

# Gestures, English Spoken Discourse and Czech Dubbed Text in an American Feature Film

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## Abstract

*This paper presents the results of an interdisciplinary analysis in the fields of functional sentence perspective and nonverbal communication, based on the English spoken text, Czech dubbed text and gestures made by the actors in the American film American Beauty (1999). The data for the analysis were taken from the multimodal database created by the author of the paper. The interaction between the gestures and the English and the Czech texts respectively is analyzed by means of the theory of functional sentence perspective. Co-occurrences of the gestures and particular communicative units are presented. The functions of particular gestures in relation to the spoken texts are also taken into account. The way in which the gestures and the English text interact is contrasted with the interaction of the Czech dubbing and gestures. The author describes the discrepancies between the two language versions of the film.*

*Keywords: g estures, nonverbal communication, gesture-speech analysis, functional sentence perspective, communicative units, multimodal corpus, dubbing, film.*

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## 1 Introduction

When watching a feature film, the Czech audience can easily distinguish between cases when there is an original Czech soundtrack and when the soundtrack has been dubbed into the Czech language. The present paper addresses the question of the discrepancies arising between the Czech dubbed text and the original feature film *American Beauty* (1999)

affecting the overall impression of the film on the audience, with the main focus on hand gestures.

The approach used in the present paper presupposes that communication is a complex process taking place through two channels – verbal and nonverbal. Some scholars state that nonverbal means constitute 70% of all the means used in everyday spoken communication (Škvareninová 4). Contrary to Škvareninová's claim, the present analysis was expected to reveal that hand gestures merely support the spoken word in a feature film, and are therefore more or less redundant.

The present study has an interdisciplinary character, which stems from the fact that the analysis considers two aspects of the analyzed material – verbal and nonverbal. The analysis of the text will be approached by means of the theory of functional sentence perspective (e.g. Firbas *Functional*) as well as speech act theory (Austin; Searle). The analysis of the gesture will exploit the results of the interdisciplinary analysis of gestures and speech (Sedlářová *Hand*), and the classification of gestures presented by one of the world's leading scholars investigating nonverbal communication in human interaction, Mark Knapp.

## 2 Theory of functional sentence perspective

Systematic research into the theory of FSP was begun by Vilém Mathesius (*O takzvaném, Obsahový, Jazyk* 174–179), and was later developed by Jan Firbas, who formulated the pluripartitive approach (e.g. *On defining, Functional, Text*), and Svoboda (e.g. *Diatheme, Kapitoly, Encyklopedický*). More recent research has been carried out mainly by Chamónikolasová, as well as by Hurtová, Adam and others.

In the early stages of the research into FSP, attention was paid to the issue of word order (Mathesius *Jazyk* 174–179; Svoboda *Kapitoly* 9). Word order, or more precisely linearity, is one of the four factors of FSP. It concerns ordering constituents carrying any semantic content at the level of the sentence, text or phrase (Svoboda *Kapitoly* 11). In the present paper linearity is considered at the level of the clause. In the Czech language, word order is used to place the constituent which makes the greatest contribution to the development of the communication (carrying the highest degree of communicative dynamism = CD) towards the end of the clause. It is a tool of rhematization. By contrast, the constituents carrying the lowest degrees of CD are placed at the clause beginning. This is only possible due to the flexibility of word order in Czech. However, in the English language word order is used to signal syntactic-semantic relations. Thus it is less flexible, and other factors come into play.

The remaining three factors of FSP are semantics, context and intonation. Some constituents in the sentence have semantic content which predestines them to carry less communicative importance than the others. Having analyzed several thousand sentences, Firbas came to the conclusion that there exist semantic scales which reflect increasing degrees of CD of the constituents within one distributional field of CD (Firbas *A functional view*). The Presentation Scale and the Quality Scale order the constituents with particular dynamic semantic functions as follows (Svoboda *Kapitoly* 12–15):

- Presentation Scale: • scene (setting) • presentation on the scene • phenomenon presented on the scene
- Quality Scale: • scene • quality bearer • quality • specification(s) • further specification(s)

Sometimes Phenomenon on the Presentation Scale may become Quality Bearer on the Quality Scale; this was the stimulus for designing the Combined Scale: • scene (setting) • presentation on the scene • phenomenon presented on the scene • quality bearer • quality • specification(s) • further specification(s).

Context is regarded as another factor of FSP. There are three distinct types of context according to Firbas (“A functional view”): a) immediately relevant textual context b) immediately relevant situational context, and c) immediately relevant experiential context. Constituents derivable from the context are labelled as context-dependent, while non-derivable or new constituents are context-independent. Context-independent constituents are more likely to carry higher degrees of CD than dependent ones.

The last factor of FSP is intonation, which is understood as the interplay of several prosodic features. It has been proved that the places of prosodic prominence tend to carry high communicative importance – i.e. the highest degrees of CD (Firbas *Functional*). The result of the interplay of the above-mentioned four factors of FSP forms the relative degree of CD carried by a particular constituent within a certain distributional field of CD.

The following communicative units have been determined in the database and considered in the analysis: Theme, Diatheme, Transition, Transition Proper, Rheme.

It has been proved that in an American feature film, facial expressions of all types except those with a deictic function co-occur with the constituents carrying the highest degrees of CD, i.e. rhemes proper (Sedlářová *Nonverbal*). Rhemes proper appear to be accompanied by facial expressions most frequently due to their high communicative importance. However, other aspects also play their roles, such as turn-taking or the frequent final position of rhemes proper in a sentence. Facial expressions are used in order to draw the addressee’s attention to such linguistic elements, to support them, and to reinforce the delivery of the messages. Visual prominence has been defined as referring to the quality of the most visually distinctive points in a film. “The factors contributing to visual prominence involve stroke phases of gestures (peak phases), movements distinct from the others in terms of their volume (size), shape and force used in their production, their place of production, as well as their level of abstraction” (Sedlářová *Nonverbal* 119). The places of visual prominence seem to co-occur with the places of the highest degrees of CD in an American feature film (Sedlářová *Nonverbal* 118–128).

### 3 Speech act theory

The present study also exploits the theory of speech acts as formulated by John L. Austin and developed by John R. Searle (Austin; Searle). It refers to “a theory which analyses the role of utterances in relation to the behaviour of speaker and hearer in interpersonal communication” (Crystal *A dictionary* 427). A speech act is a communicative activity (a locutionary act), involving the intention of the speaker while speaking (an illocutionary force), and the effect the speaker achieves on listeners (a perlocutionary effect). In a summary, the basic presupposition of this theory is that people produce utterances with intentions. Having heavily drawn on Searle, I have classified the intentions, or illocutionary acts or forces, into the following categories:

- Representatives (the speaker believes that such a state of affairs is true),
- Directives (the speaker makes the listener do something),
- Commissives (the speaker commits himself/herself to doing something in future),

- Expressives (the speaker expresses his/her feelings),
- Declarations (the speaker brings something about in the world).

Evidence has been provided that in an American feature film, illocutionary acts are frequently indicated by means of nonverbal elements – hand gestures (Sedlářová *Hand*). A certain type of gesture prevails in a particular speech act, thus representing a communication strategy underlying and supporting the performance of the act.

#### 4 The nonverbal aspect

For the purposes of the present study, Knapp's classification of gestures has been adopted (cf. Figure 1; or Knapp 187–207). The gestures are primarily divided into speech-independent gestures and speech-related gestures. A speech-independent gesture conveys a concept. It has a clear meaning which is conventionalized (e.g. thumbs up, or giving someone the finger). A speech-related gesture which is related to the speaker's referent expresses a certain aspect of the concept conveyed in the spoken text redundantly, in another (nonverbal) mode (e.g. the iconic gesture of widely extended hands showing the large size of an object, or a deictic gesture pointing at an object which is mentioned in speech). A gesture indicating the speaker's relationship to the referent frequently indicates a particular speech act, or more precisely, speakers' intentions (e.g. an explanation accompanied by gesturing with the open palms). A gesture that acts as visual punctuation for the speaker's discourse has the function of emphasizing the rhythm of the utterance. Gestures organizing the spoken dialogue between two interactants include e.g. those regulating turn-taking (i.e. the hands placed alongside the speaker's body indicating the end of the utterance, in contrast to the speaker's hands gesturing in front of his/her body, etc.).

**Figure 1: Knapp's classification of gestures**

<b>speech-independent gestures</b> or emblems, i.e. autonomous gestures	
<b>speech-related gestures</b>	gestures related to the speaker's referent – concrete or abstract
	gestures indicating the speaker's relationship to the referent
	gestures that act as visual punctuation for the speaker's discourse
	gestures that assist in the regulation and organization of the spoken dialogue between two interactants

#### 5 Aims, material and method

The main hypothesis adopted prior to undertaking the analysis presented in this study was the following: There are discrepancies between the ways in which the hand gestures performed by the American actors in the film *American Beauty* (1999) are related to the English original text and the Czech dubbed text respectively. This section outlines the aims and methodology used in this study.

The study makes use of both qualitative and quantitative analysis. It sets out to investigate the functions of the hand gestures and the ways in which the hand gestures interact with the English spoken text and support it in communicating the message to the audience. Analogously, the interaction between the hand gestures and the Czech dubbed text will

also be analyzed. The results of the two analyses will be contrasted in order to reveal any discrepancies between the original (American) and the dubbed (Czech) version of the film (the two versions will hereafter be referred to also as the English version and the Czech version).

The analysis of the interaction of the hand gestures and the text will be twofold. Firstly, the hand gestures and their relation to distinct communicative units of functional sentence perspective (hereafter abbreviated as FSP) will be analyzed in the English and Czech versions. Secondly, distinct functions of the gestures and their relation to the spoken text will be considered. Finally, the two analyses will be compared and any discrepancies between the English and Czech films identified and discussed.

The material used for the analysis of the hand gestures and its interaction with the spoken text has been taken from the *American Beauty database* (unpublished Appendix to a PhD thesis adapted and published as Sedlářová *Nonverbal*). The database and the process of its creation are described in detail in the above-referenced monograph. However, several basic characteristics will be mentioned here.

The *American Beauty database* was created on the basis of the film *American Beauty*, a DVD recording distributed in the Czech Republic by Universal Pictures (Czech Republic) s.r.o. as *Americká krása* (2003). The software tool used to create the database was *Elan* (*Elan for Windows 3.5.0*, 2006) [Software], which is a professional multimodal annotator programmed by Birgit Hellwig at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics.

The film itself lasts approximately 117 minutes. The total length of the section out of which the analyzed distributional fields of communicative dynamism were selected was 35 minutes. The total length of the analyzed text (distributional fields of CD) reached approximately 8 minutes. There were 129 individual gestures (some of them lasting over several communicative units or the whole distributional field of CD). The length of the sections containing the gestures themselves without pauses was 92 seconds. Ninety-three distributional fields of CD were analyzed in 134 annotations. Each individual annotation contains information on the number of the scene and distributional field of CD in which the gesture occurred, as well as on the function of the gesture in terms of Knapp's classification (Knapp 187–207) (cf. Figure 1). The following table (Figure 2) provides the results of the analysis of the occurrence of distinct gesture types in the database analyzed.

Furthermore, the communicative unit or units which co-occurred in the respective versions of the film with the particular hand gestures have been indicated. Finally, the description of the analyzed text in terms of speech acts has been added to the annotations.

**Figure 2: Occurrence of distinct types of hand gesture**

Type of gesture	Number of occurrences	Percentage
emblems	2	1.6%
gestures related to the speaker's referent – concrete or abstract	39	30.2%
gestures indicating the speaker's relationship to the referent	73	56.6%
gestures that act as visual punctuation for the speaker's discourse	14	10.9%
gestures that assist in the regulation and organization of the spoken dialogue between two interactants	1	0.8%
	129	100.1%

## 6 Analysis

The analysis of the multimodal database was expected to reveal discrepancies between the Czech dubbed text and the hand gestures in the English original feature film *American Beauty* (1999). Twenty-nine out of 129 hand gestures which have been analyzed were performed alongside different sentence constituents (communicative units) in the respective versions. However, only in 15 gestures did the change of the communicative unit seem to affect the function of the gesture conspicuously. The use of the word ‘conspicuously’ implies that the audience might have noticed the discrepancy, and its disturbing effect may have influenced the overall impression of the film on the viewer. Fourteen gestures were made alongside constituents which were different in the Czech version than in the English one without much impact on the function of the gesture. The following analysis (cf. Figure 3) aimed to investigate factors which had a crucial impact on distorting the functions of the gestures in relation to the Czech text.

**Figure 3: Types of discrepancy between the gestures and the Czech text**

Types of discrepancies	Affecting the function of the gesture		No change in FSP functions	Total
	conspicuously	inconspicuously		
Discrepancy in emphasis	4	13	0	17
Rhythmic discrepancy	7	0	0	7
Semantic discrepancy	4	1	0	5
No discrepancy	0	0	100	100
Total	15	14	100	129

The observations of the functions of the analyzed gestures revealed the following types of discrepancy:

- Semantic discrepancy
- Discrepancy in emphasis
- Rhythmic discrepancy

Semantic discrepancy involved cases of Czech words which were not in accordance with the hand gestures semantically. The occurrence of semantic discrepancy thus presupposed the existence of gestures related to the speaker’s referent – concrete or abstract. Such gestures are frequently performed to support and nonverbally illustrate a concept conveyed by the speaker’s words. The speaker’s referent may be concrete, i.e. it is present in a situational context and can be referred to by means of pointing (cf. Example 1), or by means of looking at it, but it can also imitate its shape or another quality which can be visualized. Alternatively, the speaker’s referent may be abstract, i.e. it is a concept present in our mind which is delineated with a gesture of metonymical character (cf. Examples 2 and 4). Grey highlighting hereafter indicates words which are spoken simultaneously with the performed gestures under discussion.

A semantic discrepancy in a gesture related to a concrete referent of the speaker is shown in Example 1. When the actor playing the role of Lester says the Diatheme “Craig” in the English version, he points his left thumb towards Craig’s office. In the Czech version the deictic (pointing) movement of the thumb, however, occurs alongside the Transition “platit”. The gesture is performed at such a distance from the Diatheme to which it is actu-

ally related that the Czech audience are not able to identify its referent with Craig, Lester's colleague. The Czech text is thus irrelevant to the gesture. Or more precisely, the gesture does not illustrate the words spoken by the actor.

Despite the described discrepancy, the audience receives the message via the verbal channel, and encounters no difficulty in identifying the referent of the word "Craig". This finding shows that the verbal mode of the message in Example 1 carries more weight than the nonverbal mode. The deictic gesture mentioned above is actually redundant, though it pragmatically supports the coherence and delivery of the message.

### **Example 1**

(English version)

Lester: "That's somebody who's gonna get fired because Craig has to pay women to fuck him."

(Czech version)

Lester: "Takže někdo dostane padáka, protože Craig musí platit ženskéjm, aby mu podržely."

(scene 2, distributional field of CD 23)

Example 2 shows a gesture referring to an abstract referent accompanying words which do not match the meaning implied by the gesture. The actor moves his hands in circles at waist level with the aim of illustrating the action or process of 'freeing up some cash'. However, no such or similar concept is expressed in the Czech words "Kasa je prázdná." (meaning roughly "There's no money."). The gesture performed alongside the Czech words creates an awkward impression. What adds to this impression is the fact that the movement starts during the pause between two utterances in the Czech version. Obviously, the rhythmic pattern of the visual mode was not observed by the Czech actor dubbing Lester. Therefore it can also be listed among the rhythmic discrepancies.

### **Example 2**

(English version)

Lester: "Times are tight. You gotta free up some cash."

(Czech version)

Lester: "Časy jsou zlý. Kasa je prázdná."

(scene 2, distributional field of CD 16)

Discrepancy in emphasis is illustrated in Example 3. The analysis revealed that gestures participating in this type of discrepancy are classified as indicating the speaker's relationship to the referent. The position of the hands and palms in such gestures may indicate that the speaker agrees, disagrees, explains, defends his/her views, tries to control the situation, or suppress the addressee's feelings, makes a firm statement, expresses his/her feelings, considers the statement important, confidential etc. Such gestures illustrate the speaker's intention, or the illocutionary force of the speech act. Semantically, they are not primarily connected with a particular constituent or a communicative unit. They are instead related to the utterance as a whole. Therefore they frequently last throughout the

duration of the entire utterance. In the database such gestures are usually performed during Expressives or Representatives to support the performance of these speech acts.

### Example 3

(English version)

Brad: "Nobody's getting fired yet!"

(Czech version)

Brad: "Nikdo tu zatím padáka nedostal!"

(scene 2, distributional field of CD 25)

The gestures indicating the speaker's relationship to the referent frequently acquire another dimension in speech; the hands or fingers in a particular position are sometimes moved with force during particular communicative units in order to emphasize them, thus signalling their higher relative degrees of communicative dynamism in relation to the other communicative units (cf. Sedlářová *Nonverbal*). Discrepancy in emphasis occurs when the Czech dubbing actor does not observe this nonverbal emphasis, and says a Czech word carrying a relatively low degree of CD alongside this visual emphasis.

The gesture in Example 3 is related to the speech act of Representative. The illocutionary act is to oppose the addressee's statement. The right palm is open and faces the addressee, thus signalling opposition or defence (cf. Škvareninová 131). The gesture is performed throughout the duration of the utterance. The speaking actor moves the hand with force on the Rheme "Nobody's" in order to emphasize it. By contrast, in the Czech version it is the Diatheme "zatím" (meaning "yet") that is emphasized with this gesture. The Czech thematic communicative unit is lower in its relative degree of CD than the English one. However, in spite of the fact that the relative degree of CD does not correspond to the nonverbal emphasis, the message is successfully delivered to the audience.

The last type of discrepancy is linked with the rhythmic pattern of the speaker's nonverbal behaviour. This type of discrepancy could occur with any speech-related gestures. While the discrepancy in emphasis involved correct rhythm but visual emphasis on the wrong communicative unit, rhythmic discrepancy occurred when the Czech dubbed text did not observe the rhythm of the gestures at all. Example 4 illustrates rhythmic discrepancy which occurs in two consecutive gestures. The gestures supported the concepts of the words "justified" and "firing" respectively; they were related to the speaker's referents. The former gesture was made with the actor's left open palm waving to the left as if he were pushing the justice away. The latter gesture was made with the left thumb pointing away behind the speaker's shoulder as if the employee he was referring to as "somebody" was being thrown out in that direction. Due to the linear proximity of the gestures and the respective words, both gestures could easily be associated with the respective Czech words to which they were related, even though their placement after the Czech corresponding words makes the entire section look awkward in the Czech version. However, the message again seemed to be delivered successfully.

#### Example 4

(English version)

Lester: “And he’s basically there to make it seem like they’re justified in firing somebody because they can’t just come right out and say that.”

(Czech version)

Lester: “A ten je tam v podstatě proto, aby ospravedlnili, že někoho vyhazují. Oni zřejmě nemůžou jen tak přijít a říct to.”

(scene 2, distributional field of CD 37)

### 7 Conclusion

This study has aimed to reveal distinct types of discrepancy occurring between the Czech text and the hand gestures in the film *American Beauty* (1999). The first aim was to determine individual communicative units co-occurring with the gestures in the English and Czech versions. The results of these analyses were then contrasted. The contrastive analysis revealed that out of 129 gestures, 29 were performed alongside different sentence constituents (communicative units) in the Czech text than in the original. Nevertheless, out of the 29 gestures which involved a change in function, only 15 distorted the delivered message to some extent, accounting for 11.6% of the total number of analyzed gestures. The remaining 14 gestures with discrepancy in FSP function were mainly those indicating the speaker’s relationship to the referent, i.e. expressing and supporting particular intentions. In general, such gestures are semantically related to the entire utterance. As they are performed rhythmically, they can occur on any communicative unit which does not carry a lower relative degree of CD and is thus not suitable for emphasis. The functions of these gestures in the communication between the audience and the film have been preserved.

Different types of discrepancy between the Czech text and the hand gestures affecting the functions of the gestures have been identified and classified into semantic discrepancy, discrepancy in emphasis and rhythmic discrepancy. Not surprisingly, semantic discrepancy occurred mainly with gestures related to the speaker’s referent. Discrepancy in emphasis occurred mainly with gestures indicating the speaker’s relationship to the referent. Rhythmic discrepancy occurred with any types of speech-related gesture.

All three types of discrepancy seemed to be caused by the fact that the actors working in the Czech dubbing had not observed the visual aspect of the film when speaking. Despite causing awkwardness by means of distorting the function of the gesture in relation to speech, the discrepancies mentioned above did not prevent the audience from receiving the delivered message. They only weakened it, limiting it or some of its aspects to one channel – i.e. the verbal one.

The above observations point to the conclusion that the verbal and nonverbal aspects of the film make different contributions to the message of the film delivered towards the audience. While the hand gestures only support the message, contributing to better communication, it is the verbal aspect that is crucial to whether the audience receive the message or not.

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