

SPEECH AND GESTURE REGULATIONS IN EXPRESSING VAGUE REFERENCE IN EXPOSITORY DIALOGUE

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This study explores the organization of multimodal systems, mediated by two types of hierarchical regulations: systemic regulations governing each mode (speech and gesture) and multimodal regulations operationalizing mode alignment. To identify these regulations, we examine the variability of the multimodal speech-gesture system, modulated by the cognitive factor of vague reference in expository dialogue. The data were collected in an experiment involving native Russian speakers explaining the differences between close synonyms. The paper contrasts the distribution of vague reference speech cues used to shape referents in names (placeholders) and point the way to the referent in predications (approximators), both aligned with functional gestures (deictic, representational, and pragmatic).

The findings reveal several regulations that constrain the distribution and alignment of speech cues and gestures. First, the prevalence of approximators is observed, indicating that a higher input of predication expresses vague reference. Second, the prevalence of placeholders in the Request communicative move was found, accounting for the Request's role in both initiating a new act and completing the previous one by renaming the vague referent. Third, a more frequent use of pragmatic gestures with approximators was identified, suggesting that while nominations primarily evoke iconic and indexical representations in gestures, predications are strongly linked with pragmatic manifestations. Finally, the study reveals that vague reference serves as a cognitive principle regulating the speech and gesture system in interactional discourse.

Keywords: *multimodal system, vague reference, systemic regulations, speech, gesture, dialogue*

1. Introduction

This study contributes to the exploration of semiotic regulations in organizing speech and gesture complexes modulated by cognitive factors, specifically the factor of indirect reference. Following Yuri Stepanov, we expect that “while identifying commonalities in different semiotic systems, semiotics makes us conceive global connections in the organization principles of a) language; b) material culture [...], c) spiritual culture” (Stepanov, 1998, p. 26). In describing the principles governing different semiotic systems in the communicative modes of speech and gesture, we adhere to the “hierarchy law” formulated by Stepanov, which asserts that different semiotic sys-



tems follow similar organizational regulations, contributing to “a certain predictability of a phenomenon” (Ibid., p. 128). These regulations, manifested in the adaptation or alignment of patterns of modes (Demyankov, 2019; Iriskhanova, 2023), are presumably influenced by various cognitive and discursive factors, as well as by constraints and allowances inherent to the semiotic systems themselves – in this case, the communicative modes of speech and gesture.

In this paper, we examine the cognitive factor of reference of a specific type – vague reference – which may regulate the use of speech and gesture as co-functioning semiotic systems in the multimodal exposition of vague notions. While vague reference has been explored within the philosophy of language (Donnellan, 1966; Kripke, 1977) as an epistemic category (Kanellos & Ciobanu, 2021), a semiotic category (Stepanov, 1998; Sinha, 1999), or a strictly linguistic category represented by vague names (Podlesskaya, 2013), we propose that it also contributes to organizing multimodal systems – specifically, speech and gesture.

Epistemologically, vague reference exhibits features such as imprecision, instability, indetermination, and indecision (Kanellos & Ciobanu, 2021). These features, however, may manifest across different semiotic systems. In speech, vague reference appears in the use of hedges and shell nouns, while in gesture, it may surface in holding motions, where a person mimics keeping or weighing a referent on an open palm without outlining its contour or iconically representing its shape and physical properties. This observation suggests that vague reference functions as a common cognitive principle underlying the multimodal integration of speech and gesture.

Investigating how this shared cognitive principle structures different communicative modes within a regulated multimodal system (cf. the concept of autopoiesis related to the “semiotic aspects of structuring genetic information” [Zolyan, 2021, p. 64]) enhances the predictability of vague reference in one system (speech) through insights from the other (gesture).

Building on this notion, we identify the systemic regulations governing the distribution of speech cues and gestures, as well as the alignment patterns of the two modes expressing vague reference in expository dialogue. This type of dialogue establishes relationships between various referents while construing the object of reference as having fuzzy boundaries (Longacre, 1983; Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2007). As is known, interaction in dialogue is mediated by cycles of discrete communicative moves that exhibit varying intensities of information transfer (Lotman, 2010, p. 269). Presumably, these communicative moves contribute to variations in the regulations governing vague reference cues in speech and gesture, as well as in their overall alignment patterns.

2. Data and methods

Following the hierarchical principle in the structure of semiotic systems – which posits that each semiotic system is positioned between a lower-order and a higher-order system (Stepanov, 1998, p. 101) – we examine the multi-



modal system of speech with co-speech gesture as a higher-order system comprising two distinct lower-order systems: speech and gesture. These two systems represent two communicative modes (Irskhanova, 2021) that are uniquely human – not because other species lack them, but because their systemic organization differs. Consequently, the regulations governing the multimodal functioning of speech and gesture are expected to follow common cognitive principles.

The study of the cognitive principle governing speech and gesture – an area widely explored in contemporary multimodal research – builds on the concept of the growth point, introduced by David McNeill (McNeill, 2017). According to this principle, different communicative modes emerge from shared dynamic units of real-time thinking, which serve as the initial forms of both thinking-for-speaking and thinking-for-gesturing units. These units merge, driving the dynamic organization of multimodal systems. Since vague reference operates across both communicative modes, it can be regarded as a growth point for selecting vague reference cues in speech and gesture.

Adopting this perspective necessitates selecting one mode – either speech or gesture – as a starting point for detecting vague reference manifestations, enabling the identification of aligned patterns in the other mode. Two factors justify our selection of the speech/language mode. Firstly, in line with Stepanov, we assume that “language is not just a suitable measure, but a natural measure in attesting the regulations of semiotic systems” (Stepanov, 1998, p. 92). Secondly, since vague reference has been extensively examined in linguistic analysis but is rarely addressed in gesture studies, we can apply the classifications of vague reference cues developed in these studies to speech. For instance, Joanna Channel (1983) identifies the linguistic devices used to express indeterminacy and vagueness in the English language and distinguishes their types – placeholders and approximators – differently shaping the referent. Placeholders form the referent by naming it, while approximators map out the discourse path or route to the referent in predications, including hedges and discursive markers that function as expressions of hesitation. In the context of the Russian language, placeholders and approximators have been thoroughly described in the studies of Vera Podlesskaya and Anna Starodubtseva (Podlesskaya, 2013; Podlesskaya & Starodubtseva, 2013), who identify their specific types in speech. Their classification was extended based on the spoken data obtained in expository discourse and adapted for parametrical research in a contribution by Olga Irskhanova and Yulia Avramova (2021), who focused on coded typology. Placeholders are further categorized into lexical units substituting direct reference to the object, property, and event (maybe tropes) <1102>; impersonal pronouns (кто-то / someone, где-нибудь / somewhere) <1103>; shell-nouns (ситуация / situation, идея / idea, вещь / thing) <1104>; phrases concluding narration (и так далее / etc., и далее / and so on) <1105>; nominalized adjectives (плохое / bad, странное / strange, маленькое / small, религиозное / religious) <1106>; metadiscourse markers (ну и вот / and that’s it, что-то типа того / something like that, ну как-то так / kind of)



<1107>. Approximators, in turn, include words and phrases used to reduce the level of accuracy in forming predications about the referent. This category encompasses hedges, which make statements sound less categorical (ну в целом / by the bye, не совсем / not exactly, скорее так / most likely) <1202>; hedges indicating personal opinion (мне кажется / it seems, моему / as for me) <1203>; indefinite pronouns and particles accompanying nouns (какой-нибудь / any, чей-то / someone's) <1204>; modal adverbs and discourse markers (наверно / probably, может быть / possibly) <1205>; deictic pronouns and adverbs (там / there, вон / over there, эти / these) <1206>; metadiscourse accompanying comments (то есть / that is, скажем / well, ну как сказать / how to put it) <1207>.

To select a gesture classification that would enable the exploration of co-occurring manifestations of vague reference, we relied on the functional classification of gestures developed by Alan Cienki and Cornelia Müller (2008). This classification views gestures as exhibiting indexical, iconic, and pragmatic functions, potentially allowing for the observation of how these gestures contribute to expressing vague referents and vague discourse paths to referents in speech. It encompasses deictic gestures with the indexical function of pointing or locating a referent in space (pointing <2101>, touching <2102>, directing <2103>); representational gestures with iconic function of holding/molding/tracing a referent in hand movements (holding <2201>, molding <2202>, acting <2203>, embodying <2204>, tracing <2205>); pragmatic gestures with the function of expressing opinion about the referent or specifying its role in discourse (discourse structuring <2301>, discourse representational <2302>, discourse emphatic <2303>, contact-establishing <2304>, expressing attitude/evaluation <2305>, expressing negation <2306>, expressing word search <2307>). These gestures were explored alongside with placeholders and approximators in speech to identify their alignment patterns (Demyankov, 2019). The identification of their distribution and alignment patterns enables the formulation of specific regulations for vague reference as a common cognitive principle in the organization of speech and gesture.

Additionally, to explore multimodal system variance, we assume that the distribution of speech and gesture in expressing vague reference may vary depending on discourse interactionality, as monologue and dialogue contribute differently to speakers' involvement in discourse (Lotman, 2010). Major contemporary studies distinguish several communicative moves in dialogue: Request, Response, and Topic Elaboration, further subdivided into Common and Novel Topics (Korotaev, 2023; Iriskhanova et al., 2023). As identified by Iriskhanova et al. (2023), the use of pragmatic contact-establishing gestures largely depends on whether a common or novel topic is elaborated in discourse. Nikolai Korotaev (2023) notes that, overall, the use of the gestural mode is influenced by the presence or absence of a Request move. Given this, we may expect that the use of gestures – and presumably speech cues – in expressing vague reference will differ in dialogues, at least

between Request and Response moves versus Common and Novel Topic elaboration moves, as Request and Response moves serve multiple functions, including contact-establishing, controlling, metacommunicative, and specifying functions (Shvedova, 2003; Sherstinova, 2018; Putina, 2021). Thus, we propose that speech and gesture alignment in expositing vague reference in dialogue is mediated by different communicative moves.

Participants in the experiment, aged 18 to 23, were asked to identify the main difference between pairs of Russian synonyms: “fire – flame”, “dead-man – corpse”, “battle – fight”, “nonsense – rubbish”, “punishment – penalty”, “ideal – perfection”, “lie – falsehood”, “fear – apprehension”, “burden – load”, “effort – diligence”, “duty – obligation”, “line – lineament”, “roar – howl”, “obscurity – darkness”. To annotate the compiled 57-minute corpus, we utilized the ELAN annotation tool (see Fig. 1).

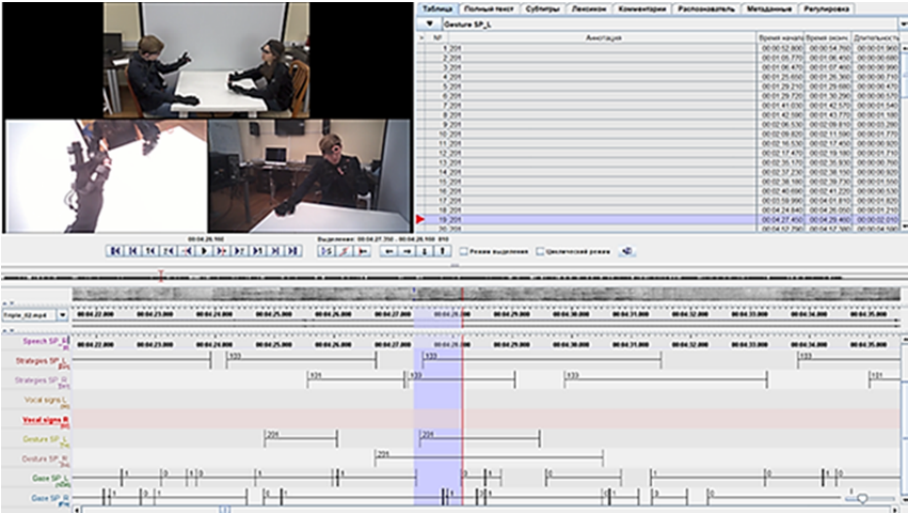


Fig. 1. An example of dialogue annotation in ELAN

As shown in Fig. 1, separate annotation tiers for vague reference in speech, gestures, and communicative moves were created for the speakers on the left and right, who were positioned opposite each other. The coded annotation was conducted by four specialists and cross-checked for accuracy. Subsequently, a series of contingency and variance tests were performed to identify regulations governing the distribution and alignment of speech cues and co-speech gestures in communicative moves.

3. Results and discussion

First, we identify the regulations governing the distribution of speech cues across communicative moves – Request vs. Response and Common vs. Novel Topic Elaboration. Table 1 presents this distribution.



Table 1

The distribution of placeholders and approximators in communicative moves

Vague reference cues in speech	Request	Response	Common Topic elaboration	Novel Topic elaboration
Placeholders				
1102	12	6	86	67
1103	7	1	46	57
1104	6	2	33	24
1105	0	0	0	0
1106	8	4	96	50
1107	2	2	6	6
Approximators				
1202	50	59	287	218
1203	9	15	50	42
1204	4	0	19	27
1205	7	10	57	69
1206	20	14	60	50
1207	17	33	79	72

With the predominance of approximators over placeholders, the results suggest that shaping the path to the referent is more demanding in terms of vague reference than shaping the referent itself. Additionally, Table 1 indicates that distribution depends on speech cue types within the categories of placeholders and approximators. For instance, while many placeholders and approximators are predominantly used in topic elaboration moves, certain cues – particularly approximators – are more characteristic of Request and Response moves. These include <1206> deictic pronouns as adverbs, <1207> metadiscourse accompanying comments, and <1202> hedges indicating a personal opinion, although the latter is also widely used in topic elaboration moves. Chi-square tests reveal that placeholders and approximators are distributed differently in Request versus Response moves ($\chi^2=10.37$, $p=0.02$), with placeholders more common in Request and approximators prevailing in Response. The relative prevalence of placeholders in Request suggests that this move not only initiates a new conversational act in expository discourse but also finalizes the speaker's referent construal and captures the referent. Thus, Request serves both as the beginning of a new communicative act and the conclusion of the previous one, reinforcing the significance of this move within the cyclic structure of dialogue (Lotman, 2010). Consequently, Request and Response moves not only contribute to communication (Shvedova, 2003; Sherstinova, 2018; Putina, 2021) but also develop the cognitive foundation of dialogue, supporting perspectives on the cognitive role of communicative modes in dialogue (Korotaev, 2023; Iriskhanova et al., 2023).

Next, we examine the regulations governing the distribution of co-speech gestures across communicative moves (Table 2).



Table 2

**The distribution of gestures co-occurring with vague reference cues
in speech communicative moves**

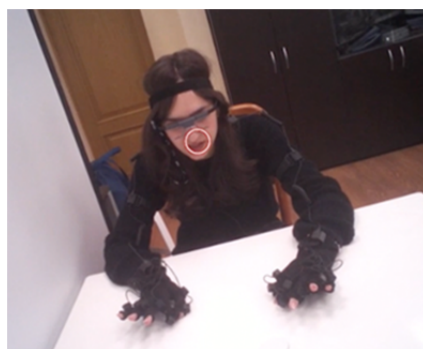
Single discursive gesture types used with speech cues	Request	Response	Common Topic elaboration	Novel Topic elaboration
Deictic				
2101	9	8	26	9
2102	11	11	58	35
2103	2	1	3	11
Representational				
2201	5	6	34	19
2202	1	1	11	13
2203	3	3	16	7
2204	1	2	12	5
2205	1	1	15	18
Pragmatic				
2301	17	13	116	65
2302	23	13	81	60
2303	48	27	113	97
2304	98	59	198	112
2305	22	22	58	32
2306	5	0	6	9
2307	3	2	5	15

The data in Table 2 show that while pragmatic gestures exhibit the highest overall activity, they are most frequently found not only in Topic Elaboration moves but also in Request and Response ones. This is particularly relevant for discourse emphatic (<2303>) and contact-establishing (<2304>) gestures. Further Chi-square tests on the overall distribution of the four gesture types reveal that pragmatic gestures differ in use between Request and Response moves ($\chi^2=18.06$, $p<.001$) and Common and Novel Topic Elaboration moves ($\chi^2=4.7$, $p=0.031$). The major difference is observed in their use within Request and Response moves, where they are more prevalent in Requests. Fig. 2 illustrates the use of pragmatic gestures in their most typical communicative moves within dialogue.

In Fig. 2a, the participant performs a Request move, which is introduced in speech with a question directed at the other participant. This question is accompanied by a contact-establishing pragmatic gesture, which also serves a deictic function, as the speaker points at the interlocutor. In Fig. 2b, the participant summarizes the information presented when shaping the referent developed during earlier topic elaboration moves. Simultaneously, she expresses her opinion about the referent, manifested through the use of a discourse emphatic gesture.



a



b

Fig. 2. The use of pragmatic gestures in communicative moves in dialogue:

- a – Request *Вранье?* (A lie?) with co-speech pragmatic and deictic gestures;
b – Common Topic elaboration *В том же смысле, что ложь – это, во-первых, глобальнее, во-вторых, литературное, а, в-третьих, нужно подумать еще* (I mean, falsehood is, first, more global; next, it's more of a literary thing; and third, I need to think a bit more) with co-speech pragmatic gesture

Further observations show that approximators are more frequently used with pragmatic gestures than placeholders. This suggests that gesture pragmaticity is primarily required to shape the path to the referent in predications. It allows for the use of fewer iconic and indexical support gestures but demands higher phaticity, contact maintenance, and evaluation. Overall, these gestures tend to specify the referent's role in discourse rather than its spatial features or location.

Therefore, the study enabled the identification of several major regulations organizing the multimodal system of speech and gesture in expository dialogue, modulated by the cognitive factor of vague reference. First, with a greater prevalence of approximators over placeholders, we can assert that shaping the path to the referent is more demanding in terms of vague reference than shaping the referent itself. Second, the higher frequency of placeholders in the Request move demonstrates that Request is multifunctional – it initiates a new conversational act while also finalizing the speaker's act of shaping the referent, thus serving as a starting point for a new communicative cycle in dialogue. Third, pragmatic gestures are prevalent across all communicative moves, appearing not only in Topic Elaboration moves but also in Request and Response ones. Importantly, these gestures primarily serve to specify the referent's role in the dialogue, often used alongside with approximators in predications.

4. Final remarks

Overall, the study makes two major contributions.

First, the findings offered insights into the organization of multimodal discourse modulated by vague reference as a cognitive category. By revealing specific alignment patterns in the distribution of speech and gesture, we suggest that vague reference serves as a “growth point” (McNeill, 2017) in



expository discourse. As demonstrated in epistemology and philosophy of language, the referent, through its names and attributes, may exhibit fuzzy boundaries, which are manifested in the use of vague reference. However, linguistic analysis of vague reference cues in communication suggests that they are used for two purposes: shaping the referent via names (nominations) in placeholders, and shaping the discourse path to the referent (its role in discourse, actions involving it, its spatial location) via predications in approximators. Moreover, the results indicate that this multimodal system is influenced by interactionality, which represents discrete moves of varying intensity in information transfer (Lotman, 2010), expressed through communicative moves such as Request, Response, and Topic Elaboration.

Secondly, the findings on speech and gesture distribution and alignment in expressing vague reference enabled the identification of several regulations tied to the structure of each mode—language and gesture—as well as the macrostructure of their multimodal use. These findings broadly align with Stepanov's (1998) ideas on system organization as applied to multimodal communication and discourse. Since approximators generally outnumber placeholders, we can conclude that shaping the discourse path to the referent is more demanding than shaping the referent itself. This is likely due to the longer spans of predications compared to nominations in discourse, and it also suggests that the referent's role in communication can be seen as having fuzzy boundaries. Notably, shaping the path to the referent through predications allows for higher pragmaticity in gesture. This alignment, described in the third regulation, supports the claim that while nominations primarily evoke iconic and indexical representations in gesture, predications allow for more pragmatic manifestations. Moreover, the second regulation emphasizes the multifunctional role of the Request move in organizing turn-taking and, by extension, specifies the impact of interactionality in dialogue.

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ЗАКОНОМЕРНОСТИ В ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИИ РЕЧИ И ЖЕСТА ПРИ РЕАЛИЗАЦИИ НЕЧЕТКОЙ РЕФЕРЕНЦИИ В ЭКСПОЗИТОРНОМ ДИАЛОГЕ

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Исследование обращается к проблеме организации полимодальных систем, которая обеспечивается проявлениями закона иерархии, регулирующего особенности реализации каждой из модальностей, языка и жеста, а также в целом всего полимодального



единства в согласовании этих модальностей. Для установления проявлений закона иерархии исследуется вариативность в организации полимодальной системы речи и жеста под влиянием когнитивного фактора нечеткой референции в диалогепояснении. Данные были собраны в ходе эксперимента, в котором участники – носители русского языка – давали пояснения в отношении различий между близкими синонимами. Определены особенности в распределении, с одной стороны, показателей нечеткой референции в речи, маркирующих трудности при конструировании самого референта в номинациях (заместители) и построении пути к референту в предикациях (аппроксиматоры), и, с другой, функциональных типов жеста (дейктические, репрезентирующие, прагматические), в диалоге. Установлен ряд закономерностей в распределении речи и жеста, а также в их согласовании. Так, аппроксиматоры преобладают над заместителями, что свидетельствует о том, что нечеткая референция чаще проявляется именно в предикативных фрагментах. Была также обнаружена более высокая частотность заместителей в коммуникативном акте Запроса, что определяет особую роль этого этапа как одновременно начинающего новый коммуникативный акт и завершающего предыдущий при повторном наименовании референта с нечеткими (размытыми) границами. Выявлен рост в использовании прагматических жестов с аппроксиматорами, что указывает на такую особенность, как возможность предикативной информации демонстрировать более высокий уровень проявления прагматических смыслов, в отличие от номинативной информации, представляющей больше иконическое и индексальное содержание референта. В целом установлено, что нечеткая референция действительно определяет варьирование в проявлениях закономерностей в полимодальной системе речи и жеста с учетом ее интеракционных манифестаций.

Ключевые слова: полимодальная система, нечеткая референция, законы системы, речь, жест, диалог

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