

Communicative load-sharing: Stance construction in multimodal, multi-media contexts

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Previous work on stance has primarily examined the linguistic resources (e.g. Biber & Finegan 1989, DuBois 2007) and more recently, multimodal enactments (i.e. gesture, gaze, etc.) that accompany the marking of stance (Debras 2017, Schoonjans 2014, Jehoul et al. 2017). However, the complexity of stance expression in contemporary discourse requires an approach that includes a broader account of more of the modalities involved, including language, and gesture, but also media and images. In this investigation of 'stance stacking' (Dancygier & Sweetser 2012), we examine talk-show discourse in which the host critiques the stance of an original remark by a public figure. The communicative and stance pattern is structured as follows: A politician says or tweets something that is emotionally disturbing and expresses an undesirable emotional stance. The host then creates a scenario which is a reconstructed historical or cultural frame and overlays the original dissonant remark. These humorous critical pieces rely on an integration of multi-media, textual, and multimodal means, and, we argue, point to the need for a re-consideration of the nature of multimodality.

We examine 25 counterfactual scenarios from broadcast media captured from online sources, including YouTube and the Red Hen multimedia archive. The multimodal behaviours that we investigate include gesture, eye-gaze, head and shoulder movement, facial expression and intonation. The multimedia artifacts are annotated for type of artifact or modality used (e.g. video footage vs. still image), discourse type (e.g. tweet vs. radio commentary), and the frame that is evoked and distorted (e.g. historical vs. cultural reference).

Multimodal behaviours for the counterfactual scenarios are, unexpectedly, characterized by veridical delivery styles, i.e. the hosts do not signal the ironic tone of their commentary in their bodily behavior, and frequently include shrugs and PUOH gestures – both of which have been shown to express epistemic stance (Jehoul et al. 2017, and Müller 2004, respectively). Preliminary results suggest that the multimodal and multimedia modes co-construct the complex stance marking through a complementary deployment. That is, there is a 'load-sharing' between these levels. This is not surprising given that the phenomenon of load sharing has been shown to factor into the distribution across modes of speech and co-speech behavior (Rice & Hinnell 2015). By focusing on the combination of multimodal enactment by the host (gesture, posture, eye gaze, tone of voice) and the multi-media construction of a counterfactual scenario, we uncover the mechanisms behind the emergence of these counterfactual forms. We propose that attention to levels of 'multimodal expression' is the only way to explain their impact and meaning. At the same time, we show how the numerous expressive modalities involved 'share the load' of stance construction in these cases.

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