we celebrate the vitality and fertility of syntax in our teachings? Do we encourage our

students to think of *grammar as life*[195]? Do we invite them to look at the social performance of grammar on the interactional stage? Do we connect "valency" and "theta roles" to the inbuilt *dramatic structure of sentences*? Do we present "states" and "actions," not just as "states" and "actions" but as *scenes* involving participants? Do we encourage them to act out some of these scenes, to create a space where sentence structure is integrated with vocal structure, tonal structure, and kinetic structure?

Everything I say is an *interpretation* of experience, in both a mental and artistic sense. My linguistic rendition of thought and experience is primarily based on *movement* as we are reminded by Jousse (1976) and Corballis (2002): *eye movements* (including eyebrow, eyelid and eyelash activity) ; *articulatory movements* (i.e. movements of the tongue, pharynx, palate, jaw, and lips) ; *bodily movements* (i.e. head movements, manual gestures, postural adjustments)… and *propositional moves*[196] (i.e. bringing forth verbal messages). The vocal and the gestural components of language cannot be separated:

Figure 8 Illustration & choreographic variation.
Co-expressiveness of word and gesture: "There's a whole difference!"

Calbris (1989) conflates voice and movement into a single semiotic process: "phono-gestural activity". McNeill (1992) insists on the co-expressiveness of *verbal* and *gestural* forms, calls them "inseparable," and eventually refers to them as the "speech-gesture nexus." The gestures that accompany speech are quite logically called *co-speech gestures*. The gestures that replace speech or called *emblems*[197].

Gestures are *global synthetic*. They compress and unify experience by packing different functions and meanings into single moves. McNeill's classification of gestures is the most widely used. It distinguishes between: "iconics," "metaphorics," "deictics" and "beats."

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[195] Langacker (2008).
[196] English translation of Jousse's phrase *gestualité propositionnelle*. Jousse remarked that the word "proposition" is based on kinetic imagery, since it literally means "to position (place) before". This is a more abstract, metaphoric type of movement, but a movement nonetheless.

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[197] Kendon (2004).

Figure 9 Illustration
Deictic gesture: "Did you hear that?"

Conclusion

Language scholars should all think of themselves as "observer of life"[198]. And language instructors should never be afraid of manifesting the "physicality of speech"[199] to their audience. This is why we have come today to *perform language* in front of you.

Movement is everywhere *around* us and *within* us. "Babblers" and "wrigglers" we are born. Social "movers" and "vocalizers" we eventually become[200]. Speakers are never mechanical transmitters and receivers: they are *embodied communicators* and *moving social cognizers*[201].

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[198] Murphy (2012).
[199] Schechner (1988).
[200] Birdwhistell (1970).
[201] Langacker (2008).

Language is part of a greater "body motion communication system"[202] which allows us to *represent* our situated experience of the world, dramatically and symbolically.

Figure 10 Choreographic variation.
"Dramatically and symbolically"

There is no limit to what word and gesture can jointly express. There is no thought, no event, no experience that may not be *played out* and *viewed*. From children's rhymes to scholarly presentations, our speech is made up of lines that we *deliver on the interactional stage*[203], of meanings that we *perform* and *display*[204]. Our words and movements are living semiotic structures. *Vita in Gestu!*[205]

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[202] Birdwhistell (1970).
[203] Goffman (1959, 1964).
[204] Streeck (2009).
[205] Jousse (1976).

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