

Towards a typology of gestural enumeration strategies in English

Laura Ruth-Hirrel¹ & Sherman Wilcox²

¹California State University, Northridge, laura.hirrel@csun.edu ²University of New Mexico

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This study explores gestural practices that accompany verbal list constructions in face-to-face interactions in English. List constructions serve a variety of important functions in language. For example, lists contribute to discourse coherence (Schiffrin, 1994) and may be used to construe ad hoc categories in context (Barsalou, 1983; Mauri & Sansò, 2018). As acts of categorization rely on the basic cognitive operation of comparison (Croft & Cruse, 2004; Langacker, 1987), studying these situated acts are important for understanding the conceptualization of category structure. Recent research has also illustrated functional links between verbal lists and stance-taking in conversation (Hinnell & Rice, 2020; Kim, 2022). Most research on gesture and enumeration (i.e., lists) has looked exclusively at finger-counting practices (Bender & Beller, 2012). Only very recently have researchers begun considering how listing practices are embodied in the gestures that speakers produce with lists in discourse (Hinnell & Rice, 2020; 2022). No study to date has attempted to classify the range of gestural forms co-occurring with lists within or across languages.

The current project has two primary objectives. First, it aims to identify recurrent gestural strategies that English speakers produce with verbal lists. The second objective is to examine how gestural strategies interact with functional properties of lists. This includes examining affordances offered by different gestural strategies and analyzing how those strategies contribute to the dynamic conceptualization of meaning in specific usage events. Data for this study come from 50 televised broadcasts from various interactional genres, including talk show episodes, news interviews, and political debates. Broadcasts were exhaustively examined for verbal list constructions. We define list constructions as a set of elements in discourse construed as prosodically, formally, and functionally parallel (integrating definitions from Inbar, 2020 and Selting, 2007). Only tokens co-occurring with manual gestures were selected for analysis. Annotations were performed in ELAN. We coded for properties of the gestural expression (e.g., spatial location, use of fingers for enumeration, use of points, beat movements) and properties of the spoken lists (e.g., type of list, type of listed element, interactional function of list).

We found several formally distinct gestural strategies recurrently used with list constructions. These include digitally constructed lists (occurring with or without finger pointing), circular movements (cyclic gestures), sequential spatial movements, and beats (which sometimes combined with other strategies). Across strategies, speakers tended to iconically reflect the construed coherence of listed items by maintaining a consistent gesture form across elements in a single verbal list. Our analysis also suggests there are functional contrasts across enumeration strategies in terms of how they interact with functional properties, such as profiling, grounding, and stancetaking. For example, use of the digital strategy that includes finger pointing offers the affordance of profiling specific elements in the list and allows listed elements to be gesturally referred back to anaphorically (see Figure 1). Contrastively, continuous circular movement gestures co-occurring with lists are not well-suited to profile individual listed entities. We highlight differences in the affordances and interactional uses of different gestural enumeration strategies through fine-grained analysis of particular examples selected from the data.

Fig. 1: Example of a digital list with finger pointing and anaphora



(a)
relationships



(b)
causation



(c)
space



(d)



(e)



(f)

We may have to understand those other two.

*Transcription: “We’re dealing with **relationships** (frame a). We’re dealing with **causation** (frame b). But what you’re saying is that to understand space (frame c), **we may have to understand those other two** (frames d-f).”*

Description: The speaker first points to his index finger (touching it with his middle pointing finger) to profile the conceptual content evoked by the word “relationships.” He then points to the middle finger (touching it with his middle pointing finger) to profile the conceptual content evoked by the word “causation.” On his third point, he touches his pointing finger to his third/ring finger to profile the conceptual content evoked by the word “space.” In frames d-f, he moves his pointing finger back and forth between the index and middle finger as he anaphorically refers back to the conceptual context previously evoked by “relationships” and “causation.”

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