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Motor signs for 'Yes' and 'No'¹

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ABSTRACT

Three different regional pairs of jugular and facial motions used in Europe for habitual expression of approval and dissent are analyzed with reference to the iconic grounds of these three semiotic oppositions. (semiotics, face-to-face interaction, kinesics, European ethnology.)

Since the domain of certain conventional gestures and head motions often encompasses a wider area than linguistic isoglosses, a naïve notion about the universality of certain meaningful gestures and movements of the head and facial muscles arises very easily.² When Filippo Tommaso Marinetti visited Moscow in the beginning of 1914, the painter Mixail Fëdorovič Larionov, who had at first greeted the Italian futurist with hostility, soon struck up friendly relations with him, although at the time Larionov did not know a single foreign language and his new friend did not understand a single word of Russian. Larionov treated his guest alternately to paintings done by himself and other members of his team and to Russian vodka. Once Mixail Fëdorovič was impatiently awaiting the end of the debates in French between Marinetti and Russian writers at a meeting of the Moscow Literary-Artistic Circle, and suddenly took the Italian by surprise, coming up close to him and twice flicking himself on the neck above the collar with his finger. When the attempt to remind the foreigner in this way that it was time to go drinking – or, speaking metonymically, 'to pour [a drink] behind the collar'³ – turned out to be manifestly unsuccessful, Larionov remarked acidly, 'A real jerk! Even *that* he cannot understand!'

Russian soldiers who had been in Bulgaria in 1877-8 during the war with Turkey could not forget the striking diametrical opposition between their own head motions for indicating 'yes' and 'no' and those of the Bulgarians. The reverse assignment of signs to meanings threw the parties to a conversation off the track, and occasionally led to annoying misunderstandings. Although facial expressions and head motions are less subject to control than speech, the

[1] The Russian text of this article has been published in *Ĵazyk i čelovek*, memorial volume for Professor P. S. Kuznecov (1899-1968), Moscow University Press, 1970.

[2] Giuseppe Cocchiara in an interesting book (1932), poses the question, 'Il linguaggio del gesto è un linguaggio universale?' (p. 20).

[3] A common colloquial metonymic expression in Russian meaning 'to have a drink' – cf. English 'to down a few'.

Russians could, without great effort, switch over to the Bulgarian style for the signs of affirmation and negation; but the main difficulty was contained in the uncertainty of the Bulgarians over whether a given Russian in a given instance was using his own code of head motions or theirs.

Such juxtaposition of two opposite systems of motions signifying 'yes' and 'no' easily leads to a new false generalization, namely the conviction that the distribution of the two semantically-opposed head motions is a purely arbitrary convention. A careful analysis, however, reveals a latent imagery – 'iconicity', to use Charles Peirce's semiotic terminology⁴ – underlying these symbols, seemingly entirely devoid of any connection or similarity between their outward form and their meaning. 'Our' binary system of signs for affirmation and negation belongs to the code of head motions used by the vast majority of European peoples, including, among others, the Germanic peoples, the East and West Slavs (in particular, the Russians, Poles, and Czechs), the French and most of the Romance peoples, etc. Moreover, similar signs in the same function are in general widespread, though by no means universal, among various peoples of all parts of the world. A nod of the head serves here as an expression of agreement, in other words, as a synonym for the word 'yes'.

Like certain forms of affirmative hand motions, this head motion has a close analog in the particular welcoming ritual which is used in the same ethnic environment.⁵ The movement of the head forward and down is an obvious visual representation of bowing before the demand, wish, suggestion or opinion of the other participant in the conversation, and it symbolizes obedient readiness for an affirmative answer to a positively-worded question.⁶ The direct opposite of bending the head forward as a sign of obedience ought to be throwing the head back as a sign of disagreement, dissent, refusal – in short, as a sign of a negative attitude. However, such a straightforward opposition of two motions of the head is obstructed by the need for insistent emphatic repetition of both the affirmative and the negative head motions; cf. the vocal repetitions 'yes, yes, yes!' and 'no, no, no!'⁷ The corresponding chain of head motions in the first case would be the

[4] Peirce (1932). Efron (1941) uses the term 'pictorialism'.

[5] Arnold H. Landor (1893) remarks that for affirmation and negation the Ainu do not use head motions, but only hand gestures: 'Both hands are gracefully brought up to the chest and prettily waved downwards – palms upwards – in sign of affirmation. In other words, their affirmation is a simpler form of their salute, just the same as with us the nodding of the head is similarly used both ways.' (p. 234).

[6] The analysis of affirmative and negative hand gestures does not enter into the present analysis. A copious, but rather mechanical and unsystematic compendium was made by Garrick Mallery (1881). In connection with numerous examples of the hand – with the fingers held touching each other – moving forward and downward as a sign of agreement, the author refers to sources interpreting the hand in the yes-gesture of the Dakota and Iroquois Indians as a metaphor for an affirmative nod of the head (p. 455). Cf. Tomkins (1926), p. 58.

[7] 'Puede reforzarse por la iteración simple o múltiple', as G. Meo-Zilio puts it (1961), p. 129. Cf. also Meo-Zilio (1960), p. 100.

alternation 'forward-backward-forward-backward-forward-backward' etc., and in the second case the reverse set 'backward-forward-backward-forward-backward-forward' etc., i.e. two similar series; the entire difference between them comes down to the initial movement forward or backward and easily slips by the addressee, remaining beyond the threshold of his perception.

The semantically opposite signs of affirmation and negation required perceptibly-contrasting forms of head motions. The forward-bending movement used in an affirmative nod found its clear-cut opposite in the sideward-turning movement which is characteristic of the head motion synonymous with the word 'no'. This latter sign, the outward form of which was undoubtedly constructed by contrast to the affirmative head motion, is in turn not devoid of iconicity. Turning the face to the side, away from the addressee (first, apparently, usually to the left),⁸ symbolizes, as it were, alienation, refusal, the termination of direct face-to-face contact.⁹

If in the system of head motions for 'yes' and 'no' under discussion the sign for affirmation appears to be the point of departure, then in the Bulgarian code, which also has parallels among a few ethnic groups in the Balkan Peninsula and the Near East, it is rather the sign for negation which serves as the point of departure for the system. The Bulgarian head motion for 'no', appearing at first glance visually identical to the Russian head motion for 'yes', under close observation displays a significant point of difference. The Russian single affirmative nod is delimited by a bending motion of the head forward and its return to the usual vertical position. In the Bulgarian system, a single negative sign consists of throwing the head *back* and the consequent return to the vertical position. However, emphatic intensification makes the return to the normal position into a slight bending of the head backward in our 'yes' or forward in the Bulgarian 'no'. Frequently, because of emphasis, the same head motion undergoes immediate repetition – once or many times – and such repetition, as had already been noted above, more or less obscures the difference between our sign for affirmation and the Bulgarian sign for negation.

In the pure form of the Bulgarian negation, the head – thrown back, away from the addressee – bespeaks departure, disagreement, discord, a rejected

[8] This kind of negative movement of the head specifically to the left has been observed, e.g. among the Indians of Terra del Fuego (see Gusinde (1937:1447) and among the Persians (Phyllott (1908:619ff.)).

[9] Among many peoples in both hemispheres the iconic gesture accompanying or replacing the head motion for 'no' consists of raising the palms – open and with fingers extended – in front of the addressee, as if in a sign of rebuff or defense. The hands in this gesture move either forward and back, as if parrying the other party, or from side to side, as if shutting oneself off from him, brushing him aside or pushing away from him. These two variants can be compared to two varieties of the gesture of threatening which are related to them in both form and meaning: the movement of the raised index finger perpendicular to the line of the shoulders in Eastern Europe or parallel to the shoulders in the Central European region.

suggestion, refusal of a positive answer to a given question, while the Bulgarian sign for affirmation – turning the head from side to side – represents an obviously secondary form, a derivative from its negative antonym. In keeping with Saussure's formula (1916: 1, ch. 1, § 2), observations of the structure of the Bulgarian head motion for 'yes' and of its basic core of inalienable properties should reveal even in this visual sign a certain degree of iconicity. With the initial turn of the head – usually to the right – and with each further turn, the addressor of this affirmative cue offers his ear to the addressee, displaying in this way heightened attention well-disposed to his words; cf. such Bulgarian figures of speech as 'Az s'm celijat v uši' ('I'm all ears'); 'davam uxo/nadavam uxo' ('I give [you my] ear', cf. 'lend me your ears').

Systems of head motions for affirmation and negation are represented in Europe by both types considered above – 'ours' and the 'Bulgarian' type, as I label them – and also by a third type, occurring in certain parts of the Mediterranean area, consisting of bending the head forward for affirmation and backward for negation. I have observed that this kind of opposition is consistently used by the Greeks in Athens, and the same system is preserved in certain regions of Southern Italy, for example among the Neapolitans and Calabrians.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the fact that it is difficult to perceive the difference between the two sets of repeated noddings of the head – forward and backward – is completely corroborated, even in the present case. Both of these head motions are in fact accompanied by two mutually-contrasting movements of the pupils, eyeballs and eyebrows – downward as a sign of agreement and upward as a sign of negation. But even these movements, just like the aforementioned movements of the head, turn out to be nothing more than concomitant, redundant phenomena, while the role of the autonomous, distinctive signal in this case is played by the furrow between the eyebrows and the cheekbones, especially the right eyebrow and cheekbone; this furrow is narrowed as a sign of affirmation and is, in contradistinction to this, widened as a sign of negation.¹¹

The work of the facial musculature, causing the movement of the eyebrow either towards or away from the cheekbone, creates a kind of synecdoche: the lowered or raised eyebrow becomes a meaningful, valid substitute for the submissively-bent-down or obstinately-thrown-back head. Another signal for specifying the head motion for negation – used, for example, among those Arabic tribes which have a similar opposition built around bending the head

[10] As Mallery states, 'The ancient Greeks, followed by the modern Turks and rustic Italians, threw the head back, instead of shaking it, for "no"' (p. 441). It is interesting that in the cases of cooccurrence of both forms of negation – vertical and horizontal – the selection of the first of these two gesticulatory synonyms in Southern Italy is interpreted in the same way as a look meekly directed upwards in avoidance of a bold, unseemly, categorical denial or of an impolite, point-blank refusal.

[11] A similar correlation has been observed among the Persians (cf. the above-mentioned article by Phillott) and the Polynesians (see Métraux (1940: 33)).

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forward or backward – is a click sound, which accompanies the basic movement of the negative sign, i.e. the initial bending of the head backwards.

Several other motions of the head and face are connected in form and meaning with the signs for 'yes' and 'no' of 'our' type. A question is contrasted to an affirmative nod in which the head is thrown back by having the chin thrust forward and up. The head either remains set in this position or the questioner moves it slightly from side to side. In addition, opening the eyes wide signals a puzzled question, while squinting is characteristic of an encouraging attitude on the part of the questioner. As has been already noted above in another connection, the key role here is played by the widened or narrowed space between the eyebrows and the cheekbones.

Amazement, as if removing the capability of an unambiguous reply ('neither yes nor no'), is expressed by rocking the head from side to side, usually from left to right. An inclined movement of the head relates this sign to the head motion for 'yes', and the direction from side to side relates it to the motion for 'no'. Shrugging the shoulders signifies doubt ('perhaps yes, perhaps no'). Reducing the angle between the head and the shoulders brings together the signs of surprise and doubt; but in the case of the former the head is bent toward the shoulders, which remain stationary, and in the case of the latter the head remains stationary while the shoulders are raised toward it.

It is necessary to subject the formal makeup and semantics of various systems of motions to thorough analysis, eliciting the invariants of the sign within each of them. The ethnological and geographical distribution of individual systems, as well as the role assigned to them in the processes of communication (the hierarchical significance of gesture, motion, facial expression, and speech, and the degree of their interconnection) are subject to investigation. In such an investigation the linguist ought to take into account the highly instructive indigenous terminology, both nominal and verbal, used for referring to the customary gestures, head motions and facial expressions.

The exciting questions about the interrelation of naturalness and conventionality in these motor signs, about the binary, 'antithetical' principle of their construction, and, finally, about the ethnic variations and universal invariants – for example, in signs for affirmation and negation – raised almost 100 years ago in Darwin's searching study *The expression of the emotions in man and animals* (1872) demand a comprehensive and systematic examination.¹²

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