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# Viewpoint and stance in gesture: How a potential taboo topic may influence gestural viewpoint in recounting films

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## Abstract

This study investigates whether the stance narrators take toward a potential taboo topic or action influences their gestural viewpoint strategies in multimodal film retellings. The analysis focuses on (a) how gesturally expressed viewpoints interact with verbal stance markers in providing a narrow or wide scope of interpretation; and (b) how multimodal discourse practices may reveal a taboo-maintaining or a taboo-ignoring stance on the part of the narrator.

Thirty bilingual native speakers of both Luganda and Ugandan English were asked to recount, once in each language, a Ugandan short film revolving around the topic of adultery. Analyses revealed that gestural viewpoints varied depending on the verbally expressed evaluation of the potential taboo film segment. Positive verbal evaluation was accompanied by imitative character viewpoint gestures, i.e., the narrator included himself in the narrated event. By contrast, the semantic features displayed via observer viewpoint gestures yielded more possible interpretations and co-occurred with paraphrasing or moral judgment. Narrator viewpoint gestures correlated with literal reference highlighting the obviousness of the described actions. The term *distancing narrator viewpoint* is introduced to capture gestures that create a spatial distance between the narrator and the narrated event in the context of negatively framed verbal utterances.

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## 1. Introduction

Speakers construct a view of a referential object or event from a certain perspective in a discourse (Dancygier and Sweetser, 2012). As previous research has shown, speakers may express a conceptual viewpoint through both linguistic markers and co-speech gestures (Parrill, 2012; Sweetser, 2012). In light of embodiment theory, co-verbal gestures have become a “crucial data source” (Sweetser, 2007:201) in various connected disciplines in the cognitive sciences (e.g., Cienki, 2013; Mittelberg, 2013). At the core of this theory is the tenet that the body and its interaction with the physical and social environment shape the conceptual structure in the mind (e.g., Gibbs, 2006; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). It is assumed that the mind’s experiential groundedness motivates not only the gestural systems of entire linguistic communities, but also how ideological issues are expressed by individuals belonging to a given subculture (Evola, 2010). Furthermore, socially constructed taboos are part of people’s value systems, which guide and control their daily activities and communicative behavior (Allan and Burridge, 2006).

This study combines cognitive and sociolinguistic approaches to explore the role of social factors in how speakers conceptualize a topic by means of speech and co-speech gesture. In particular, it investigates how gestural viewpoint may

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provide important information regarding stancetaking processes in addition to the verbal evaluation of the discourse content.

## 2. Stance and taboo

### 2.1. Stance

*Stance* is a multidimensional term encompassing affective, attitudinal, cooperative and moral position (e.g., Englebretson, 2007). This study will focus on multimodal acts of attitudinal and moral stancetaking. A speaker takes an *attitudinal stance* when she expresses her attitude concerning the propositional content of an utterance (Biber et al., 2011). In the context of socially defined rules and conventions, the expression of an attitude may arise from value judgements, namely *moral stance* about what is generally seen to be good or bad (Ochs and Capps, 2001). According to Du Bois's (2007) theory of a *stance triangle*, a stancetaker may evaluate an object, position oneself in relation to an object, and/or align with his or her interlocutors.

Speakers may judge the propositional content of what they are saying through linguistic markers, such as attitudinal adverbs (e.g., “fortunately”) or stance verbs (e.g., “I hate”) (Biber et al., 2011). In addition, speakers may take a stance through the use of co-speech gestures (e.g., Debras, 2017; Kendon, 2004; Streeck, 2009). For instance, a commonly occurring gestural stance marker is a *shrug*, a “compound enactment” (Streeck, 2009), involving several body parts such as raised eye-brows, palms facing up, lifted forearm, raised shoulders, and head tilts, which have been shown to pragmatically evoke the idea of disengagement or uncertainty (Debras, 2017). In addition to these recurrent, mainly indexical (Mittelberg and Waugh, 2014) multimodal expressions of stance described in the literature, the present study is concerned with subtle strategies of *representing* discourse contents to varying degrees of explicitness through gestural viewpoint. Before specifying ways to multimodally portray a conceptual viewpoint, we need to further characterize the stance object, which is, in this study, a socially defined taboo.

### 2.2. Taking stance toward a socially defined taboo

This study focuses on two specific kinds of taboo, namely *taboo topics* and *taboo actions* (Schröder, 2003). As an example of a taboo topic, discussing sex is considered taboo in certain contexts. For some individuals or cultural groups, talking about this topic requires addressing the contents related to it in a certain manner. However, the mass media in many countries employ terms such as “sex,” which seems to have bleached its taboo character (Luchtenberg, 1999). This topic is particularly interesting for the current study as it has the potential to elicit different portrayals of and stances toward it.

In his analysis of taboo topics, Schank (1981) pays special attention to the manner in which a linguistic expression represents a given topic. In choosing an utterance that offers a broader scope for interpretation, certain associations prompted by the topic may be disguised. According to the author, literal expressions (e.g., “having sex”) tend to entail a narrower scope for interpretation, whereas general paraphrases (e.g., “doing whatever”) allow for several possible interpretations of the content (e.g., washing dishes). Schank assumes a general metalinguistic understanding on the part of the speakers, allowing them to consciously select one utterance over another. In doing so, speakers position themselves with respect to the potential taboo topic. A study which also inspired my focus on the narrator's stance toward a topic is Trinch (2014), which investigated how reviewers of a book on rape discuss the topic. She distinguishes between “silence-sustaining stance” (i.e., the reviewer considers rape a social-cultural taboo and thus a difficult topic) and “silence-breaking stance” (i.e., the reviewer depicts rape narratives as a treatable topic). Modifying this terminology, the present study employs the two opposite terms *taboo-maintaining* and *taboo-ignoring*,<sup>1</sup> which constitute the outer poles of a continuum used to determine the narrator's way of depicting a given topic by providing either a wider (taboo-maintaining) or a narrower (taboo-ignoring) scope for interpretation. Thus, using deliberately vague language is taken to support keeping a perceived taboo intact, while opting for precise, literal expressions that do not permit interpretations other than the intended, taboo-related one, presents the topic as one that can be discussed openly.

The second kind of taboo relevant to this study is a taboo action, in which an action is perceived as being conventionally negative (Schröder, 2003), which in this case is an extramarital affair. Whether or not this action is considered a taboo by the narrator depends on the respective social group, time, space, age and interlocutor(s) (Allan and Burridge, 2006). Hence, a detailed knowledge of the study participants' personal circumstances is needed. All participants of this study belong to the Baganda clan, a tribe in Uganda. The country's many tribes usually have a considerable influence on the

<sup>1</sup> The weaker terminology is intended to reflect that the topic of adultery is less violent than the topic of rape.

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