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**PhD Thesis Summary**  
*Gesticulation in Public Debate*

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# **GESTICULATION IN PUBLIC DEBATE**

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The gestures of politicians have been a topic of interest for a long time. Observing and interpreting them has become an increasingly common concern, in particular, with the advent of television. That is why, we chose, from the broad scope of public debate, to focus our efforts on political televised debates, which act a real “show of bodies and discourses” through their device sets as the base for their spectacular dimension (Noël, 1990: 192), having become an important component of political communication nowadays. They have, in fact, transformed political practice into a communicational practice and in the last fifty years have claimed the attention of many researchers who have been analyzing these practices from different theoretical perspectives, without, however, reaching converging conclusions in most cases (see Gauthier, 1994: 5).

The choice of this subject is justified primarily by the fact that gesticulation is a code frequently present in everyday communication, hence always arousing the interest of those who study the non-verbal and who bring in new elements to the field through their publications. Gesticulation is certainly one of the most productive research topics, with numerous articles, books, symposia, congresses and seminars devoted to its various aspects (cf. Carpov, 2006).

Secondly, our choice is based on the idea that the gestures used by politicians in televised debates, along with facial expressions and their physical presence, play an important role in communication and help shape their image among voters. Moreover, gestures can impact the assessments of presidential candidates for a part of the electorate.

The *Gesticulation in public debate* thesis highlights the importance that different study areas carry for the study and analysis of gestures, taking, from this point of view, an interdisciplinary approach. It is based on the non-exhaustive examination of sources, classic and modern, and some reference articles, theoretical and practical, on the topic of non-

verbal communication and gestures in the fields of communication, rhetoric, semiotics, physio-linguistics, philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology and ethology. Also, our thesis concerns the issue of public debate and the analysis of gestures used by politicians in debate shows. Approaches, from various perspectives, come from the fields of communication and political psychology, political sciences, social philosophy, socio-linguistics and bodily semiotics.

However, it is important to emphasize that, as scientific research into nonverbal communication comes from multiple fields of study, they do not coalesce as theories as such, either partially or totally accepted, regarding this type of communication, even if there are outstanding contributions, and multiple attempts at surveying and categorizing independent variables. Based on these tests, solid hypotheses were formulated that can successfully stand in the place of theory. However, we must point out the existence of a considerable number of “fashionable” works in the field, lacking scientific rigor partially or completely, but which guarantee success in decoding gesticulation / nonverbal

behavior in different fields. Such approaches, proposing “a mimetic model of scientific theories” (Lardellier, 2015: 36), minimize the role that words and speech play and instead oversell the contribution of gestures in the communication process. However, we feel that going through such works with caution and critical sense may be to some extent useful, without positioning ourselves with those who argue that we should not look at nonverbal communication as secondary in relation to verbal communication.

The methods and techniques used in our thesis are mostly qualitative, with research relying mainly on *simple observation*. Considered a superior technique for obtaining data on nonverbal behavior and behavior specific to each situation, observational research allows for in-depth study of individuals as well as for recording behavior in natural locations. However, this method of research is not precise, it does not allow for comparison of cases and nor for the use of larger samples, sampling constituting itself through random choice of subjects and the lack of representativeness. Consequently, data obtained

may not form the basis of generalizations (Marinescu, 2009: 47-48).

Since observation is not sufficient as a research technique, we also resort to a method specific to communication science: *content analysis*, which is a technique for collecting and studying text, i.e. words, pictures, symbols, meanings, ideas, themes or messages communicated. With this technique, information can be organized in a format that allows inferences on the characteristics and meanings of messages, written and oral, respectively, of the artifacts of social communication (Agabrian 2006: 18-22). Thus, content analysis applies not only to text but also to symbolic communication, contributing to the study of nonverbal communication in a manner that is systematic, objective and quantifiable, in order to measure variables (Gunter, 2000: 56).

Our research is based on observation fiches of gestures, made while watching six French presidential debates, in the period 1974-2012:

- May 10, 1974 debate with a duration of 1 hour and 40 minutes, and May 5, 1981, with a duration of 1 hour and

10 minutes, between Giscard d'Estaing François Valéry Mitterrand:

- April 24, 1988 debate between Jacques Chirac and François Mitterrand, lasting 2 hours and 15 minutes;
- May 2, 1995 debate between Chirac and Lionel Jospin Jacques, lasting 2 hours and 10 minutes;
- of 2 May 2007 debate between Ségolène Royal and Nicolas Sarkozy, lasting 2 hours and 40 minutes;
- May 2, 2012 debate between François Hollande and Nicolas Sarkozy, lasting 2 hours and 55 minutes.

The method used is that of inductive inference by generalization<sup>1</sup>. Using it we tried to highlight types of gestures used frequently or occasionally by candidates for the presidency of France, their possible functions and meanings and the possible intent behind them. We believe this method is useful because it is systematic, structured and thus helps us

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<sup>1</sup> “In other areas of knowledge where truths are taken directly from experience, they are used in other ways, which is forwarded to the particular (and singular) in general. Logical operations encountered here is called inductive inferences by generalization” (Dima, 1990: 189).



learn and collect more relevant information on communication through gestures in public debates, which are the subject of our analysis.

Our investigation focuses on three general objectives: the analysis of the role of gesticulation in televised political debates; highlighting the importance of gesticulation in building the identity of the candidates to the presidency of France and proving a correlation between dynamic gesturing and the efficiency of the candidates' performance during the debates. We will, therefore, use objective procedures for counting and recording gestures, as well as subjective interpretation procedures and inductive generalization inferences, thereby obtaining a quantitative and qualitative description of verbal and nonverbal messages transmitted during the observed political debates.

Our research approach combines descriptive and normative approaches to gesticulation used during televised political debates with an empirical analysis methodology within the two applications meant to interpret meaning and monitoring recurrent gestures of French politicians.

**The first chapter**, named *Theoretical Paradigms in the Analysis of Gesticulation* presents accepted meanings of the term “gesture” with a special emphasis on definitions which broaden the scope. We therefore include in this category different body component movements, facial movements and gaze, thereby aligning ourselves with a line of thought drawing from antiquity in the work of Quintilian. We therefore also discuss some analysis perspectives on gestures and emphasize the importance of interpretation in context, by reference to the verbal message. The chapter also contains an overview of gestures’ typologies, in particular those that have as classification criterion the communication intention (Ekman-Friesen, Greimas-Courtes, D. Morris) and their role in the conversation (JB Bavelas, Cosnier-Vaysse). In the final chapter, we highlight a number of functions that gestures can play in interpersonal interactions, without considering them universally valid.

**The second chapter**, *Gestures and Communicative Action* revolves around the idea of ludic “conversation” (GH Mead) between the bodily “metonymic actors” (AJ Greimas),

which play different roles in interpersonal interactions in public debates and are bearers of symbolic meanings. Another important Greimas idea employed in this chapter is the fact that, based on the analogy between phonemes and sememes, gesture phonemes can be inventoried, respectively, as natural behaviors, which, through permutation and combination operations, give rise to statement gestures and speech gestures. Because the meanings of gestures taken separately can configure or not during observation, many of the experts concerned about their analysis have particular regard for their meaning, which is quite difficult to determine in itself, and less on practical characteristics. In this chapter, we also discuss the socio-cultural dimension of gestures in communication, highlighting that some gestures have universal value, while others have meanings that can vary from one culture to another or even from one period to another within the same culture. The end of this chapter discusses possible meanings attributed to gestures, performed by different parts of the body, by a number of authors (in particular, Desmond Morris, Allan & Barbara Pease, Joseph & Caroline Messinger). We try to see to

what extent these meanings are relevant to the context in which gestures appear in presidential debates in France and illustrate them with good examples.

In the final chapter, *The Bodily “Metonymic Actors” in the Public Debate Arena*, we discuss the types of public debate formats (*Karl Popper, Lincoln-Douglas, debate show and parliamentary debate*) and detail the characteristics of each of them, with regards to the organizational norms, rules of conduct, the time sequence of activities and the order of participants’ intervention. We also insist on the differences between televised debates and talk shows, and the importance of debate strategies in shaping the image of candidates in election races, which benefits from gestures, facial expressions and posture, along with previously exhibited characteristics, speech patterns, appearance etc. Finally, we highlight the specificities of French presidential debates compared with those in America and analyze the last two debates that took place in France, with emphasis on the role of finger gestures by presidential candidates in 2007, and in particular the recurrence

of the gestures of the two candidates in 2012 from the perspective of the Ekman-Friesen typology.

In the specialized literature there are two concepts about the image of politicians (Giasson et al., 2005). The first is founded on psychological and character traits as well as on the moral values embodied by a particular candidate. The second interpretation, coming from a political science perspective, focuses on the image-profile of candidates, their visual representation, transmitted through their gestures, mimics, behavior and interactions with other actors. However, analyses focused on the study of visual representations or on possible effects on the electorate are not very numerous.

Our research follows the path opened by Mouchon (1983), Atkinson (1984), Blum (1988) and Calbris (1999, 2002), which favors the analysis of the visual image content of politicians from the symbolic and psychological perspective, without being interested in assessing perceptible impact on the electorate. The method of these authors is to formulate interpretation tables for the personality and values of politicians, resulting from the analysis of gestures and facial

expressions. These types of studies allow for revealing the latent message and communication intentions by assigning meaning to nonverbal components.

This analysis perspective was broadened by authors such as Sullivan and Masters (1988, 1993), Rosenberg and his colleagues (1986, 1987), Redlawsk and Lau (2003), who took into account gesticulation and mimicry in the context of interaction with other debate participants. Our approach lies exactly at the confluence between these two approaches, as it identifies a series of gestures with intentional character, as well as those spontaneous gestures, caused by verbal and nonverbal interactions between political actors.

In our approach we encountered a number of limitations both technical and gnoseological. In this regard, a first difficulty concerned the visual data collection, meaning that attention was focused more on capturing images, in certain situations, and less on verbal messages conveyed. Also, some gestures could not be seen, but only intuited, because of the camera angle or framing used, which meant that most often, the reactions of the receptor candidate cannot be captured. At the

same time we have encountered obstacles in selecting gestures due to the length of debates, on the one hand, and the diversity and abundance of gestures, on the other hand. In terms of the quality of illustrations considered relevant, it was sometimes affected by the absence of necessary laboratory conditions for processing the images. Limited knowledge of the French political context was, at times, an obstacle to understanding language subtleties and correlating nonverbal messages to verbal ones.

We wish to point out that an attempt to formulate initial conclusions made us realize that we are not at the end of the effort to research gesticulation in public debate, but rather at a new beginning, which opens further investigative possibilities.

The diversity of analysis perspectives determined us to ask: *What is the most rigorous approach to this issue?* The multiple classification criteria for debates left us in a position to question: *What kind of debate enhances the functions of gestures in communication?* Searching for answers to these questions will certainly be one of the directions in which our research will continue.

Through the presentation of theoretical considerations related to our subject of interest, we have found that authors concerned with the study of nonverbal communication position themselves in different ways in regards to the verbal-nonverbal report. There are those, for example, who support the rule of nonverbal communication compared to verbal communication and therefore focus on simultaneous analysis of verbal and nonverbal communication elements. One is Jacques Cosnier (1988), who believes that enunciation is the result of a body that “speaks”, i.e. that every word uttered is the product of bodily enunciation. As for us, during the research we argued for complementarity and not subordination between gesticulation and language, a rapport that allows for bidirectional epistemic understanding. From this perspective, we believe that the study of gesticulation should not be limited to surveying and describing gestures, but instead involve a pragmatic analysis, which can contribute to the effective implementation of communication strategies in specific contexts.



The intentional nature of gesticulation, brought to the fore by Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen in 1969 proved to be the most relevant classification criterion, although gestures were also sorted by their nature and according to the status they have in relation to verbal interaction. In this sense, gestures can sometimes express more than words, revealing the hard to hide reactions and thus contributing to either more efficient or distorted communication. If verbal material provides referential functions, metalingual and meta-communicative, nonverbal and para elements, and all the ensemble of relational meanings have expressive and phatic functions (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1990).

By analyzing gesticulation occurring during the chosen debate shows we have found that gestures can replace speech and can enhance narrative clarity, thus helping to keep the focus or adjust the pace and flow of interactions.

Presidential debates turn television into a theater of confrontations, in which there is a reconfiguration of the political community from the perspective gesticulation in that the political actors pay more attention to using expressive

gestures. In this sense, the situation of politicians shifts, as they can no longer legitimize themselves solely through political projects, but instead becomes largely an image that sells, a hero with whom the viewer identifies (Rosca, 2007). Thus the credibility condition for a speech is not truth, but verisimilitude. There is a truth of perception that substitutes reflexive logic and builds on sense impressions (Haines, 2002).

Ample information about personality, character, and relationships with other participants in the debate, emotions and feelings of candidates are transmitted through gestures. Gestures help to influence interlocutors and change verbal interactions, and the appropriate encoding and decoding of gesture messages becomes an important factor for the efficiency of the communication flow.

Politicians know that voters' expectations are constantly changing and are therefore forever trying to adapt their gestural pattern to these expectations. In this regard, the expressiveness of certain parts of the body becomes essential in understanding the communication process and in regulating the discursive balance between partners during debates.

Placed on the border between verbal and visual mediation, televised political debates act as meta-communication, an exhibit of the oratorical and gestural skills of political actors. By integrating gestural communication in the structure of televised speeches, images support and supplement the words. Concurrency or delay between the words and the image is translated into accords or discrepancy of opinion. Gesticulation therefore has an essentially pragmatic role, potentially becoming the source of misunderstandings, prejudices or stereotypes.

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