

Gestural adjuncts at the interfaces

Introduction. What is the semantics of informative, non-conventional gestures adjoining to verbal expressions? The current literature draws a distinction between co-speech and post-speech gestures. Both tend to be not-at-issue; e.g., both (1a,b) give rise to an inference that Hagrid’s dog is large:¹

- (1) a. If Hagrid brings his dog^{LARGE}, it’s gonna be a mess. *co-speech gesture*
b. If Hagrid brings his dog LARGE, it’s gonna be a mess. *post-speech gesture*

Ebert (& Ebert) (2014; 2017) claim co-speech gestures are Pottsian (2005) supplements (akin to appositives), and post-speech ones are at-issue/parenthetical. Schlenker (2018) says co-speech gestures trigger *cosuppositions* (assertion-dependent presuppositions), and post-speech ones are supplements. I propose a more nuanced view whereby temporal alignment doesn’t determine a gesture’s semantics directly; instead, the relationship is mediated by syntax and prosody.

Predicative vs. propositional gestures. I observe that adnominal co-speech gestures can be interpreted as at-issue under pressure (e.g., to make focus alternatives properly contrastive), but only if they have predicative, not propositional semantics. Thus, (2) can be uttered if Hagrid has two dogs (a small and a large one), but not if he has one unique dog of unknown size.

- (2) If Hagrid brings his dog^{SMALL}, it’s OK, but if he brings his dog^{LARGE}, it’s gonna be a mess.
a. available reading: ≈If Hagrid brings his ⟨**small**, **large**⟩ dog...
b. unavailable reading: ≈If (Hagrid brings his unique dog and it’s ⟨**small**, **large**⟩)...

The unavailability of (2b) resembles the unavailability of at-issue adnominal appositives:

- (3) #If Hagrid brings his dog, ⟨which is **small**, a **small** beast⟩, it’s OK, but if he brings his dog, ⟨which is **large**, a **large** beast⟩, it’s gonna be a mess.

The data above are problematic for Ebert’s analysis: if co-speech gestures are akin to appositives, they shouldn’t have at-issue interpretations to begin with (since other appositives don’t), and even if they did, those interpretations would be propositional, not those of restrictive predicative modifiers.

Those data pose questions for Schlenker, too. He can account for the predicative at-issue readings of adnominal co-speech gestures as in (2a) via local accommodation, allowed for ordinary presuppositions (Heim 1983; Schlenker 2009, a.o.), if those gestures adjoin to NPs (e.g., *dog*) and have the same semantic type as those NPs. However, if co-speech gestures adjoin to DPs (e.g., *his dog*) and have the same semantic type as those DPs, local accommodation should be able to apply to them, too, yielding unattested at-issue readings as in (2b) (or weaker, but still unattested).

Proposal. I propose to derive this contrast between NP- and DP-level gestures by positing that while NP-level gestures denote predicates and can thus trigger cosuppositions or be locally accommodated, DP-level gestures, like appositives, denote propositions (with pronouns anaphoric to the DP they adjoin to), so the cosuppositional mechanism can’t apply to them due to type mismatch.

While both NP- and DP-level gestures can be linearized as co-speech, in English only DP-level gestures can be linearized as post-speech. E.g., (4) is deviant, as (i) English NP-level modifiers want to be in the same intonational phrase (IP) as the NP they adjoin to, but (ii) it’s articulatorily hard to integrate a prosodically independent gesture into an IP with verbal content, and (iii) even if a post-speech gesture can be thus integrated, it will resemble a postnominal adjective, which are restricted in English, so (iv) the gestures in (4) have to be DP-level and thus propositional, which (v) makes a cosuppositional treatment and thus local accommodation impossible for them. I sketch an OT-style analysis capturing the deviance of NP-level post-speech gestures in English.

- (4) #If Hagrid brings his dog **SMALL**, it’s OK, but if he brings his dog **LARGE**, it’s gonna be a mess. Some preliminary data suggest that French might be more tolerant of NP-level post-speech gestures, due to pervasiveness of postnominal adjectives and different prosodic grouping of NP-level modifiers.

¹ In ‘word^{GESTURE}’ the gesture co-occurs with the underlined verbal content (underlining doesn’t indicate syntactic attachment), in ‘word GESTURE’ the gesture has its own time slot. **Bold** marks contrastive focus.

References

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