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## VERBAL GESTURES: TOWARD A FIELD-BASED APPROACH TO LANGUAGE DESCRIPTION

If it seems that the language presents some strange facts, it only means that you have insufficient knowledge concerning the boundaries of cross-linguistic variation; it does not mean that the language is inherently strange, or randomly complex.

*Kibrik 2005: 260*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

A. E. Kibrik (1992) argued for a broad approach to understanding language by not focusing entirely on the linguistic system but also taking into account the mental state of the speakers. His fundamental argument centers around the idea that structuralism presents too narrow a focus and ignores functional categories, has radically shaped linguistic theory in Russia. His theoretical work, in particular in typology, enriches his many contributions to field linguistics, which are an equally important part of his legacy to the Russian linguistic science. His own extensive fieldwork, the training of students, and his authoritative textbook on fieldwork (Kibrik 1972) have not only shaped the development of individual field linguists but his findings in the field helped formulate his own theoretical thinking, and vice versa. It is in the spirit of this interplay between field findings and the development of a comprehensive theory of language that I offer this paper in his memory and honor. The topic stems from simple observations in the field of what has turned out to be a complex phenomenon, what I call *verbal gestures*. In section 2 I define verbal gestures and then in section 3 provide a summary of my fieldwork on Wolof verbal gestures that inspired the present cross-linguistic approach. Section 4 places verbal gestures in a cross-linguistic frame, and section 5 considers the role of verbal gestures in the communicative system, arguing that a comprehensive theory of language should include elements on the continuum from linguistic to paralinguistic to adequately describe communication.

### 2. DEFINING VERBAL GESTURES

The term *verbal gestures* is used here to refer to that set of sounds or segments which stand outside a language's phonemic inventory but are still part of the communicative system of the language. In American English, examples of verbal gestures that use sounds outside of the phonemic system include the glottal stop in some pronunciations of *uh-oh*, the dental click in *tsk-tsk*, or the use of tone in *mhmmm*. These gestures are not, strictly speaking, lexical items, but native speakers know them, recognize them, and use them frequently. They are conventionalized and are a central

part of communication. They vary from language to language and although they are important parts of the communicative system, they lie outside "language" or the linguistic system per se, and thus are largely ignored by linguists. There are some studies of paralinguistic clicks (e.g. Gil 2011), a few studies of clicks and other vocalizations as playing a role in conversation (Ogden 2001 for Finnish; Wright 2007 for English), and a set of studies on discourse markers which are a different phenomenon. Verbal gestures are relatively understudied, but are prevalent in the world's languages. My initial work with verbal gestures in Wolof (Grenoble et al. *forthcoming*) is described in more detail in Section 3; it is that work that provides the foundation for the discussion here.

More specifically, verbal gestures can be defined in terms of a set of linguistic criteria: (1) they consist of elements not in the phonemic system; (2) they do not take inflectional or derivational morphology; and (3) although they can serve as full turn sequences in conversational structure, they are not part of any morphosyntactic frame. These definitional criteria partially overlap with Gil's (2011) notes about the "exceptional features" of paralinguistic clicks, as he too notes that they involve sounds outside of the phonemic inventory and are not integrated into morphological and syntactic structures. In addition, he argues that they have a very restricted range of meanings. The full semantic range of verbal gestures requires significantly greater research, as their cross-linguistic range is an open question at this time, but based on my own work to date, they do not appear to have a restricted set of meanings. (See Section 5 for a broader discussion of the semantics and pragmatics of verbal gestures, placing them on a continuum of linguistic and paralinguistic elements.) Finally, Gil's study is devoted to clicks only, and verbal gestures include a much wider range of phonetic elements.

The use in speech of sounds that are outside of a language's phonemic system has been recognized for some time. As early as 1949, Fries & Pike noted that a single dialect might include more than one sound systems, while recognizing that one or more of these systems may be highly fragmentary. Particular sounds might occur only in specific morphemes (e.g. glottal stop in English *uh-oh* or [ʔmʔm]). Harris (1951:71) also notes the existence in language of particular sounds outside of the phonemic system of this same language. Typically, their use is limited to certain exclamations, animal calls or borrowed words; their distribution is limited to such special categories in language.

Verbal gestures also differ from *ideophones* as they are generally called in African languages, also referred to as *expressives*, *descriptives* or *mimetics*. Tufvesson (2007), preferring the term *expressives*, defines them as "a distinct class of words which denote sensory perceptions of the speaker; describing visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, haptic, emotional or other types of perceptions in relation to particular phenomena." Ideophones are "marked words that depict sensory imagery" (Dingemans 2011:25) that have "detailed semantics that express a speaker's personal perceptual experience" (Tufvesson 2007; see also Diefloth 1976, Klammer 2001). They may have special phonetic and/or phonological properties, such as lengthened vowels, raised pitch, increased amplitude (Childs 1994; Samarin 2001), or use rhyming or stress patterns differing from those otherwise used in the language (Doke 1954) and are notable specifically for their sound symbolism and unusual phonology. (See Dingemans 2012:655 for a survey; Samarin 1970 for an overview of these phenomena.) The exact linguistic status of ideophones varies from language to language and they need to be studied on a case-by-case basis. Unlike verbal gestures, they are unquestionably words; Newman (1968:108) argues against treating them as a separate morphological category, finding that we should rather analyze them as ideophonic nouns, ideophonic verbs, and so on.

Wolof has a large number of ideophones (Dialo 1985). Wolof ideophones, however, consist of sounds in a language's phonemic inventory and function as fully fledged lexical

items. They are not extragrammatical but are part of the syntax where they appear to function as “satellites of specific verbs” (Samarin 1970:165). Thus although they are an important part of expressive language, they do not fit the definitional criteria of verbal gestures. Despite a fair number of descriptions of Wolof, the use of verbal gestures has previously only been described by Dialo (1985), who provides at most a brief sketch of these sounds, calling them expressive elements. In this category he includes hand and verbal gestures, interjections, ideophones, and onomatopoeic words. Dialo briefly discusses clicks, also noting that they are not phonemic elements in Wolof and are regular lexical items or functional words. Dialo considers these clicks to be pseudo-syllables, *pseudo-* in the sense that they occur without vowels.

### 3. VERBAL GESTURES IN WOLOF

The phenomenon of verbal gestures first came to my attention while conducting fieldwork on Wolof, a Niger-Congo language spoken widely in Senegal and Gambia. It is one of the official and national languages of Senegal and is the major African language of wider communication there, with approximately 3,930,000 speakers as of 2006. Another estimated 185,000 speakers live in Gambia and about 12,000 in Mauritania, for a total worldwide of 3,976,500 (Lewis et al. 2013). Here I present an overview of current work on Wolof verbal gestures; see Grenoble et al. (*forthcoming*) for more details.

Fieldwork conducted in Ronkh Senegal, a village of 5000–12,000 inhabitants located in northern Senegal, approximately 2–3 kilometers south of the border with Mauritania, indicates a complex system of verbal gestures with distinctive meaning, including a set of contrastive clicks. Casual observation indicates the use of some of these same verbal gestures in other parts of Senegal, including Dakar, Saint Louis and Kedogou, although there is some variation in use and distribution. Differences between urban and rural, or deep, Wolof are well-studied (McLaughlin 2001, 2008), but these descriptions focus more on the use of French with Wolof in urban settings and not on discourse practices beyond code-mixing.

#### 3.1. Verbal gestures in Wolof

Verbal gestures in Wolof were elicited and recorded in spontaneous conversation. Interviews were conducted in Wolof or a mixture of Wolof and French. Verbal gestures are readily elicitable. Although there is no term in Wolof to categorize the category of verbal gestures, speakers easily produced them when just one was described and offered others on their own initiative. They also easily defined them in words: the *waaw* ‘yes’ dental click was defined as ‘waaw’; the lateral click defined as a “synonym” of the dental click, and so on. One specific verbal gesture, *ciipetu*, is referred to by this name in Wolof. Not surprisingly, some speakers were able to provide more verbal gestures than others. While in Ronkh, we created two audio tests for recognition of wild sounds by extracting samples from context and playing this back to other speakers. These test recordings included recordings of the same verbal gesture uttered by different speakers; the first test consists of 39 different sounds; the second of 15. Even without any supporting context or visual aids, speakers recognized the different sounds readily and without question. Thus the use of these verbal gestures is well known and highly salient.

A tentative inventory is found in Table 1, where each verbal gesture is described in terms of place and manner of articulation:

Table 1. Verbal gestures in Wolof (from Grenoble et al. *forthcoming*)

Gloss	Description	Manner	Meaning
waaw	velar click (mouth closed)/ lateral click/ alveolar click	single instance single instance single instance	'yes'
backchannel	velar click (mouth closed)/ lateral click/ alveolar click	repeated repeated repeated	'I see', 'I understand'
deedet	bilabial-dental click	repeated twice	'no'
ciipetu	bilabial-dental click	elongated suction (through teeth)	'I don't like this'
"hiss" { "the pis" }	[s:]	elongated	attention-getting
waalis	whistle-1	flat intonation	attention-getting
	whistle-2	rising intonation	calling
	whistle-3	rising-falling intonation	expressing admiration
"hm"	nasal sound [ɱmʔ] (mouth closed)		'watch out, you are in trouble'

The verbal gestures outlined in Table 1 are widely and frequently used; all were documented in fieldwork on Wolof. They are conventionalized and recognized by speakers without hesitation. Manner and place of articulation are significant: rapidly uttered lateral (*waaw*) clicks, produced with reduced amplitude, are backchannels, and not substitutes for 'yes'. Note that an increase in amplitude and duration iconically signals intensification, i.e., longer and/or louder production of the *ciipetu* gesture signals 'really don't like'. In order to contextualize the present cross-linguistic study of this category, I provide here a brief overview of the Wolof analysis. For more details, see Grenoble et al. (*forthcoming*).

### 3.2. Clicks

Wolof is striking in using a set of contrastive clicks for different verbal gestures with distinct discourse-pragmatic functions. These differ in terms of place and manner of articulation. These are categorized as follows

#### **Waaw and the backchannel**

The verbal gesture *waaw* 'yes' has three articulatory variants, apparently in free variation, each produced a single time to indicate 'yes':

- (1) a palatal/velar click, produced with the lips closed<sup>1</sup>
- (2) a lateral click
- (3) an alveolar click

Consultants, both in Ronkh and those from Dakar (currently living in Chicago), do not distinguish any difference in meaning between these three clicks and some specifically

<sup>1</sup> This click uses the ingressive airstream mechanism—as do other clicks—and is produced with the oral cavity closed in two places, the lips and the palate or the velum. The tongue acts as a piston. The only difference from velaric ingressive clicks is the path through which air flows into the oral cavity: in clicks produced with the mouth open, air

identified them as synonyms. There appears to be idiosyncratic preference of one over the other, with certain speakers using one variant to the exclusion of others, but such variation is found across siblings of the same gender. No consultant identified one over an other variant as associated with a particular social group, register, or anything else. Thus they appear to be in free variation. When uttered once, this verbal gesture is interpreted as ‘yes’ and speakers readily defined it in Wolof as *waaw*. When repeated, it is interpreted as ‘I see’, ‘I get it’, ‘I am following’ or ‘I understand’.

A click produced with the same place of articulation is used as a backchannel, when uttered repeatedly with reduced amplitude by one interlocutor while the other is speaking. The overlap in speech and reduced amplitude signal, clearly, that this is a backchannel and not a turn-taking device (see Knight 2009).

Frequency of use seems to be idiosyncratic: some speakers backchannel often, others less so. While manner of articulation (single versus repeated) is distinctive and phonemic with this gesture, the three different places of articulation are recognized by speakers as distinct in sound, but not in meaning.

### ***Deedeet***

The verbal gesture meaning ‘no’ is a bilabial-dental click, differing perceptibly from the *waaw* click. It is produced by sucking air in through lips pressed against the teeth. It is similar to a bilabial click, but the lips are not rounded, but rather pressed flat against the teeth. It is repeated twice in quick succession. Again, as with the *waaw* gesture, speakers readily defined this as *deedeet* ‘no’, quickly produced it when asked for the gesture meaning *deedeet*, and correctly identified it on an audio recording with no supporting context.

### ***Ciipetu***

The verbal gesture *ciipetu* (with alternate pronunciations *cipetu* or *kipetu*) is similar to the *deedeet* clitic in terms of place of articulation but differs in manner: it is elongated, with pursed lips which move to the side. It expresses negative evaluation, such as ‘I don’t like X’, ‘I disagree’. The Wolof word *ciipetu* refers specifically to this gesture. The fact that it is named indicates both its widespread usage and its conventionalized nature. The semantics of *ciipetu* is somewhat vague, signaling negative evaluation of something or disagreement with the previous speaker. A similar verbal gesture is used by some African diaspora speakers, called *cut-eye and suck-teeth* (Rickford & Rickford 1976), a verbal gesture accompanied by a characteristic eye roll. When producing *ciipetu*, some Wolof speakers make a slight eye roll, not as prominent as cut-eye gestures reported for African American speakers. Moreover, as the audio recognition test shows, the verbal gesture is itself sufficient for conveying the *ciipetu* meaning; it was unambiguously recognized by all speakers tested.

## **3.3. Other verbal gestures**

A number of other Wolof verbal gestures do not use clicks but are also highly conventionalized. They include *waalis*, *the hiss*, and *hm*:

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flows in through the mouth. With this particular click, air flows in through the nasal cavity. Gil (2011) describes the use of a phonetically similar click in Mauritanian Fula, “produced with closed mouth and an acoustically salient coarticulation whose nature I was unable to identify.” In Mauritanian Fula it is articulated once for ‘yes’ and twice for ‘no’.

**Waalis**

The word *waalis* refers to a whistle. The whistle can be produced four distinct intonation contours, each of which has a different interpretation. These are: (1) with *flat, level intonation*, to get attention; (2) with *rising intonation*, used to call out to someone; (3) with *rising-falling intonation*, to indicate admiration or positive evaluation; and finally (4) with *rising-falling attention*, to express relief. The use of *waalis* requires further investigation. In Ronkh the most frequently used whistle is #3, used for positive evaluation, while the hiss was much more commonly used to get attention. (This matches our experience in Dakar, where the hiss (or *pis*) is very commonly used on the streets.) The fourth whistle (expressing relief) was not recorded in Ronkh but suggested by our consultant from Dakar.

**Hiss**

The *hiss* (or the *pis* in Dakar Wolof) is uttered as an elongated [s:], sometimes with a bilabial onset [ps:] in Dakar Wolof. This verbal gesture is widespread throughout Senegal and very prevalent on the streets, used to attract attention for a wide range of communicative purposes.

**Hm**

This verbal gesture, a nasal sound [m̃m̃?] uttered with the mouth closed, was identified by consultants in recordings of spontaneous speech as signaling a warning, meaning roughly ‘watch out, you’re in trouble’, a signal to the hearer that she or he should take care to not annoy the speaker.

**3.4. Discussion**

The verbal gestures outlined here are widely and frequently used in Wolof. They are conventionalized and recognized by speakers without hesitation. Wolof verbal gestures are striking in making use of a number of contrastive clicks despite the lack of clicks in the phonemic system. Iconically, an increase in amplitude and duration iconically signals intensification, i.e., longer and/or louder production of the *ciipetu* gesture signals ‘really don’t like’ (see Section 5).

## 4. VERBAL GESTURES IN A CROSS-LINGUISTIC FRAMEWORK

Verbal gestures are widely spread throughout the world’s languages. They can be classified phonetically, or semantically-pragmatically, along the linguistic-paralinguistic cline. Because they are so understudied, this section presents only a very preliminary analysis of which verbal gestures may be found cross-linguistically. Verbal gestures can be classified phonetically (as in the clicks) or functionally (e.g. as signaling affective meaning or as turn-transition markers). In the present section I begin with a discussion of clicks, as arguably the most phonetically salient of the verbal gestures, and then proceed with a broad classification according to function.

**4.1 Clicks**

Perhaps the most studied phonetic category of verbal gestures is clicks, because they are so striking when they occur in languages which do not have clicks in their phonemic inventory. Gil (2011) surveys what he calls “paralinguistic” clicks, noting three key features: (1) they



involve sounds outside of the phonemic inventory; (2) they are not integrated into morphological and syntactic structures; and (3) they convey a restricted range of meanings. Based on this definition, three categories of languages emerge in terms of the distribution of paralinguistic clicks: (1) languages that use clicks with logical (affirmative/negative), that may or may not have affective uses; (2) languages that have affective uses of clicks but not logical ones; and (3) languages that do not have affective or logical clicks. In this last category are languages that do not have any clicks at all, as well as languages that use clicks for other purposes (such as turn-taking or addressing babies). In his survey of 143 languages, Gil finds 47 languages with clicks expressing logical meaning, 71 with affective but not logical meaning, and 25 which may express neither logical nor affective meaning. Note that not all non-phonemic clicks are verbal gestures. Extremely weak clicks have been shown to occur in German, when alveolar-velar stop sequences overlap at word boundaries (Fuchs *et al.* 2007) but these are allophones, emerging from morphophonemic processes, and not verbal gestures.

Gil's definition for paralinguistic clicks is similar to the one used here for verbal gestures (Section 2), with two key differences. First, verbal gestures are not limited to clicks, but encompass a broad range of phonetic phenomena. Second, the functions of verbal gestures extend beyond logical (yes/no) and affective uses and include turn-taking mechanisms. Thus Gil's class of paralinguistic clicks is a subset of verbal gestures. I return to the question of linguistic versus paralinguistic uses in Section 5, where I also discuss possible limits on the category of verbal gestures.

As seen in Section 2, Wolof has a rich system of clicks, with both logical (*waaw/deedeet*) and affective (*ciipetu*) clicks. Some languages have just one logical click: Greek uses an apico-dental click for 'no', and it is conventionalized as an affricate [ts] and referred to as *tsuk*. This is seen in *He made a tsuk*, meaning 'he clicked no' (Joseph 1994:228). Use of this negative click is a pan-Balkan phenomenon. It is well-known and is incorporated into the local writing systems. It is rendered orthographically in Albanian as *cq*, Macedonian and Bulgarian *ck*, Greek *tsuk*, Romanian *nt*— all phonetically [ɬ] — which is the clucking noise that can accompany an upwards head-nod (downward in Balkan Slavic) for 'no' (Friedman & Joseph, *forthcoming*, Chapter 5).

In English, clicks have been described as having affective uses only. They are described in a number of handbooks for phonetics as used to indicate disapproval (Clark *et al.* 2007:58; Ladefoged 1993:135), where the example of English clicks is provided as contrastive to click sounds which are phonemic in Khoisan languages. More recent research (Wright 2007) demonstrates that clicks are used in English conversation (see Section 4.3.2).

#### 4.2. Use and spread of clicks

The distribution of clicks as phonemes is very limited both geographically to southern Africa and Tanzania, and genealogically to Khoisan languages, with borrowings into some Bantu, and also reported in Damil, a specialized language in Australia (see Hale 1998). As verbal gestures, the mapping of clicks in Gil (2011) shows that usage of clicks for logical meanings is largely clustered in West Africa, the Middle East, and the Balkan. A cluster of languages is also found in the Caucasus and India/Bangladesh. The only outlier in this data set is Sranan, a creole language spoken in Suriname. Gil hypothesizes that their use in Africa may be best explained as an areal feature, spreading through contact. Certainly the evidence of the Balkan languages supports this hypothesis. Use of a dental click for 'no' spreads from India through

the Middle East and into the Balkans, as well as into southern Italy and Sicily. Moreover, the spread zone for the use of clicks in the Balkans and in Italy appears to coincide with specific migrations: in the former with the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire, and in the latter with the extent of Magna Graecia (Friedman & Joseph, *forthcoming*, Chapter 5).

While the distribution of verbal gesture clicks with logical meaning can be explained as the result of language contact, the widespread use of clicks as verbal gestures of other types (broadly categorized by Gil as affective) is less clear. My hypothesis is that they are used as verbal gestures precisely because they are not part of the phonemic inventory. Clicks are highly salient. Ladefoged & Maddieson (1996:259) “emphasize the importance of their intensity. Clicks stand out from the sounds around them. This is partly due to their usually being preceded by silence or low level voicing, and often followed by a voiceless accompaniment. But it is more because many of the clicks contain a great deal of energy compared with the surround sounds.”

This would also account for the fact that clicks are found in some special registers. Nathan (2001) reports the use of clicks in two different Chinese varieties in children’s nursery rhymes. In the Ningdu dialect of the Gàn group (spoken in the interior part of southeast China), initial velar nasals are replaced by a voiced nasalized post-alveolar click, while in Mandarin (which lost word-initial velar nasals), the clicks are produced word-initially. As Nathan points out, this usage of clicks differs phonetically from paralinguistic clicks (or verbal gestures as defined here) which are separate segments that do not combine with any words as the Chinese nursery rhyme clicks are used as the onset of words in the nursery rhymes. (In verbal gestures, non-phonemic segments do combine with phonemes, as in American English *uh-uh* [ʔʌʔ ʔʌʔ] or Wolof *hm* [ḡḡḡ].)<sup>2</sup>

### 4.3. Functional uses of verbal gestures

The paralinguistic use of clicks has been more widely studied than have other verbal gestures, and so this section is largely preliminary. A large number of functional uses of verbal gestures can be grouped together as affective or expressive; these verbal gestures signal attitude of the speaker, either toward the propositional content of the interlocutor’s utterance, or toward the interlocutor, or some other aspect of the context.

A number of verbal gestures have to do more specifically with the communicative situation. These include gestures that are part of the turn-taking structure or play some other role in conversational structure. These are loosely categorized as structural uses, where structure refers specifically to conversation or to some other aspect of communication, such as attention-getting devices. Further research is needed to understand the range and limits of these categories as well as how to best classify verbal gestures.

Turn-taking signals include turn-initiating devices, turn-yielding devices, and turn-holding devices. These are largely understudied cross-linguistically, but current evidence suggests that verbal gestures play an important role here.

#### 4.3.1. Turn-initiating signals

In English, four cues have been identified as *turn-initiating signals* (initiated by the current listener): (1) shift away in head direction; (2) audible inhalation; (3) initiation

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<sup>2</sup> The glottal stop is also an allophone of word-final [t] in American English. In the Santa Barbara corpus, it is found in 24% of these instances. See Eddington & Channer (2010) for details along with an overview of the status of glottal stops in different varieties of English.

of a gesticulation; and (4) paralinguistic overloudness (Duncan & Niederehe 1974:240). These four cues was displayed at 95% of the turn beginnings analyzed in their corpus. However, the vocal cues (audible inhalation and paralinguistic overloudness) were infrequently used as opposed to the use of the two body movements. As they point out, these cues are independent of the verbal content of the conversation, which brings a processing advantage (p. 246). But their analysis suggests that they are not true verbal gestures but rather co-articulatory properties.

The use of clicks as English turn-initiating signals is different. In an analysis of six corpora of naturally occurring speech, Wright (2007) identifies NSI (New Sequence Indexing) clicks in both American and British English. These clicks have an anterior place of articulation (overwhelmingly produced with labiality or alveolarity); are singletons; and are frequently produced with a high-amplitude inbreath. These features thus include two of the cues identified by Duncan & Niederehe. The pre-click sequence is uttered with low pitch, and the click itself with high pitch, a pattern which corresponds with pitch contours correlated with turn-taking sequences; the click is often preceded by a pause. Wright did not, however, test these clicks out of context to determine if speakers recognize their function independent of the surrounding conversational structure. Further work is needed here.

#### 4.3.2. turn-yielding signals

In Finnish, an analysis of a corpus of talk-in-interaction shows that creak phonation is overwhelmingly used turn-finally, marking a possible TRP (transition relevance place); often but not necessarily along with other phonations, including breathiness, whisper and voicelessness (Ogden 2001). Creak begins with an abrupt onset in Finnish, unlike in English.

In Kalaallisut (West Greenlandic) turn completion (often coinciding with topic completion) is signaled by a verbal gesture which involves highly audible inhalation and creaky phonation. This gesture is produced without any other linguist. When speakers of Kalaallisut speak English, they may use these phonations in uttering the word *yes*; however, when speaking either language, the phonation pattern most frequently occurs alone, without any accompanying lexical item. This gesture can also be used as a backchannel to signal agreement with the current speaker and as a signal of agreement, in which case it can be analyzed as a single turn unit.

#### 4.3.3. turn-holding signals

Studies of turn-holding signals have focused primarily on prosody, tempo and amplitude; more research is needed here for the use of verbal gestures. Glottal stops are used in Finnish as turn-holding devices (Ogden 2001) as well as in English (Local & Kelly 1986; Local & Walker 2005).

#### 4.3.4. back-channels

Backchannels are not turn-taking or turn-yielding signals but rather indicators to the current speaker to continue talking (Knight 2009:39; Yngve 1970), showing the hearer's "continuing attentiveness" (Duncan & Niederehe 1974:237). In English, the backchannel commonly written *mhmm* is a verbal gesture: it is not part of the lexicon, does not take inflectional morphology, and it has tone. In Wolof, the *waaw* click, when uttered repeatedly, is a backchannel; it is produced frequently by the recipient (or hearer) while the current speaker continues talking. It is uttered with reduced amplitude, reduced in comparison to that of the normal loudness of both the speaker and of the (current) listener when she or he is taking

a turn (and thus is speaker). Such overlap is a common trait of backchanneling behavior (Duncan & Niederehe 1974:237).

It is not the case that all of these devices should be classified as verbal gestures. The non-modal phonations used as turn-taking signals (such as creaky voice) are co-articulatory processes, not independent utterances as are other verbal gestures described here.

## 5. VERBAL GESTURES AND THE COMMUNICATIVE SYSTEM

How do verbal gestures fit into the overall communicative system? Although they are not strictly speaking language per se, there that they are a fundamental part of communication. Being fluent in a language certainly involves being in full command of the system of verbal gestures; as Gil (2011) points out, miscommunications can result without being able to understand language- and culture-specific gestures. Related to this is the issue of the limits of the category: what vocalizations are verbal gestures, and what simply vocalizations? In the examples presented here, the Wolof clicks are clearly verbal gestures (Section 3.1), while the non-modal phonation types used as turn-taking signals less clearly so (Section 4.3); many are phonations co-articulated with lexical content. Moreover, the relationship of verbal gestures to non-verbal gestures requires elaboration. Further research into these categories is needed, and most pressingly fieldwork involving talk-in-interaction in understudied languages.

Verbal gestures in Wolof suggest a continuum along the parameter from those that are most linguistic to those that tend to be paralinguistic. On the linguistic end, click gestures such as *waaw* ‘yes’ and *deedeet* ‘no’ function nearly as full lexical items and are defined by speakers as synonyms for the lexical items they represent. They are only “nearly” lexical items as they do not take morphology and cannot be integrated into syntactic structures, such that they cannot be embedded, and so on; see Grenoble et al. *forthcoming*.)

With this in mind, phonemes, verbal and non-verbal gestures can be arranged on a continuum along the parameter from those which are most linguistic to those which tend to be paralinguistic, as represented in Figure 1:



Figure 1. Verbal and non-verbal speech elements and their function in the world’s languages (from Grenoble et al. *forthcoming*)

Figure 1 is intended to capture the fact that verbal gestures can have both linguistic and paralinguistic functions, but tend toward paralinguistic ones. (Here I beg the question of defining paralinguistic; see Lieberman 1973 for useful discussion.) By the same token,

non-verbal gestures have a strong tendency to have paralinguistic functions, although they can have linguistic uses. For example, a head nod in many languages can be seen as a non-verbal substitute for the lexical item 'yes', signaling agreement, assent, or correctness, for example. Verbal gestures in Wolof lie in between: some have clear linguistic uses, while many are more paralinguistic in nature.

This leads to the question of the arbitrariness of verbal gestures. In his discussion of paralinguistic clicks, Gil (2011) points out that they are both arbitrary and conventionalized. The relationship between sound and the concept conveyed (the signifier and the signified) has long been understood to be arbitrary; this is a fundamental concept in linguistic science (Saussure 1967). In contrast, at least some verbal gestures are not as arbitrary: a finger or hand used to point at something has an indexical function.

Ideophones constitute a special category in terms of sound symbolism, but not all ideophones refer to things involving sound. Unlike verbal gestures, however, they are lexical items, but can be considered a special kind of words. An analogous analysis for ideophones has been posited by Klamer (2001:167), who organizes linguistic forms on a continuum from marked (less constrained) to unmarked (more constrained). Ideophones are less constrained than core lexical items (Joseph 1994) in that they take little or exceptional morphology and rarely have syntax unique to their class. They often use segments which are not part of the phonemic inventory.

The position of acoustic properties in speech is less clearly arbitrary. Shintel et al. (2006:174) argues that "speakers can vary the acoustic properties of speech analogically with properties of objects or events in the world. This acoustic variation can make the semantic information conveyed by words more prominent." They illustrate this argument with the use of intonation by English speakers to mimic the vertical direction of motion ('up' and 'down') as speakers increase or decrease fundamental frequency in describing visual motion and in reading sentences describing motion, analogically mapping these concepts. In a separate experiment, they show that speakers use utterance duration to signal speed of a motion event, mapping faster or slower articulation to the relative speed of a moving object. This iconicity is relevant in both production and perception, with listeners able to use prosody alone to understand the speed of an object (with the content of sentences describing only the direction of motion). Similarly, listeners recognized a picture as representing a previous referent when the information about the object's state (at rest or in motion) was implied by the speech rate (slow or fast), even though the propositional content of the speech was not describing this state (Shintel & Nussbaum 2007).

Finally, the classification illustrated in Figure 1 centers around a distinction between linguistic and paralinguistic functions, a distinction which is as blurry as this diagram suggests. In her discussion of the use of clicks in English conversation to demarcate the onset of new sequences, Wright (2007:1069) points out that this study challenges the assumption that clicks are used only paralinguistically in English.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In the present paper I have sketched the use of verbal gestures in a number of languages. The use of clicks as verbal gestures is particularly salient since so few languages use clicks in their phonemic system and so many in their system of verbal gestures. It would be tempting to devote the analysis entirely to clicks, but that would overlook the larger point of the wide range (phonetically and pragmatically) of verbal gestures as a cross-linguistic category.

Verbal gestures are apparently used cross-linguistically as an integral part of the communicative system. The work presented here is preliminary and calls for broader empirical and experimental data to define and delimit the category of verbal gestures. Such empirical work must be driven by naturally occurring discourse, recorded in natural settings, with close attention to all parts of the communicative system: language per se, as generally defined, along with verbal and non-verbal gestures. Further research is needed to determine if there are spoken languages which do not use such gestures and, by the same token, if there are correlates in sign languages. The definition of the category of verbal gestures is in need of further refinement to determine its limits, the range of uses of verbal gestures, and how verbal gestures in a particular language compare cross-linguistically.

The study of verbal gestures is in alignment with Aleksandr Evgen'evich's own philosophy of linguistic work, grounded in empirical data and driven by a curiosity about the range of categories in human language. It is not coincidence that the identification of verbal gestures as a separate category comes with fieldwork on Wolof, a lesser-studied language. Recognizing that the world's languages are unevenly studied, Kibrik also pointed out that existing descriptions often fall short of answering the questions researchers are interested in, arguing that these descriptions should be oriented toward a wide readership (1992:40). Verbal gestures are a case in point. In order to understand their usage in a given language, it is necessary to have a good grasp of that language's phonemic inventory, its morphosyntax, use of other expressives, and an understanding of the cultural anchoring of conversational discourse. This broad view of communication is of interest to anthropologists, linguists, and psychologists, as well as specialists in the individual languages.

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