Exploring bodily, collaborative, and coupled contexts for recurrent gestures associated with negation: Insights from communicative events in Chinese

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Recurrent gestures associated with negation are well documented in several European languages (cf. Ladewig, 2014). However, the role of these gestures in extended sequences of interaction has yet to be explored. There has also been little work on gestures associated with negation in Chinese language and few comparative studies of recurrent gesture cross-linguistically.

The current paper aims to fill these research gaps by examining the role of gestures associated with negation in a collection of communicative events in Chinese interaction. These events were extracted from the author's 20-hour video corpus of naturally-occurring spoken interaction involving a key participant in her everyday social and professional interactions. The events were identified qualitatively on the basis that a) they involved an extended interaction over at least several turns with a rich variety of multimodal negations, and b) they showcased pragmatic norms of negation that are stylistically and culturally salient in China (e.g. Ma, 1996). The two specific events selected for this study involve offering/declining a wedding gift (2m20s) and rejecting compensation for a favour (27m57s).

The method of analysis adopted cognitive-linguistic approaches to identify and describe the kinesic features and linguistic organisation of recurrent gestural forms associated with negation (Bressem, Ladewig, & Müller 2013; Harrison, 2018). Elements of a conversation-analytic approach were integrated to the transcripts to examine the sequential, multi-active, and object-oriented nature of the interaction (Hua, Wei, & Yuan, 2000).

The presentation will first introduce the gestures associated with negation that recur over the course of both events, showing how they are similar to the forms documented for other languages (i.e. variants of the Open Hand Prone family; Kendon, 2004). The analysis will then turn to aspects of the broader kinesic and interactive contexts of these gestures, including various full-bodied and collaborative actions (e.g. wrestling, slapping), turn structures (e.g. adjacency pairs with preferred and dispreferred responses), different uses of verbal resources (e.g. whining, shouting), and changes of affect made relevant in the discourse (e.g. flushing).

The findings are discussed in relation to the linguistic, multimodal and embodied nature of negation (cf. Beaupoil-Hourdel, 2015), the cultural specificity of negation pragmatics, and to embodied cognition (e.g. Gallagher, 2017). The paper illustrates how the analytical unit of recurrent gestures can be broadened from the level of a multimodal construction grammar (Bressem & Müller, 2017) to the level of an interactive ecology.

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