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Can gestures help clarify the meaning of the Spanish marker 'se'?

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Abstract

Much has been written about the Spanish marker 'se' and its functions, the conclusions suggest that aside from its function as a reflexive pronoun it is a pragmatic marker not following a homogeneous structure (Azpiazu Torres, 2005; Aarón and Torres Cacoullos, 2006; Maldonado, 1999). We propose that additional information on the function of 'se' is provided by the hand gestures co-occurring with 'se'. This paper adds to the existing body of knowledge by taking a multimodal approach to investigate the uses of 'se' by two groups of speakers, one Spanish and one Mexican, by adding gestures to the linguistic analysis.

Our results confirmed the various functions highlighted by linguistic analysis and point to the importance of including the gesture when interpreting the various meanings of 'se'. In particular we observed that in verbs like 'comer' or 'tragar' (to eat, to swallow), 'se + ingest' is the preferred form, the gesture marking the subject, not the object. This is significant as studies of 'se' indicate that its use is to provide a telic aspect to the action indicating the whole object has been ingested (Sánchez López, 2002), yet the gesture highlights the subject. With intransitive verbs, the gesture stresses or adds information related to the path or manner of the action, suggesting that one of its main function is to energize the action, as suggested by Maldonado (1999). Our results indicated that Mexicans are more likely to use the marker 'se' but there were no differences in terms of functionality.

Keywords: Se; Gesture; Spanish

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the hand gestures co-occurring with clauses containing the marker 'se', one of the most used words in Spanish. Initially classified as a reflexive pronoun in structuralist approaches, 'se' has been difficult to categorize as it can provide semantic, pragmatic and syntactic meaning. 'Se' can be used not only in reflexive sentences but also in impersonal, passive and middle voices. It can be used with transitive and intransitive verbs with events and non-events. Its use can also depend on dialectical variations and stylistic affect (Sánchez López, 2002), and on the aim of the speaker (Maldonado, 1999; Sanz and Laka, 2002; Torres Cacoullos and Schwenter, 2008) which means that almost every case needs to be studied separately.

Hand gestures, movements of the hands and arms when we speak, help both the speaker to externalize the thought (a cognitive function) and the listener to access the message the speaker is externalizing (a communicative function). Gesture studies from both a communicative and a cognitive perspective leave no doubt as to the

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importance of gestures in the speech act (Goldin-Meadow, 2003; Gullberg, 2008; McNeill, 2015). From a communicative perspective, gestures can carry both content information and illocutionary force affecting the utterance (Kendon, 1995; Harrison, 2010; Müller, 2004; Streeck, 2008). Although the role of gestures in pragmatics is not clear (Payrató and Teßendorf, 2013), it is at least recognized and is being included in pragmatic studies (Cienki, 2017). Despite these findings, the study of gesture and speech together, to add to the linguistic mapping of language varieties is still lacking.

It has been suggested that 'se' specifies the pragmatic meaning of the clause by adding transitive value to it, clarifying the aspect of the verb (Azpiazu Torres, 2005; Clements, 2006; Maldonado, 1999). If this is the case, we hypothesize that the gesture will also reflect this meaning. Therefore, by studying the gesture it should be possible to confirm the function and pragmatic meaning of the marker. This study focuses on two varieties of Spanish, American (Mexican) and Peninsular (Andalusian). Eighteen speakers (50% Mexican, 50% Spanish) narrated the same story, based on a video cartoon. Their speech and gestures were transcribed and the utterances with 'se' analyzed following a mostly qualitative approach to identify potential patterns in the use of 'se' + gesture. The objective of the study was to identify whether gestures co-occurring with utterances containing 'se' were providing additional information to help clarify the speakers' intended function of the marker 'se'. A secondary objective was to identify whether there were any obvious differences, in the use of the marker and the gestures co-occurring with it, between Spanish and Mexican speakers.

2. Gestures

Speakers gesture when they talk, the rate and form of the gesture and its synchronicity with speech varying from speaker to speaker. Similarities have been found related to the culture and language of the speakers (Kita, 2009), the topic, the cognitive load on the speaker (Goldin-Meadow, 2003) and the attention of the addressee (Iverson and Goldin-Meadow, 1998, 2001). Gestures can play a communicative function (for the benefit of the interlocutor) (Kendon, 2004; Harrison, 2010) but also a cognitive function (for the benefit of the speaker) (Goldin-Meadow, 2003; McNeill, 1992, 2015).

This study focuses on representational gestures that have a primarily communicative function (Mittelberg and Evola, 2013). These are gestures that present iconic or metaphoric resemblances to the content of the speech, including those used to point –deictics. Gesture classification often follows the work of McNeill (1992), grounded on prior classifications by Efron (1941) and Ekman and Friesen (1969), based on body movement meaning and function. Ekman and Friesen (1969) categorized communicative body movements into: emblems, movements that have been codified by certain societies and carry meaning without words (such as the victory sign); illustrators, reinforcing verbal communication; affect displays, communicating affect or emotional states; regulators, used to manage interactions; and adaptors, to answer physical or context related requirements. McNeill focused on hand and arm movements setting them up along a continuum according to the relationship between the hand/arm movement and speech. At one end of the continuum, we find sign language, codified hand movements that do not need speech to be understood, followed by mime and emblems. Further along the continuum are the hand movements referred to as gestures per se (Ekman and Friesen's illustrators and regulators). These are used together with speech in the communicative act but are not codified by any one culture, so they have no clear specific meaning if seen without speech or out of context. If they do not refer to the content of the speech they are termed non-representational. These are mostly pragmatic gestures that can be used to emphasize, keep the rhythm of the speech, refer to the interlocutor, manage the turn, indicate request, negation or other illocutionary meanings (Kendon, 2004) (for a summary of other types of classifications please refer to Bohle, 2013). A gesture phrase can have various phases, from the rest position to the stroke and back to rest, with holds in between each phase. Most of the content of the gesture is carried in the stroke, which is often synchronous in time with the speech unit carrying the related content.

Speakers of different languages conceptualize events differently, as explained by the *Thinking for Speaking* hypothesis, or TFS (Slobin, 1996). It has been observed that the typology of the language is often mirrored in the gesture (McNeill and Duncan, 2000; Stam, 2006, 2015), reflecting the TFS of the speakers (Slobin, 1996). TFS suggests that speakers are conditioned in what they say and how they say it by linguistic choices. Therefore, language typologies can also be used to describe how the gesture is used to communicate. Gesture studies have shown how gesture reflects language characteristics such as the subject (S), verb (V), object (O) order (Futrell et al., 2015) or how information provided by the gesture mirrors that encoded in the verb, usually manner or path (Alibali et al., 2000; Slobin, 2016; Stam, 2006, 2017).

Gestures have also been found to disambiguate utterances with more than one meaning, adding information of a prosodic nature (Guellaï et al., 2014; Loehr, 2013; Prieto et al., 2013). In addition, other pragmatic functions are often reflected in both representational and non-representational gestures. For example, anaphoric functions are communicated by deictic (pointing) gestures (Gullberg, 2003), and negations with negative gestures (Kendon,

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