


Gestural fieldwork: a case study from Southern Italy

Introduction. Gestures are a topic of much recent interest in formal linguistics (Ebert and Ebert 2014; Schlenker 2018; Esipova 2019b; *i.a.*). However, to date, the question of how to gather gestural data for theoretical purposes has received almost no attention in the literature. In this talk, I present the details of an original experimental design used to collect theoretically-grounded gestural data from the endangered languages spoken in Southern Italy. In particular, the experiment I describe was used to investigate the syntactic distribution of the co-speech gesture *Mano a Borsa* ‘pursed hand’ (MAB; ) in Neapolitan, an Italo-Romance language spoken in and around Naples. From the previous literature on MAB, we already know that this gesture arises frequently in questions; however, its precise syntactic, semantic, and lexical properties are unclear. This experiment pursued the following research questions: (A) what is the clause-type distribution of MAB? (B) where may it be aligned temporally within the spoken utterance? (C) is MAB an underspecified wh-item? This experimental design should help lay the groundwork for future gestural fieldwork in theoretical linguistics.

Gestural fieldwork. MAB in Neapolitan is paired with a particular speech act, namely questions. However, this does not tell very much about its nature: does MAB make a grammatical contribution at a syntactic level? Does it present a systematic distribution across different speakers? These are all open questions to which it is impossible to find an answer without gathering extensive systematic data (analysable quantitatively) based on the intuition of native speakers on consistent linguistic stimuli. What I report in this talk is a case study involving the elicitation of gesture-related linguistic data, which seems to have produced successful and reliable results. In turn, this provided the experimenters with (i) a more complete picture of the distribution of MAB in questions in Neapolitan; and (ii) data which are well-suited for formal analysis of MAB, crucially including negative data (not possible with certain other methods, e.g. corpora of naturally-occurring productions). In this talk, I will focus *not* on the detailed results of this experiment, but rather on the experimental and fieldwork methodologies themselves, as they are novel within theoretical gestural studies.

The experiment I will focus on is a hybrid one: it was hosted online using experimental design software called Gorilla (<https://gorilla.sc>); however, it was administered in person by a fieldworker *in loco* in Naples. Native Neapolitan-speaking participants were recruited by the fieldworker (also a native speaker), and given a preliminary questionnaire before deciding whether to proceed with the interview. This was necessary due to the nature of the speech community we were investigating, where most individuals have access to at least three distinct grammars; i.e., they are multilingual. (I will provide additional background on the complex language situation in Italy during the talk.) The experiment comprises forced-choice tasks and acceptability judgement ratings. The reliability of this method has been tested for both spoken languages (Schütze and Sprouse 2014) and signed languages (Kimmelman 2021). With respect to gesture, in the semantic literature we can find a mixture of acceptability judgement tasks and experimental methodologies (e.g. ‘playback method’ used in Schlenker (2014), acceptability rating task showing pictures to the participants; Esipova (2019a)). Although these would be partly adaptable in the case of MAB, these could not provide the manipulations needed because of the nature of our research questions, which goal is not to investigate the semantic contribution of MAB, but whether MAB has a specific syntactic distribution. This is why, the main stimuli our participants were asked to judge consisted in pre-recorded videos (spoken by a Neapolitan speaker), which were manipulated in order to test the degree of naturalness of a given spoken component accompanied by MAB in a target sentence and within a given utterance context. This also gave us also the possibility to control for certain factors (i.e. intonation, movement speed and amplitude, etc.). The participants were also asked to motivate their choices in all the contexts present in the experiment, in order to exclude possible confounds (e.g. inappropriate utterance contexts, negative stigma effects related to the use of MAB, etc.)

Contributions. While investigating gesture in theoretical linguistics we can make profitable usage of fieldwork methodologies already used and tested in both spoken and sign formal linguistics. In both spoken and sign generative linguistics, data comes mainly from the intuitions of native speakers; i.e. from formal and informal acceptability judgements by native speakers and signers. However, taking as example the experiment ran for Neapolitan, these methods cannot be straightforwardly applied to the theoretical study of gesture without making additional general methodological considerations and considering specific factors related to the nature of the language communities we are working with.

Selected references

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