Multimodal Representation of the Concept of Happiness in Russian Students’ Narrative*

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Abstract: The article deals with the issues of concept representation in multimodal communication. The respondents were asked to describe their condition of happiness they have ever experienced. The video-recorded spoken language data, i.e. reflective self-reports has been analyzed using content-analysis and metaphor identification analysis. In the course of this research we came to the conclusion that when a person evaluates various facts as making him/her happy this person is likely to produce a gesture expressing positive emotions. The components of the concept of Happiness represented verbally, in a special gesture and in two modes simultaneously have been revealed.

Key words: Multimodal representation of a concept • The concept of Happiness • Spoken narrative • Reference • Sources of happiness • Gesture

INTRODUCTION

It has recently been proved that multimodality is an ontological property of communication. Multimodal discourse comprises ”a multitude of material carriers (paper, celluloid, videotape, bits and bytes, stone, cloth …), modes (written language, spoken language, visuals, sound, music, gesture, smell, touch) and genres (art, advertising, instruction manual)” [1: 4]. When we study spoken data only the loss of information exchanged in a communicative act is inevitable. As Tim Wharton puts it “non-verbal behaviours are often beyond our conscious control: they are involuntary or spontaneous. Almost always, however, understanding an utterance depends to some degree on their interpretation” [2: 1].

This research is aimed at the analysis of representation of Russian everyday understanding of happiness. We study this layer of the concept of HAPPINESS in Russian students’ narrative. The data we analyse is not only texts but hand gestures representing this abstract notion, so the representation we study is verbal and gestural.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

To achieve the aim stated we designed a study which consisted of the following steps: firstly, to record interviews, make video transcripts and divide interviews into events; secondly, to analyse spoken data; thirdly, to analyse gestures and finally to analyse multimodal representation of the concept of HAPPINESS on the basis of referents of gestures. In gesture studies the term reference is being used based on an interpretation of what the speaker may have had in mind when producing the gesture in light of the speech with and around it [3].

RESULTS

To analyse multimodal representation of the concept of HAPPINESS, first of all, we recorded interviews and made video transcripts. According to the study design respondents were asked to describe a state of happiness they have ever been in. The interviews averaged less than five minutes and took place over a one-week period. In total we recorded 25 interviews.

Then we divided interviews into events. An event is a relatively short narrative about one precise situation in which the interviewee felt happy. We made the division on the basis of spoken data with special regard for “the conceptual formula of happiness” developed by S. Vorkachev [4]. It is a logical formula showing the evaluative relation (including the basis of evaluation) between the subject of cognition and the objective world (Here and further the translation of quotations from Vorkachev’s works from Russian into English is mine-M. Suvorova) [Ibid]. The formula is based on

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Argyle’s conception of happiness as subjective appreciation of life as a whole [5]. Thus the concept of HAPPINESS has two major components: a state of affairs and a state of mind [6]. A state of affairs is referred to as an objective component and a state of mind is referred to as a subjective component. In the semantics of HAPPINESS evaluation (both intellectual and emotional) links the two components. In other words, various facts of the objective world are evaluated by a subject of cognition as making him/her happy. Such facts of the objective world are called sources of happiness.

We divided 25 interviews into 76 events. The structure of each event corresponds to the formula of happiness: the interviewee describes the situation when he/she felt happy (an objective component is represented) and tells about his/her emotions at that moment (a subjective component is represented). We applied content analysis to the parts of events which contain representation of an objective component to find exact sources of happiness for each event.

Consider the following example:

“The happiest moment for me was when I got my exam results. I got 97 points in geography. For me it was just amazing, I don’t know how to say, it was such an outburst of emotion!”

What is printed in bold type represents the subjective component of the formula, i.e. emotions of the speaker. What is underlined represents the objective component of the formula, i.e. the source of happiness. In this example the source of happiness is exam results. In our thematic classification it falls into the category of studies and work.

All the events were analysed in this way, so that we identified and classified 83 sources of happiness (100%). Thematic groups include relations (30; 36%), studies and work (16; 19%), attainment of goals (12; 15%), material objects (9; 11%), nature (4; 5%), vacations and tourism (4; 5%), memorable occasions (4; 5%), pets (2; 2%) and creative work (2; 2%).

After we had analysed the spoken data we proceeded to the analysis of the visual one. As it has been mentioned above, we study hand gestures. We apply the Method of Gesture Analysis developed by C. Müller, E. Fricke, H. Lausberg and K. Liebal [7]. The method includes three steps: gesture identification, gesture form analysis and gesture interpretation.

At the 1st step we identify gesture units, the entire movements of the hands from their starting rest position through the gesture itself and back to a rest position. A gesture consists of the preparation, stroke, post-stroke hold and recovery [8]. The preparation is the initial movement of the hands [8]. The stroke is the most effortful portion of the gesture unit, in which the movement dynamics and hand tension are the greatest [8]. The stroke is the minimum required for a gesture unit. A post-stroke hold is a part of a gesture unit when the final image produced in the gesture, reflected in the handshape and orientation of the hand, is sustained [8]. The recovery is the phase which is final when the hand is relaxed and returns to a rest position [8].

In analyzing gesture form we pay attention to a hand shape, palm orientation and movement of the hand. The parameters and their descriptions are borrowed from the works of I. Mittelberg, D. McNeill, R. Webb and A. Cienki [9-11]. The path of movement can be straight, arc shaped or circular. Manner and speed of movement can be either rapid or gradual. Direction can be horizontal, outward, etc.

Gesture interpretation is usually an interpretation of the stroke. The stroke phase is normally focused on as the part which expresses the speaker’s idea which motivated the gesture in the 1st place, what one might call the gesture’s “meaning” [9-11].

The respondents produced 422 gestures in total, 76 of which were adopting (we do not work with adopting gestures in this research). In the rest 346 gestures a particular group of gestures drew our attention. This group consists of gestures of the following forms: 2H PO (two hands, opened palms), 2H PFlatVert (two hands, flat vertical palms), 2H PFlatHoriz (two hands, flat horizontal palms), 2H Fist (two hands, clenched fist), 2H ZipClosed (two hands, zipped firmly), 2H ZipOpen (two hands, fingers concatenated), 2H Closed (two closed hands). All these gestures are upward movements of hands shaping a circle or a semicircle. Gestures of this group occurred 120 times in 72 events out of 76. It is notable that an upward movement of hands shaping a circle or a semicircle was detected at least once in all the events apart from those where interviewees produced either no gestures at all (3 events in one interview) or adopting gestures only (1 event).

The very character of the movement suggests that it has positive implications (consider a well-known conceptual structure GOOD IS UP [12]). Thus we refer to the gestures of this group as “gestures of happiness” used when one is talking about happiness in its everyday sense.

Since events in this research are regarded as complex unities of the linguistic and paralinguistic we studied the interrelation between spoken data and gestures as well.
CONCLUSION

Both objective and subjective components cannot be represented in speech simultaneously due to its linear character. It means that analysing one’s speech we are unable to detect whether certain facts of the objective world are appreciated or depreciated by the speaker unless it is not expressed implicitly or explicitly in words. But speech is only one mode of expression. When we analyse narrative from the point of view of its multimodality we can grasp a deeper sense in it. Thus when we study multimodal representation of the concept of HAPPINESS we can see appreciation on the part of the speaker of certain facts of the objective world on the basis of gesture analysis before any kind of positive emotions are expressed in words.

REFERENCES


