Paralanguage and gesture in a corpus of Skype conversations: “... okay so good luck with that ((laughing))?”

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CASE: Corpus of Academic Spoken English (forthcoming)

- **200+ hours** of Skype conversations between speakers of English as a Lingua Franca, currently being compiled at Saarland University, Germany
- Partners from Bulgaria, Spain, Italy, Sweden, Finland, France, Belgium, and L1 reference components from the UK and the US (planned)
- Topic prompts, academic context, 30-60 min.
- Allows research in the areas of:
  - English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)
  - Lexical innovation
  - Pragmatics & Discourse Analysis
  - Computer-mediated communication (CMC)
  - ...

CASE website: tinyurl.com/CASEproject
Research background: Video communication

- Research on Skype as oral, synchronous and dialogic discourse type not very extensive
- Research on video-conferencing as a predecessor of Skype:
  - Video and audio channels imitating features of face-to-face interactions, facilitating informal communication (Fish et al. 1993: 50f.)
  - Additional benefits of an audio-visual video connection: visual backchannels, non-verbal responses and non-verbal response forecasting, gesture-based support of descriptions, non-verbal expression of attitudes, better pause management (Isaacs and Tang 1994)
Research background: Video communication

- Research on **video-conferencing** as a predecessor of Skype:
  - Contributing to a “markedly richer, subtler, and easier [communication] than [...] telephone interactions” (Isaacs and Tang 1994: 67)
  - CMC **facilitates intercultural communication** regardless of national boundaries (Gong 2005: 1)
  - But “distance still matters” (Olson and Olson 2000: 173) - issues with the audio channel such as “delays, echoes, [and] incomprehensible audio quality” pose a substantial **threat to** successful interpersonal interactions (Tang and Isaacs 1993: 193f.)
Research background: English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)

- ELF “orients to achieving mutual comprehension” between speakers of different language and cultural backgrounds (Mauranen 2012: 7)

- In ELF “differences from native English that achieve this [successful intercultural communication] [are] regarded not as deficiencies but as evidence of linguistic adaptability and creativity” (Jenkins 2015: 45)

- ELF as a set of strategies aimed at achieving mutual and situated comprehension (Mauranen 2012)
Subcorpus for quantitative analysis: BabyCASE (forthcoming)

BabyCASE
775 mins (13 hours) of Skype conversations from CASE (ca. 115 000 words in the annotated version)

Composition:
- 5 conversations each from CASE SB-SF/FL/ST/HE
- 10 hours video, 3 hours audio,
  duration: 30-45 minutes, various topics
- Average age: ca. 23 years, 70% female, 30% male
- Average time learning English: 12.4 years

https://www.baby-connect.com/images/baby2.gif
Rapport management: Laughter in delicate situations

Laughter as a method for successful rapport management in CASE (cf. Schmidt 2015)

● Rapport management
  ○ General features (Spencer-Oatey 2002, 2005): politeness & laughter
  ○ “Harmony between people” (Spencer-Oatey 2000: 16)
  ○ Positive effect of interaction; bonding (Provine 2000)
  ○ Secondary effect: Tension release and signalling relief (Gregory 1924, Grotjahn 1957, Meierkord 2000)

● In a CMC situation
  ○ Increased situational delicacy
  ○ Novelty

● Create a feeling of non-seriousness (≠ humorous)

01SB01SF01: I can hear you,
SB01: o:h great,
SF01: ... at last_((thh))
SB01: yeah ((laughing)) that's true,
Paralanguage

Rapport management: Laughter in delicate situations
Apart from humorous contexts, laughter is also used as a method for successful rapport management in CASE (cf. Brunner, Diemer and Schmidt forthcoming)

- In a CMC situation: Increased situational delicacy / novelty
- Laughter contributes to creating rapport between interlocutors (Spencer-Oatey 2002) by creating common ground and reducing the situational awkwardness (cf. Chafe 2007)
- As a means of mitigating a delicate situation, for example embarrassment, by indicating non-seriousness (Chafe 2007), where a potentially problematic situation can be defused by means of laughter (Jefferson et al. 1987: 172)

01SB01SF01:
SB01: I can hear you,
SF01: o:h great,
... at last_((thh))
SB01: yeah ((laughing)) that's true,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcription</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>((LAUGHS))</td>
<td>separate, loud laughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>((laughs))</td>
<td>separate laughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>((laughing))</td>
<td>laughing while speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>((chuckles))</td>
<td>chuckle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>((chuckling))</td>
<td>chuckling while speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>((thh))</td>
<td>aspirated minimum laughter starting with alveolar plosive sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>((ehh))</td>
<td>monosyllabic laugh pulse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>((hehe))</td>
<td>short chuckling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>((heh))</td>
<td>initially aspirated monosyllabic laugh pulse</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
07SB49FL33:
SB49: u:hm,
    I think it's like u:hm ... like,
    yeah typical stereotype Sauerkraut ((German (1.2))),(ehh)
FL33:  ah,
        okay.
        €€€
SB49:  uhm,
        Knödel ((German (0.8))),(ehh)
        .. I don't know if there is a word in English for that? (((chuckles))]
FL33:  [[[LAUGHS)]] (…)
FL33:  I'm sorry for this conversation like half an hour talking about food,
        and I haven't eaten yet.
SB49:  ((ehh))
FL33:  ((ehh))
SB49:  I think we don't have to talk the whole time about food,
        [it's just],
FL33:  [no no].
SB49:  to start the conversation ((laughing)).
FL33:  yeah of course but still I'm like mhm I'm hungry ((laughing)).
Laughter as a key element in interaction

SB17: and I always find nice places where I think oh I-one day I wanna g-
I would like to go there too,
and .. if I'm not student anymore I can afford a bit [more],
SF10: [yeah].
SB17: ((heh)) .. yeah.
that's always .. uhm,
[yeah you always]-
SF10: [so if] I need a .. a vacation,
I: .. know .. ((heh)) .. that I can turn to you ((chuckling)). ((chuckles))
SB17: ((heh)) you- you could yes you could ((chuckling)).
if you [don't have] ((chuckling)),
SF10: [that’s ()], ((laughs))
SB17: if you don't have u:h offices in- in in Bulgaria?

Example “Travel agency” (CASE 07SB17SF10)
Laughter as a key element in interaction

SB24: .. people can come to me.
and I like have to give one lesson a week,
I should talk something?
like how they ... should read their material,
and .. what they should read and things like that,
I don't know.

SF15: .. oh my god,
you're so cool. ((laughs))

SB24: .. I'm not,
I'm just working for the professor. ((laughs)) ...

SF15: (1.0) well: <y- you are I mean> who gets to do that,
I don't get to do it.

SB24: ... <I'm> sure you're going to get to do it.
if you already started off like that, ((laughs))

(CASE 11SB24SF15)
Several filtering possibilities
Preservation of features relevant for linguistic research
Gestures, stance, facial expressions, material objects
Gesture in video data

- Multimodal explanations and gestures (e.g. backchannels, greeting, leave-taking)
- Turn-taking through multi-modal means (e.g. facial expressions, gestures, stance)
- Third-party interference or participation
- Objects as topic focus
Transcribing spoken data: Discussion

“Books”
“Books” (CASE 03SB27FL25)

1  SB27: I have so much books here that I.. bought,
2       but .. I can’t read them. ((hehe))
3  FL25: look,
4  I mean .. we have dictionaries,
5       yes, dictionaries,
6       but ther- but there are also books there somewhere,
7       uhm?
8       and I have SO many books to read                     it’s just,
9       .. SO: FRUstrating,
10      because I like to read them all at the same time,
11     and it´s [...] so frustrating,
12    a:h.
13 SB 27: ((ehh))
“Books”

**Issues:**

- Gestures (pointing, emphasis, turn-taking)
- Facial expressions
- Laughter
- Physical stance
- Multimodal explanations
- Camera perspective
- Object focus
- ...

Transcribing spoken data: Discussion
The role of multimodal features in ELF conversations: Case study

“Pretzels”: Audio analysis

1 ST07: [so] “ho-“,
2 ... my .. m;
3 I would like to know,
4 ... how is a, 
5 ... German pretzel? ((ehh))
6 SB57: (1.3) uhm so,  
7 (1.4) uh[m:],
8 ST07: [for ins]tance, 
9 ... ho- .. how it is made? 
10 ... is it uh .. uh .. how can I say, is it uhm ... more like a biscuit?
11 ... is it more like a bread?
12 SB57: (2.2) it’s uh .. hm .. hm, 
13 I’d say it’s actually more like .. m;
14 (2.0) <uh> ... hm, 
15 (1.5) also (((German (0.3))) .. uhm uh,  
16 ... uhm I know that, 
17 uhm: pretzels are made by, 
18 ... being dipped into .. kind of an acid?
19 ST07: ... mhm= 
20 SB57: =that’s why they have this,  
21 ... brown .. crust things, 
22 ST07: ... yes, 
23 SB57: .. and there are salt on them, 
24 ST07: ... mhm, 
25 SB57: .. and they are usually .. like (2.0),  
26 ... they have a knot in them, 
27 like the- .. they have [this eight, eight] kind of shape. 
28 ST07: [okay okay] 
29 SB57: .. so, 
30 ST07: [m:], 
31 SB57: [are] are these the pretzels you have too?

Example “Pretzels” (CASE 07SB57ST07)
The role of multimodal features in ELF conversations

“Pretzels”: Video transcript

1 ST07: [so] °ho-°,
2 my .. m:,
3 I would like to know,
4 .. how is a,
5 .. German pretzel? ((ehh))
6 SB57: (1.3) uhm so, {raising hands with palms facing up}
7 (1.4) uh[m:],
8 ST07: [for ins]tance,
9 .. ho- .. how it is made?
10 ... is it uh .. uh .. how can I say, is it uhm ... more like a biscuit?
11 ... is it more like a bread?
12 SB57: (2.2) it's uh .. hm .. hm,
13 I'd say it's actually more like .. m:,
14 (2.0) <uh> ... hm,
15 (1.5) also ((German (0.3))) .. uhm uh,
16 .. uhm I know that,
17 uhm: pretzels are made by,
18 .. being dipped into .. kind of an acid? {imitates dipping}
19 ST07: ... mhm= 
20 SB57: =that's why they have this,
21 .. brown .. crust things, {outlines crust of a pretzel}
22 ST07: ... yes,
23 SB57: .. and there are salt on them, {imitates sprinkling salt}
24 ST07: ... mhm, {nodding}
25 SB57: .. and they are usually .. like (2.0), {showing the shape of a pretzel with his index fingers and performing a repeated tying motion}
26 ... they have a knot in them,
27 like the- .. they have [this eight, eight] kind of shape. {uses index fingers to indicate the shape}
28 ST07: [okay okay]
29 SB57: .. so,
30 ST07: [m:],
31 SB57: [are] are these the pretzels you have too?
Gestures in BabyCASE

Shaking head

HE03: okay so is it are you actually recording at the moment?
SB106: yeah.
HE03: okay.
    yeah [that's fine].
SB106: [I started] right,
    ... with the call but,
    yeah,
    I can delete the beginning so,
HE03: no it's fine I don't I don't mind {shaking head}.
    [it's],
SB106: [okay]. ((laughs))
HE03: ganz egal ((German (1.5))),
    .. für mich ((German (1.2))).
SB106: oh you can speak German.
HE03: yeah a little bit,

(CASE 07SB50FL34)
Gestures in BabyCASE

Shaking head

FL34: (1.0) interpreting is like thirty four PLAces .. and translation is sixty four. .. so it's like .. HA:LF .. the people that GET inside .. th- .. [the: .. u:h],
SB50: [oh okay].
FL34: .. first degree.
SB50: mhm.
FL34: and you do- you have to count people from outside from other universities: s, .. and you have to count people who didn't, .. uh .. PASS .. the TESTS .. the: .. years before and they're crun- so it's-

{shaking head}

(1.0) a:h fucked up it's s:o fucking difficult .. [to get] in THERE.
SB50: [mhm],
FL34: (1.0) it's: .. really difficult. #00:36:31-9#
and I know- .. I will .. try .. both: .. tests?

(CASE 07SB50FL34)
Shaking head

HE01: .. "oh"?
and well one and a half year isn’t too bad.

SB75: .. <yeah> that’s okay, #00:16:30-7#
.. I can see the end already?
{pointing to the side and looking there} <so>,

HE01: [((laughs))]
SB75: [((laughs))] so its reachable.
so .h.

HE01: yeah .t well London is a .. {shaking head} is a great city I- I ah,
I want to move there ((thh)),
or live there.

SB75: .. oh really,
you ALso.

HE01: .. "yeah".
SB75: it’s amazing we can have a coffee THERE then.
[if we are both living there? ((hehe))]

(CASE 01SB75HE01)
Quantitative analysis: Gestures in BabyCASE

764 instances of transcribed non-verbal behaviour in the preliminary transcripts

- **Nodding** (283 instances in BabyCASE) most frequently co-occurs with “yeah” (110), “mhmm” (47), “right” (16), and “okay” (17) (within three preceding and following words), i.e. in more than two thirds of the contexts (67%) indicating (and emphasizing) support and agreement

- **Shaking head** (45 instances) does not only indicate (and underline) negation (co-occurring with “no”, verbal negation, “not”, also with questions, in 32 instances), but also despair (“it’s so fucking difficult to get in there”); awe (“London is a great city”); uncertainty (“in England or something like that”); self-correction (“for getting a teacher [...] (1.7) for becoming a teacher?”); lack of alternatives/resignation (“everybody else just has to deal with some chocolate” as a gift); signaling lack of understanding (“what what one?”); and word search
Quantitative analysis: Gestures in BabyCASE

- *Shrugging* (24) is used, for example, in cases of **uncertainty** (“I don’t know why”); **to indicate normalcy** (“I think it’s pretty much, like any other country in the world nowadays?”); **to mark a lack of knowledge** (“I’m missing the word?”); **lack of alternatives/resignation** (“that’s what it is”); **acceptance** (“{shrugs} right” as a response to the description of an unusual combination of subjects at university); **to indicate a lack of preferences** (“you want to go first or should I? [...] Go ahead {shrugs}”); **exasperation/frustration** (“it doesn’t make sense, why is the table female?”); **disapproval** (“the topic is not, {{hehe}} {shrugs}”); **embarrassment** (“it’s kind of embarrassing to admit, [...] but, {shrugs} yeah”); and for **emphasis in combination with discourse markers** (“yes well {shrugs}”)
Quantitative analysis: Gestures in BabyCASE

- **Pointing** (13) is used to indicate objects in the physical surroundings; to refer to oneself or the interlocutor; to signal general direction (“the north part of the city”); and for metaphorical pointing (“I can see the end already”)

- **Air quotes** (10) are used when the English term is unknown (resulting in approximation, code-switching or paraphrase), but also for vague or unexplained terms (“Christmas stuff”); imprecise/generalizing terms (“Catholic” country); to distance oneself (Catholics “believe”); and to signal irony (being able to watch a lecture “again and again”)

[Image: https://pixabay.com/de/hand-finger-point-hinweis-1590381/]
Quantitative analysis: Gestures in BabyCASE

- **Mimicking actions** (7) are used to represent particular activities, such as putting eggs in a bowl, limping, or whipping, and to indicate shapes, such as the shape of a tortilla.

- **Waving** (6) is used for leave-taking in BabyCASE, sometimes reciprocally.

- Instances of **leaning forward** (3), e.g. indicating engagement at the beginning of the conversation (“How are you {leans forward}”), and **leaning back** (4), e.g. to signal a possible closing point of the opening, or a topic (“that’s cool {leans back} ((clears throat))”).

https://pixabay.com/de/barack-obama-imitiert-mckayla-maroney-1174513/
https://pixabay.com/de/kind-waving-goodbye-abreise-flugzeug-595429/
Quantitative analysis: Gestures in BabyCASE

- First insights into the **interplay** between gestures and spoken discourse
- Point to tendencies regarding co-occurring words and, by extension, possible **functions** of gestures in conversations
- Need to be supplemented by a more detailed (qualitative) **context analysis** of the individual occurrences to give a more comprehensive view of the dynamic nature of communication and the meaning-making processes involved

→ **Gestures as key elements of linguistic meaning-making**
Complex gestures

“Beer” (CASE 03SB47FL21)

- Off-screen communication
- Multimodal explanation
- Objects as topic focus
- Physical stance
“Beer”: Analysis

1 SB47: yeah we’re always in the kitchen drinking and [watching],
2 FL21: [yeah ((laughing)) ()]
3 {SB47’s roommates shout in the background}
4 SB47: [OH..YEAH?]
5 .. YEAH? {turns head to look at the roommates and nods}
6 they are protesting but [it is reality].
7 FL21: [it’s true ((laughing)) ()],
8 SB47: they are also like,
9 always,
10 like,
11 uh,
12 here. {holds a bottle of beer up with her right hand and points to it with her left index finger}
13 Beer? {holds the bottle up to the screen}
14 WE NEED BEER and,
15 wine, ((laughs)) {holds a glass of wine up with her left hand and raises it to the camera, and her roommate, off-screen clinks it with her glass}
16 EVERY time, ((laughs))
Paralanguage and gestures provide **additional cues** to understanding in ELF conversations

- Laughter as a humor device and a means of mitigating awkward situations and creating rapport
- Gestures:
  - Backchanneling, turn-taking, greeting, leave-taking, stance
  - Supportive and descriptive gestures, multimodal explanations
  - Camera perspective as pointing mechanism, object showings
  - Third party intervention and off-screen communication

(cf. also Brunner, Diemer and Schmidt forthcoming)
Thank you!

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CASE: tinyurl.com/CASEproject
References


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