

THIRTY-NINE SECONDS OF VIDEO
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After working for several years with three deaf siblings from a small family in Mexico who have developed their own family sign language, without contact with other deaf people or other sign languages, I began to wonder what it would have been like if our studies of interaction had begun not—as mine did—with written renderings of spoken language but with the experiences of people more like my signing friends. I thus picked a small piece of interaction—just thirty-nine seconds recorded in my lab at UCSD at its inaugural workshop on December 7, 2007—to reflect about what such a different investigative trajectory might have looked like.

I imagine that such an analysis might begin with the sorts of things deaf people routinely see and interpret as they watch people around them interacting. These would, I speculated, include at least movements of bodies, some more or less idiosyncratic, others organized into what Kendon (2004:111) calls “gesture units” which begin with a ‘preparation’ or initial excursion of some body part(s), followed by a ‘stroke’—an apparently deliberate, well-formed, and potentially interactively significant movement—followed by a return to some sort of rest position. What would my deaf friends have seen in the little video clip I had chosen? It seems to me to contain at least three Kendonesque visible gesture units, apparently coordinated with a series of other observable body movements and configurations. Figure 1 illustrates the first of these gesture units arranged on a timeline. This first little gestural utterance seems to be bracketed by the subject’s throwing back his head, pausing for about 4 seconds, and then shaking his head after completing the gestural performance.

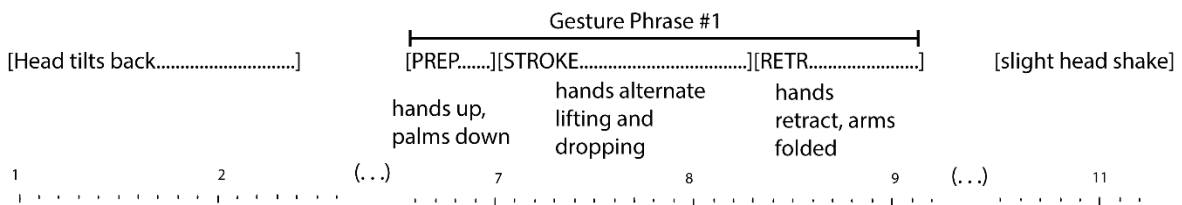


Figure 1

The first Gesture phrase. (Timeline graduated in 10ths of seconds, with gaps represented by dieresis.)

The second gesture unit, which appears after the subject engages in a few more head movements (diagrammed in Figure 2) appears in Figure 3. This gesture unit is in turn immediately followed by a series of large posture shifts.

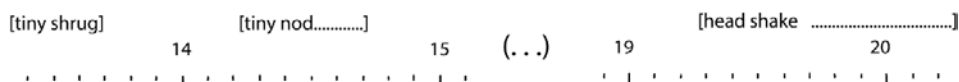


Figure 2

The lead up to the second gesture phrase

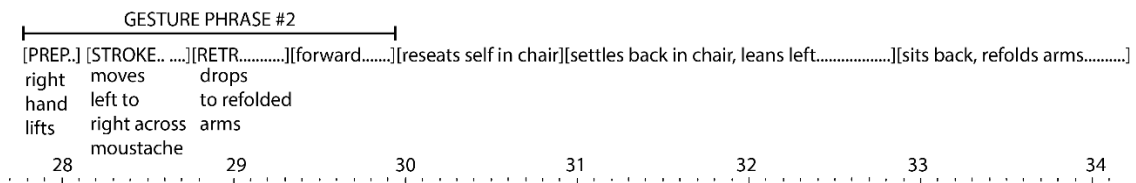


Figure 3
The 2nd gesture phrase: right hand drawn across moustache

The third apparent gesture unit, diagrammed in Figure 4, involves a complex movement of raising the subject's hands alternately, and then folding the arms, followed by a very slight nod.

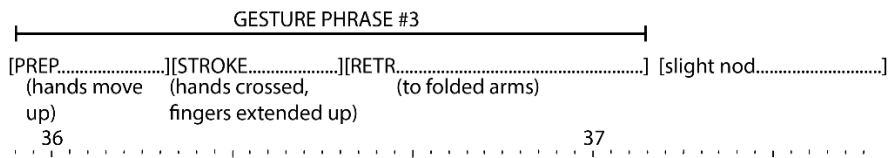


Figure 4
The 3rd gesture unit.

This is, of course, not all that our imagined observers will see. Finely attuned to the nuances of facial expression, they will doubtless attend to the subject's eyes and mouth, as diagrammed in the slightly modified Figures 5 and 6.

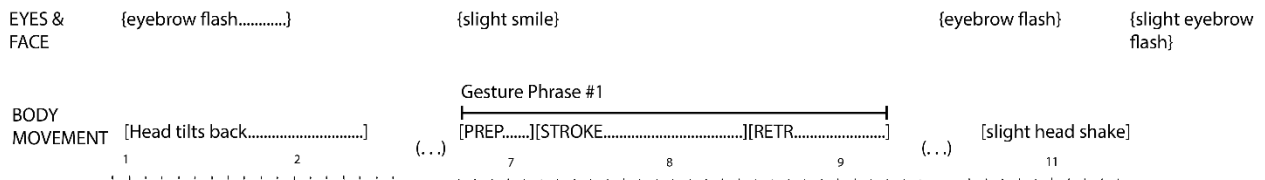


Figure 5
First gesture with added facial annotations.

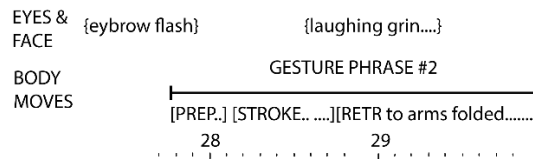


Figure 6
2nd gesture with facial annotations.

Of course, these diagrammatic representations can be made clearer by attaching still video frames to them, as I have tried to do in the following diagrams, which illustrate not only the gestural movements of the hands and arms, but also some of the apparently expressive configurations of eyebrows, gaze, and mouth.

Figure 7, for example, shows the subject's first apparent gestural phrase, and Figures 8 and 9 the last two.

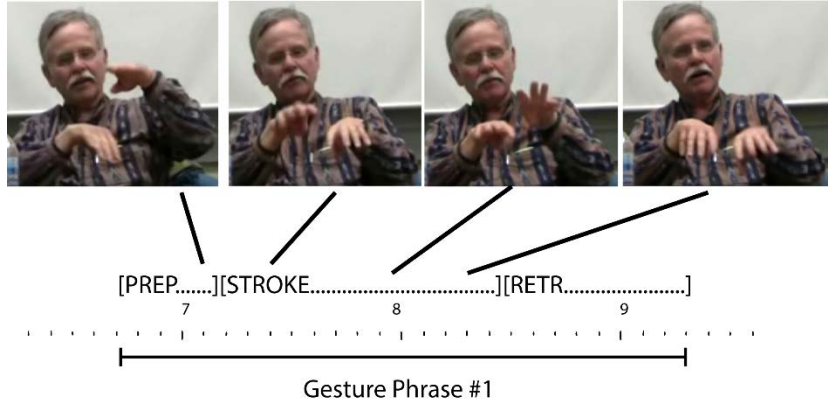


Figure 7
The first gesture unit with video stills

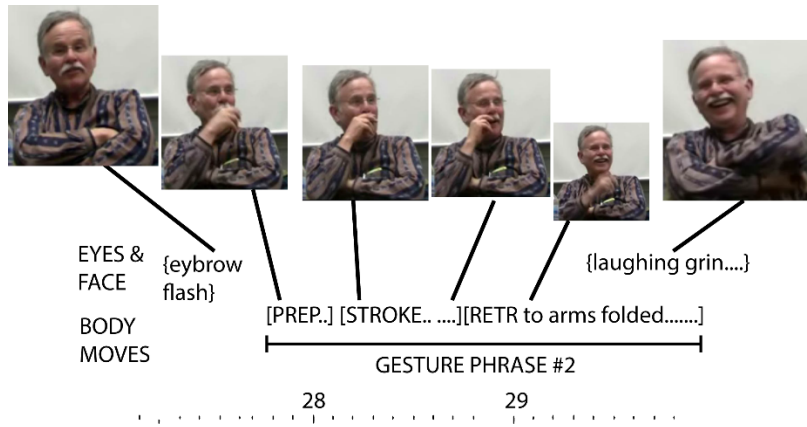


Figure 8
The second gesture unit illustrated

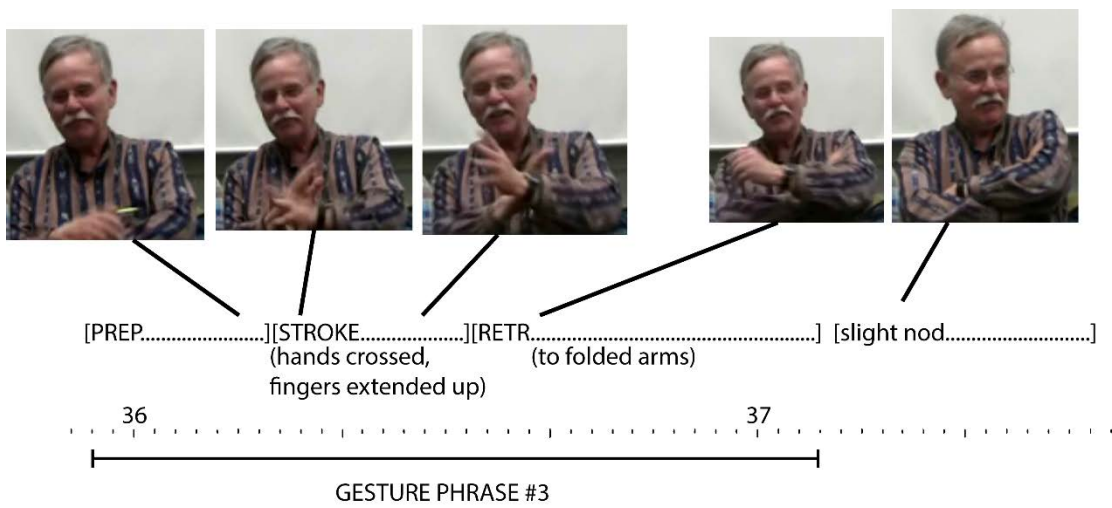


Figure 9
The third gesture unit illustrated. (Timeline graduated in frames of 1/30th of a second.)

Of special interest to analysis may be two phenomena of apparent importance to this subject's expressive repertoire. One is the use of gaze, apparently used in part to pick out observers or recipients in his audience, as well as virtual targets, not in local space but only imagined (see Figure 10).



Figure 10
The subject's expressive and referential use of gaze

Another is what appears to be a characteristic emphatic device the subject favors: the eyebrow flash (Figure 11).

Two sample eyebrow flashes



Figure 11
Emphasis via eyebrow. (Frames represent 1/30th of a second in a sequence.)

Having proceeded thus far with only visual stimuli, our imagined analyst must not, of course, ignore (although also not privilege) the—perhaps only vaguely interpretable—flapping of the subject's lips. As a final layer to our projected analysis, then, allow me to conclude with an

annotated transcript of the accompanying spoken language, not easily accessible to a deaf observer of the interaction, but, luckily, available both to me and to the original intended audience. I divide it into three parts (Transcripts 1-3), each corresponding to one of the gestural phrases already identified.

gaze up

and uh well, the first job I got
maybe this is a slight digression

head shake and gaze left

Gesture #1: "typing"

but the first job I got they didn't have any good job

so the only job I had

like they could give me was typing up these um

uh, like credit cards,
we call them addressograph labels
that were identifications for people going for the clinic

gaze right & slight nod

gaze left

Transcript 1: Words accompanying gesture #1

eyebrow flash

and there was someone else who'd been hired as ath- as an ethnographer

Negative head shake

um: and they couldn't fund her anymore . either
so she also got this job of doing the adre- addressograph labels

eyebrow flash

and um . well that turned out to be Candy

eyebrow flash


and so- so
and so

grin,
laugh,
fold arms

Gesture phrase #2:
grooming the moustache


Transcript 2: Words accompanying gesture #2

you know, while we were doing the addressograph labels



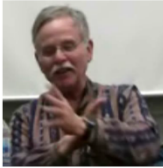
subject adjusts position in chair

we were talking about Goffman who was at Penn then and all these other kind of things and




gaze to left

well- things- things yeah- things went . very very well




Gesture phrase #3: "things"

and then ((laughter drowns Chuck out))



Nod



Transcript 3: Words accompanying gesture #3

Reference cited:

Kendon, Adam 2004. *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance*. New York: Cambridge University Press.