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IDIOGESTS: GESTURAL IDIOLECTS REVEAL VARIATION IN DISCURSIVE FOCUS*

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Abstract: This paper discusses a particular kind of gestural interspeaker variation, revealing the individual speaker's "gestural idiolects", which we term *idiogests*. While partly attributable to *ad hoc* individual preferences and style, our data show that these idiogests are also indicative of a certain semantic focus or perspective that the speaker takes on the scene and maintains throughout the discourse. Our study is based on elicited picture descriptions by L1 speakers of Belgian Dutch.

Keywords: co-verbal gestures, gestural idiolects, idiogests.

1. Introduction

The last decades have witnessed an increased interest in a multimodal approach to language where in particular co-verbal gestures have received an increasing amount of attention. One of the basic claims of gesture researchers (e.g., Kendon 2004; McNeil 2000; 2014) is that co-verbal gestures should not be regarded as decorative elements that merely serve a rhetorical or

* This article is written for the special issue of the journal *Lege Artis* in honour of Ad Foolen's 75th birthday. As Ad Foolen's work testifies of a strong interactional focus, the topic of idiogests discussed here seems quite appropriate. This article is the first publication of my idea about the existence of idiogests.

emphatic purpose. Certain gestures, such as beats, do indeed relate to emphasis – and are therefore also probably more recurrent in persuasive language (be it public or private), but most co-verbal gestures are considered to be part and parcel of the linguistic and/or communicative act. The planned, communicative confluence of language and gesture is what McNeil (2000) calls "growth points". That language and gesture are conceptualised as a single communicative unit is evidenced by the fact that gestures either perfectly align with or precede the words in the verbal stream that they semantically correspond with. For example, an iconic gesture representing a tree during a verbal recount will typically coincide with the word *tree*. Similarly, beat gestures serving to emphasize elements in the discourse typically coincide with prosodic word stress (in the case of languages that have (variable) word-stress). Kelly et al. (2010) propose the "integrated-systems hypothesis" which not only holds that speech and gesture are tightly integrated, but also interact so as to enhance language comprehension. Arguing for gestures and language to be a single unit of meaning or communicative intent does not, however, mean that they are essentially the same: language expresses meaning sequentially via (conventional) symbols; gestures express meaning holistically using (possibly iconic) images. In sum, language and gesture both conspire to make meaning, and suppressing one to the benefit of the other leads to impoverished speech production and understanding.

Such a unified account aligns quite nicely with a cognitive, usage-based view on language which posits that 'language' is learned in and emerges from concrete usage-events, predominantly in interaction with other speakers. These usage-events are by definition rich in detail where verbal and gestural elements combine. Iconic gestures usually feed the interaction by facilitating the expression and comprehension of the descriptions of reality (e.g., by expressing their shape or size) or ideas about reality (e.g., metaphorical conceptualization of time as a directed line moving from left to right). Pragmatic gestures, ranging from hand gestures over shoulder shrugs to frowning one's eyebrows, contribute to expressing and understanding the speaker's epistemic stance. Via cognitive processes of abstraction and pattern-finding, coupled with intention reading, language users build more schematic structures of these usage-events that eventually function as patterns allowing the creation of novel utterances. If the integrated-systems hypothesis holds, then language and gesture are both learned in such usage events, via similar processes.

Despite all these cognitive and communicative benefits, there is considerable variation in speakers' individual gestural behaviour, especially concerning the frequency with which speakers gesture: some speakers gesture a lot, others do not. Concerning such individual differences in gestural behaviour, Gullberg et al. (2008: 165) observe that "[m]any aspects of individual variation in adult, native gesturing are not well understood, such as why some speakers gesture more than others, and why the same speaker sometimes chooses to gesture and sometimes not". There have been some suggestions in the literature about the causes for such individual differences. Some of this variability can be attributed to the usual socio-linguistic variables, such as the speaker's age (Alibali et al. 2009), to the speaker's culture (Kendon 2004; Kita 2009), or to the speaker's individual traits (cf. Hostetter and Potthoff 2012 who see gesture production in relation to "extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness to experience"). Psychopathology and cognitive disorders also play a role (Gillstrom & Hare 1988; Bello et al. 2004). Hostetter and Alibali (2007) point out that the frequency of gestures can also be related to the speaker's communicative skills: lower verbal frequency (both in L1 and in L2) usually leads to more gesturing, even if it has also been pointed out that different levels of proficiency may also lead to different *types* of gestures (rather than their mere frequency), where one typically sees a change from lexical-representation to emphatic/rhythmic gestures as proficiency increases (Kida 2005; Lemmens & Perrez 2017; Taranger & Coupier 1984).

Most of the studies mentioned above center around the presence of absence of co-verbal gestures. This article presents a qualitative study of another type of gestural interspeaker variation, i.e., the repeated or sustained use of exactly the same kind of gesture used by a given individual, which could be termed a "gestural idiolect". We will use the term *idiogests* to refer to such gestural idiolectal variation, a term we borrow from the work by choreographer Brannigan, who defines this as "the gestural parameters, the performative domain, the corporal specificity of the dance star" (2011: 142). Also, with respect to co-verbal gestures, idiogests are attributable to a personal gestural style which may have to do with the speaker's "corporal specificity" (e.g., the way a speaker bends their fingers given their physiology) or particular motor habits that a speaker may have settled on in the course of their life (for whatever reason). However, the elicited data that our study is based on suggest that some of these idiogests do find a semantic or discursive motivation and reveal a speaker's (temporary) perspective on a given scene. It is this perspective, we hypothesize, that triggers speakers to reproduce a high

degree of recurrence for particular types of gestures, leading to a certain 'gestural style'. In particular, we refer to recurrent formal similarities (or even near-identity) of gestures across different contexts that somehow can still be related semantically or discursively. At first sight, idiogests may seem similar to what McNeill (2000) has called "catchments" (recurrences of gesture form features over a stretch of discourse), but we will show that they are still different.

In the next section, we will briefly describe the data on which our analysis is based, followed by a more detailed description of the observed idiogests.

2. Material and methods

The data on which this article is based are drawn from elicited descriptions of five pictures from two wordless picture books for children. Each picture depicts a different kind of environment: (1) a clothing shop for kids, (2) a shoe store, (3) a bedroom where a family is getting dressed for a party, (4) a street market, and (5) a butcher's shop. Each picture thus has a typical array of objects, respectively clothes (Picture 1), shoes and shoeboxes (Picture 2), furniture and clothes (Picture 3), vegetables (Picture 4; at three vegetable stands), and meat and delicacies (Picture 5). However, they also show people interacting with objects, such as a shop assistant carrying shoe boxes, a market woman holding up a bunch of carrots, a woman folding clothes on a counter, people trying on shoes, a man tying his tie in front of the mirror, or a butcher slicing meat or laying it on a dish.

The subjects who participated in the quasi-experiments were asked to describe each picture, one after the other, on the basis of a lead-question, targeting particular entities. For example, for Picture 3 (the one on which this article is based, see Figure 1), the lead-question was *Here we're interested in the clothes and the furniture. Can you tell me where they are?*

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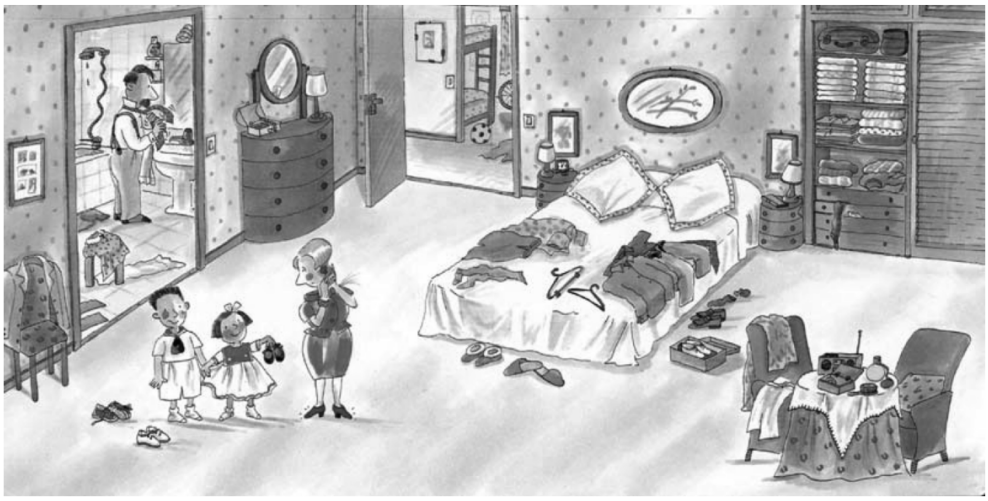

Figure 1. Picture 3: the bedroom (Source: Capdevila 1984, reproduced with permission)

The resulting descriptions are (short) descriptive monologues, told to the experimenter, situated in front of them. The subjects were presented one picture at a time, in a random order for different participants to avoid any order cross-over effect. The subjects were seated on a chair without armrests. Before starting the description, they could hold the picture for a while to study it and then were asked to place it on a stand placed slightly to the right of them (at about 1m distance) and start their description. The productions were video-taped and transcribed verbatim. Afterwards the data were annotated in ELAN, which also allows analysis of co-verbal gestures.

This "picture description project" has been conceptualised as a larger contrastive study where speakers of different languages would be involved (French, English, Dutch, and Swedish) and learners of these languages (see also Lemmens 2021: Ch. 9; Lemmens and Perrez 2012). Given the time and labour-intensive process of gesture coding, for this paper, only the descriptions of Picture 3 by Dutch speakers were considered. There were 12 participants who participated for Dutch; they were undergraduates at the University of Leuven, Belgium (following a course in L2 Swedish taught by the author). Of these 12 participants, one speaker (DU-L1-01)[1] was excluded because of the simple fact that he never made any gestures at all for picture 3 (but was similarly "gesturally mute" for the other pictures), apart from occasionally tapping the fingertips of his spread-open hands against each other (see Fig. 2) which, however, was not semantically meaningful; it merely indicates a slight degree of nervousness.

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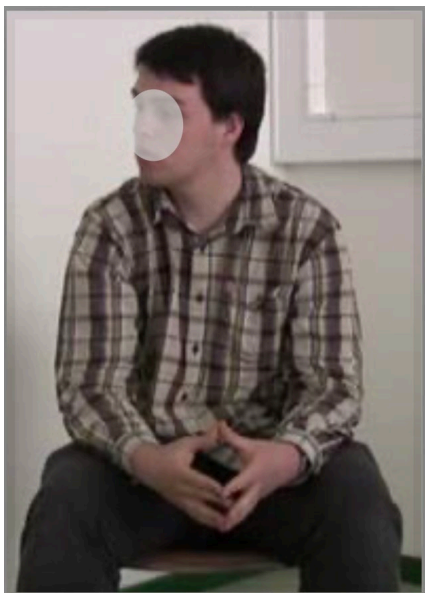

Figure 2. Non-communicative holding gesture (speaker DU-L1-01)

Strikingly, this particular participant was also verbally quite modest, having very short descriptions and speaking in a quiet voice, in line with his more introvert character.

3. Idiogests in oral picture descriptions

While analyzing the gestures in the elicited descriptions of picture 3 in more detail, I couldn't help being struck by an undeniable recurrence of the same (or highly similar) gestures with one and the same speaker, to the extent that I could even assign particular names to the participants, like "the mute" (mentioned above), "the oscillator", "the pulser", "the swayer", etc. What started out as a humorous description of the participants, slowly developed into a more serious consideration of these speaker consistencies in their gestural behaviour, giving rise to the idea of idiogests as defined above. Looking at the gestural occurrences in more detail, as well as at the verbal stream with which they were aligned, it became clear that these idiogests were possibly more than just formal, stylistic variations between speakers or differences related to gestural motor habits. The latter would be similar to repeated, non-communicative gestural habits, like repeatedly scratching one's head, rubbing one's ear, or adjusting one's hair. Rather, these idiogests also seemed to reflect what the speaker tended to focus on while describing the picture, which thus provides a further, context-specific motivation for the formal similarity. For example, as we will describe in more detail below, the "oscillator" is recurrently using an oscillating gesture to express a binary locative relation, the "pulser" is using a flick of her hand each time she mentions an entity that she feels is relevant in answer to the leading question (the

location of the clothes and the furniture). In the following section, we present a few of these idiogests in more detail, organised via the labels that we have assigned to the participants; after these descriptions we will have a more general discussion.

3.1 The oscillator: expressing locative semantics

The recurrent gesture used by this speaker (DU-L1-03) is a gesture with the thumb and index finger in a C-shape (see Fig. 3) which comes in two variants: one in which index and thumb oscillate in a fairly fast movement, the other where they do not oscillate. As illustrated by the three stills in Fig. 3, the gesture is made with the (dominant) right hand, but occasionally also with the left hand, or even with both hands.

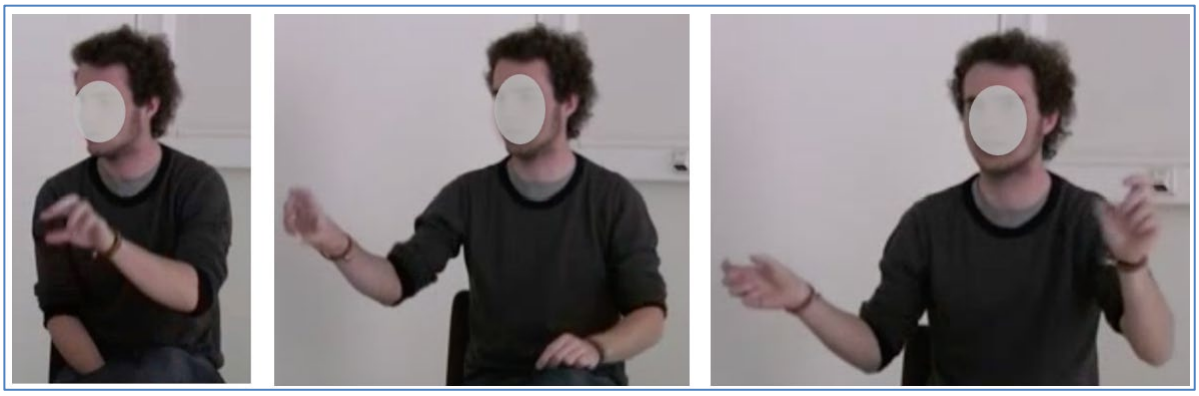

Figure 3. The oscillator (DU-L1-03); three different gestures LH, RH, LRH

What is striking is that the verbal stream with which the oscillating variant of this gesture is aligned invariably talks about the location of a particular entity, mostly in the form of a Basic Locative Construction (Wilkins & Levinson 1998) of the form *Figure* + <*verb*> + <*relator*> + *Ground*, e.g., *de kast staat naast de deur* 'the cabinet is (litt. stands) next (to) the door'. The oscillating C-gesture thus visually relates the located entity (Figure: *cabinet*) vis-à-vis the reference point (Ground: *door*). Moreover, these C-gestures are typically not located in the center space which represents the space being described (the bedroom), but more in the higher periphery (left or right). This indicates that the speaker's gesture is not anchoring the location of the entities in the represented space, but expresses merely the proximal relationship between the Figure and the Ground. This is why, in other work (see Lemmens & Perrez 2017), we have made the systematic distinction between gestures that express locative semantics *in abstracto* (typically a holding gesture made at the height of the chest) and 'true' locative gestures that

situate (i.e., anchor) an entity in the gesture space (typically situated a bit lower but also with a downward movement). In terms of Langacker's Cognitive Grammar, the latter type of gesture could be seen as "grounding predications" which he defines as follows:

"*a grounded instance [is] an instance distinguished from others and situated with respect to hearer/speaker knowledge* […] *Semantically, [grounding predications]* **anchor the type conception in time (relative to the ground)** *and tie it to specific participants, thereby converting it into the conception of an instance*". (Langacker 1991: 33, emph. added)[2]

Applied to our example, the semantic notion PROXIMITY, also verbally expressed by *next to*, remains a gestural type, and is not translated into an "instance" as it is not spatio-temporally tied to a location (grounded) in the gesture space. Such grounding occurs when the gesture (with a downward movement) situates the two entities in the gesture space, for example if the speaker had pointed at a specific location in the gesture space (e.g., to the right) simultaneous to saying *next to*. This would identify the location of either the Figure (cabinet) or the Ground (door), or both. The typical gestural expression of such locative grounding of 3D objects (in our data at least) is via a CLAW-gesture, palm down and fingers lightly spread as if holding a tennis ball), as shown by the two (different) gestures in Fig. 4 (for another speaker as the oscillator never made such a gesture).

Figure 4. Non-communicative holding gesture (DU-L1-06)

The oscillating idiogest is invariably *not* grounded which strengthens the idea that this is a mere semantic focus on the proximity itself, which is further highlighted via the oscillating back and

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forth where the thumb represents one entity and the index the other; the wiggling expresses the (enduring) spatio-temporal interrelationship between Figure and Ground.

The non-oscillating variant is less frequent, but invariably aligns with the Figure; it could thus be interpreted as representing the Figure as a 3D-object, yet one which is still in a relationship with the Ground.

In and by itself, the occurrence of a C-shape, typically oscillating gesture is not a remarkable fact. What is remarkable, however, is the ***recurrence*** of this gesture over different contexts (i.e., with different Figure-Ground relationships); on a total of 18 gestures that occur in his description of the bedroom scene, 8 are this oscillating C-gesture (about every 2.5 gestures is this idiogest) and they invariably co-occur with semantically similar verbal expressions such as *next to*, *to the left/right*, etc. In other words, throughout the description, the speaker (surely unconsciously) maintains a semantic focus on the (non-grounded) locative relationship between the Figure and the Ground which makes this oscillating C-idiogest more than 'just' a stylistic feature.

3.2 The swayer: representing 3D-objects

The swayer (DU-L1-02) is, as the name suggests, using an idiogest where she sways with both hands in a wavy downward movement, which she does whenever she mentions one of the type objects that she feels are to be mentioned in response to the leading question ("locate clothes/furniture") (See Fig. 5).

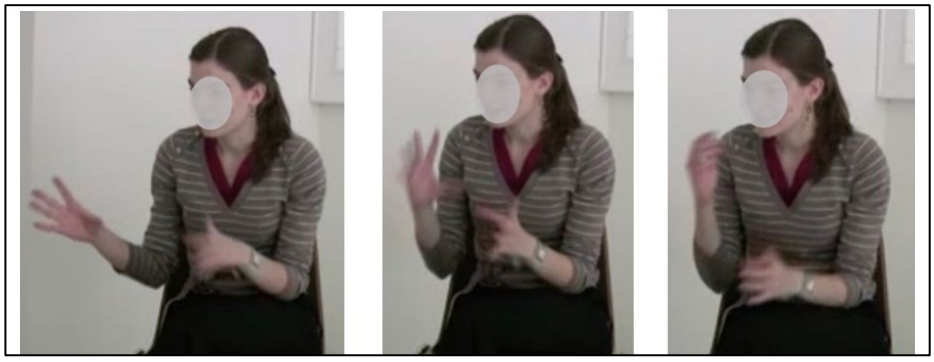

Figure 5. The Swayer (three different phases of single gesture)

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This idiogest has representational value since it represents, in a somewhat unclear way, the three-dimensional objects that she refers to. While the gestures are representational, they are not fully iconic as the swaying gesture is only an approximation of what could be regarded as a visualization of the entities' formal properties (like their shape). Half of the 10 gestures she makes in her description of picture 3 are these swaying idiogests, and they co-occur with lexical items referring to objects such as cabinets or clothes. Precisely the latter is important, since the idiogests occur mostly when mentioning the two types of entities that figure in the instructions (furniture and clothes), which are thus the key elements to be mentioned in the description if the speaker wants to perform the description task correctly. As such, the idiogest acquires a pragmatic value as well, highlighting the fact that she is complying to the instructions. The (fairly monologic) setting is important here, as the participants are describing pictures to the experimenter (standing behind the camera) and on his instruction, often also looking at him after having completed a particular locative event. In sum, her idiogests serve a dual purpose: they (somewhat sloppily) represent the located objects, but they also express a pragmatically motivated compliance to the experimenter's instructions. Despite the monologic nature of the description (the experimenter never comments or reacts on their discourse), the speaker adds recurrent gestural expressions that serve an interactional function. This is unsurprising, as it is at the heart of what we use language and gesture for. The interactional function is even more outspoken in the following series of idiogests, discussed together as they serve a similar purpose.

3.3 The indexer, the pulser and the beater: a pure pragmatic value

The idiogests produced by the indexer (DU-L1-12), the pulser (DU-L1-10) and the beater DU-L1-7) are formally different (hence the different names), but they all serve a similar pragmatic function (see Fig. 6, 7, and 8).

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Figure 6. The indexer

Figure 7. The pulser

Figure 8. The beater

The indexer (Fig. 6) uses a pointing-shaped idiogest with the (dominant) right hand with a stretched index finger (the other fingers are bent in a loose fist, with the thumb mostly resting on the middle finger); the hand moves from the resting position to pointing at a vague location to the further left of the speaker's left ear (i.e., it is a (fairly fast) move from center to upper-left. As such, it remains clearly detached from any representation of the bedroom in the gesture space (in front of the speaker) or from any pointing to the picture itself (on a stand to the front-right of the speaker). The speaker also has a tendency to maintain that handshape even when not gesturing. Of the 29 gestures that she makes during the description, 16 are such pointing idiogests (just over half). The gesture invariably coincides with the naming of located entities. This confirms that it clearly is not representational or deictic, but has pure pragmatic value: it functions more like a "gestural bulleted list", visualizing the enumeration via an upward pointing gesture.

The pulser (DU-L1-10, Fig. 7) and the beater (DU-L1-7, Fig. 8) similarly use pragmatic beat gestures that occur each time they mention an item of furniture of clothing. The pulser does this with a gesture where the hand is in a loose, sloppy open claw-like shape, palm down, the hand flicks up in a quick movement from the wrist only which rests on her knee. The beater similarly does beat gestures with more undefined handshapes, mostly with the palm (half) up and fingers in neutral, loose position, and a movement also mostly from the wrist, even if sometimes a bit larger. Her idiogest is formally less well-defined, yet does have sufficient similarity across different contexts to consider it as such. In both cases, the idiogest is again nearly exclusively pragmatic, as they occur each time an entity is mentioned that is relevant to the task at hand

(describing furniture or clothes). From a more general perspective, these gestures could be interpreted as epistemic, as they relate to contextually induced obviousness or self-evidence (from the point of view of the speaker). Bressem and Müller (2014) consider this to be a recurrent gesture, typically made as a PUOH gesture (Palm Up Open Hand), mostly with both hands. The beater does use such a more open hand gesture (mostly single handed, sometimes with two hands); the pulser's gesture does not conform to this, which, however, does not strike us as invalidating the possibly epistemic meaning of her idiogest.

4. Discussion

The above description of idiogests illustrates that in their gestural behaviour, speakers use *individually specific* recurrent gestures with a striking similarity of form. These formal properties line up with those that have been observed in the literature; for example, Bressem and Müller (2014) mention recurrent gestures (across different speakers) that are quite similar to the ones described above, such as the index-thumb oscillating gesture, the double-handed PUOH gesture, etc. However, what is striking in our data is that there is a higher-than-normal recurrence of the same gesture in the description of a single speaker, turning it into an index of the speaker's idiosyncratic gestural style, a *gestural idiolect* or an *idiogest*. Such idiogests can be attributed to corporal properties or individual habits of the speaker, comparable to one's pitch of voice or the use of fillers like *uhm* in the verbal mode. However, what we see here goes beyond such mere corporal or habitual phenomena, as the idiogest seems to be semantically or discursively motivated. One of the speakers in our data set, the oscillator, nicely illustrates a more semantic (i.e., representational) focus on the interrelation between the described entities, a focus that he maintains throughout his entire description. Similarly, the swayer gesturally represents the (3D) objects she is referring to in the verbal stream but does so with a non-iconic swaying gesture; as such, her idiogest holds the middle between a clear iconic representation of the object and a (more schematic) expression of its location in the gesture space which is typically done with a pointing gesture or claw-gesture (cf. Fig. 4). The gesture invariably aligns with the mentioning of the items of furniture or clothing as asked for in the task, which adds a pragmatic layer to this gesture whereby the speaker expresses that she conforms to the instructions. A similar pragmatic or even fully epistemic function is argued to apply to the idiogests of the indexer, the beater, and the pulser, as if they are working through a gestural bulleted list for each of the items that they considered necessary to be mentioned in response to the task.

In sum, the data strongly suggest that these idiogest reveal a (subtle) semantic or discursive focus that the speaker maintains throughout the description. This could in fact be compared to recurrent small verbal phrases that are often added in interactional discourse, such as the interactionally motivated additions at the end of a sentence that speakers often intersperse their oral discourse with, such as the (rhetorical) questions *you know?* or *you see what I'm saying?* that speakers may add at the end of their utterances. Or consider the university lecturer who intersperses their explanation to the students with *Does that make sense?* to the extent that it becomes a striking individual (i.e., idiolectal) feature of that lecturer's discourse[3]. These phrases fulfill a particular discursive function yet their *recurrent* use also creates a particular individual verbal "style". It is in this sense that idiogests should be interpreted.

At first sight, idiogests may seem to be similar to what McNeill (2000) has termed *catchments,* recurrent gestures with the same form features, which speakers use to combine things into larger discourse units:

> "*A catchment is recognized from a recurrence of gesture features over a stretch of discourse. It is a kind of thread of consistent visuospatial imagery running through a discourse segment that provides a gesture-based window into discourse cohesion.* […] *Thus, working backwards, the catchment offers clues to the cohesive linkages in the text with which it co-occurs*". (McNeill 2000: 26)

It is through catchments that one sees "what [the] speaker is combining into larger discourse units" (McNeill et al. 2001: 2), i.e., what a speaker groups together as semantically similar (visible via the catchment) or distinct (put into different catchments). McNeil (2000) illustrates such catchments when a speaker is describing a scene from a Sylvester cartoon depicting Sylvester climbing up a drain pipe and a bowling ball moving down in it. One of the catchments that McNeill identifies is when the speaker uses the same single-hand gesture at different places in the description when describing the bowling ball; another recurring gesture (made with two hands) serves to indicate the relative position of the two entities in the drain pipe (Sylvester and the bowling ball). These two examples of catchments clearly show that they are not the same as the idiogests discussed here, which apply across *different* contexts, describing totally different entities or events. McNeil does add that "[i]ndividuals differ in how they divide the world into related and unrelated components" and that thus "[c]atchments give us a way of detecting these individual grouping patterns, which are a version of one's cognitive style"

(McNeill et al. 2001: 2), but this is again quite different from idiogests which are part of a personal style that is, however, revealing a particular semantic of pragmatic focus.

Moreover, a quick and non-systematic glance at some of the other descriptions by the five speakers discussed above has revealed that they do this in these other descriptions as well, which confirms the above idea that these really are idiogests, i.e., features of an individual gestural style. Also, only these 5 speakers (of the 11 participants) revealed such a striking gestural style; the others did not have such a clear gestural idiolect or simply did not gesture enough. As our data are limited to the descriptions of five pictures, it is impossible to determine whether or not the idiogests extend beyond this quasi-experiment.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed examples suggesting the existence of idiogests, i.e., recurrent gestures that a speaker may use that have a very strong formal resemblance such that they can be considered signalling a gestural idiolect. While being tied to a personal style or habit, we showed how idiogests are furthermore semantically or discursively meaningful, as they reveal a particular focus the speaker maintains in their description. They are thus not unlike the recurrent use of stock phrases that speakers may repeatedly use, especially for pragmatic interactional purposes, like *you know?* added at the end of a sentence to enhance or suggest a stronger interactional orientation of their discourse.

The data on which our study is based remains limited in scope as it concerns a (monologic) picture description by speakers who have only been recorded in one single session and not at another occasion. We can thus not determine whether their idiogests extend beyond this experiment even if we suspect they do. Despite this more limited character, the observed idiogests are quite salient in the narrations which strongly confirms their validity and invites that a more targeted study be set up to study this further.

Notes

1. The code identifies each speaker in the data set: DU refers to Dutch, L1 to it being an L1 speaker (as opposed to L2), the last number is the (randomly assigned) speaker number.
2. When introducing the concept of grounding, Langacker is not talking about gestures, but about, for example, tense marking on verbs where a form like *worked* is the grounded instance

of the type expressed by the verb *worked*. Similarly, articles and other determiners (e.g. ***a*** *job*, ***no*** *job*) create grounded instances of the noun *job* which expresses a type. See Langacker 1991: Ch.2 for more details.

3. This is based on a real-life example of a lecturer that we once had at the university of Lille whose discourse was riddled with this question for which he didn't really expect an answer but which still gave students the possibility to respond or engage in a discussion.

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