Finding Kozakiewicz. In search of a method to identify Polish emblematic gestures

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Abstract

Studies on nonverbal communication in Poland have not given much attention to emblematic gestures, downgrading them in mainstream publications to the status of cultural curiosities. We believe, however, that emblems, as gestures playing important role in intercultural communication and second language teaching, deserve thorough and structured studies. Using the methods available in the field of discourse studies and combining them with some assumptions of meta-analysis, we have developed tools that will make it possible to identify Polish emblematic gestures and subsequently analyse them. The overview of works on gestures and our own research have allowed us to establish the features of Polish emblems, which should be investigated in future research. They are, among others: name, meaning, verbal paraphrasing, etymology, iconicity, variation and range.

1 Introduction

Studies on nonverbal communication that have so far been carried out in Poland have not given much attention to emblems. We believe, however, that emblems are a phenomenon which deserves thorough and structured studies. First, because emblems appear in human life as intentional gestures very early on, they have an important function both in the process of socialisation and language acquisition. Second, emblems are a manifestation of culture. This means that, for some reasons, they have preserved such mechanism of perceiving the world and interpreting it that are typical of the culture. Because of this feature emblems may also play an important role in intercultural communication and second language teaching. Ignorance of emblems often leads to intercultural misunderstandings and conflicts.

The main question that we want to answer in the present paper is – what is the procedure of identifying emblems and analysing their functions in culture and communication? What features discern emblems from other gestures? We will search for the answer in publications devoted to nonverbal communication, which we understand to be a specialised discourse with emblems being a construct created by researchers. We will also compare the results with our empirical studies.

This paper is not an ordinary review of existing literature. Its aim is to prepare tools that will allow us to identify Polish emblematic gestures and subsequently analyse them. In our reconstruction of the discursive notion of the emblem we use methods available in the field of

1 Probably the only Polish publication that can be said to be devoted to emblems is the Jarząbek dictionary (1994)
discourse studies and combine them with some assumptions of meta-analysis\textsuperscript{2}. Our procedure has been to analyse, synthesise and interpret different concepts, both Polish and foreign, regarding emblems. Using this approach we were able to achieve our specific goals, i.e.: characterise the way researchers think about emblems, create a list of defining properties of emblems, establish the status of emblems in classifications/typologies of all gestures as well as review the typology of emblems.

2 The place of emblems in typologies/classifications of gestures

Emblematic gestures were studied mainly by Efron (1941), Ekman and Friesen (1969), Morris et al. (1979), Saitz & Cervenka (1972), Sparkhawk (1978), Kendon (1981), Payrató (1993), Hannah (1996) and Brookes (2005); among Polish researchers – by Jarząbek (1994) and to a lesser extent Antas (1996, 2001). Interestingly, the term that was used was not always the same. Efron talked about “emblematic gestures”, Ekman and Friesen used the term “emblems”, whereas Kendon introduced the notions of “autonomous gestures” and “quotable gestures”. Jarząbek writes about “conventionalised gestures”, Dul – about “symbolic gestures”.

In logocentric typologies and classifications of gestures emblems most often appear as an element in a very important opposition. On the one hand, there are gestures whose meaning derives from uttered words, on the other – gestures whose meaning is independent of words. This idea is present in Efron and, in an extended version, also in Dul. Both treat emblems as gestures which are independent of speech due to a high degree of conventionalisation.

Ekman and Friesen take a slightly different position. They look at gestures from a functional perspective. In this conception, the function of emblems is least clear. They are said to offer an alternative for words in situations in which communication is made difficult or impossible (Orzechowski 2007: 47; Argyle 1988: 192).

Kendon (1988), on the other hand, removes boundaries separating different gesture types but strengthens the logocentric perspective. In the so called Kendon continuum gestures were compared to language through the category of linguisticity which encompasses all communicative hand gestures – from uncontrolled gesticulation to sign gestures.

Gesticulation → Language-like gestures → Pantomimes → Emblems → Sign Language

Kendon not only notices that emblems are dependent on speech, but also that they are similar to language (after: McNeill, 1992: 37).

What is also interesting is that in semiotic classifications emblems practically do not exist as a separate type. Both in McNeill (1992) and in Antas who modifies his conception (2001), emblematic gestures are classified by virtue of the fact that some of them are icons whereas others are metaphors.

3 Defining properties of emblems

3.1 Relationship to language/speech

As the authors of the above mentioned papers had adopted a logocentric perspective, the most important group of emblem properties is defined by means of references made to language. This applies to ontological issues as well as to attempts to describe interdependency of emblems and language in communication.

Thus, a defining property distinguishing an emblem among other gestures is the “verbality” of its meaning. This is due to the fact that some emblems have “verbal equivalents”, some have their own name, while the meaning of others is easy to verbalise unequivocally. Such semantic relationships are so distinct and unequivocal that some researchers call emblems the “motoric phraseology”, “alternative phraseology” or even “words not uttered” (Załazińska 2006, Antas 2001).

\textsuperscript{2} We understand meta-analysis as a method allowing studies on a given phenomenon through an analysis of data coming from other studies of the same subject
Thanks to language-like semantics, emblems do not have to co-occur with speech (they are gestures which are “independent of speech”) and it is this possibility of being isolated (in the process of coding and decoding) that constitutes their second defining property.

It needs to be mentioned, however, that the act of using an emblem is only seemingly independent of speech. Specialist literature identifies two main reasons for which communication is emblematised. One is the exclusion of the linguistic code (Orzechowski 2007, Argyle 1988, Kendon 1988, Ekman 1969), the other – the need to downplay or highlight linguistic content (euphemism and cacophemism).

The analysis of the relationship between emblems and language inevitably led to comparing the two categories. Consequently, emblems were described as language-like gestures. Mutual similarities were best described by Kendon (1984, 1988) (a fact already mentioned above). In addition, however, emblems are sometimes given the status of units that are discrete, arbitrary and invariant in coding (Argyle 1988). They are also given properties that are syntagmatic (sequentiality) and generative (the possibility to communicate any given subject matter).

3.2 Functions in communication

Another very important question has to do with the function that emblems have in communication. The first of such functions is the one of speech replacement in situations when speech is “turned off” (Orzechowski 2007) due to e.g. strong interference, too big a distance between interlocutors/interactants or hampering circumstances (see Kendon 1999). The Polish example of such emblem can be a raised hand signifying ‘thank you’.

Another function is to reveal one’s own physical or emotional states. Kendon believes that this is one of the three most important functions of emblems with negative emotions and feelings being dominant in the group as it can be seen when analysing examples provided in literature (Johnson, Ekman, Friesen 1975). An example of this can be a gesture of slashing air with the index finger or palm close to the root of the nose or the forehead meaning ‘I’ve had enough’, ‘I’m fed up with it’. Then there is the function of controlling human relationships (Johnson, Ekman, Friesen 1975, Kendon 1981, Orzechowski 2007). In this case, the sender uses an emblem to force the receiver to behave in a certain way. The group containing such emblems is usually the most numerous. Most of the emblems it contains play the role of nonverbal commands. A good example of this can be the gesture where the hand with fingers tightened together is held horizontally, falls down to the waist and rises in a spring-like motion. This emblem stands for ‘easy’, ‘calm down’, ‘slowly’, ‘slow down’.

Another function is to make an evaluative response, usually of a negative kind, to other communication participants (Kendon 1981, Kurcz 2005). Insults form a considerable part of this group. An example of this is knocking on your forehead with your index finger to say ‘you are stupid’.

Yet another function could be described as a nonverbal response. This concerns situations in which one of the interlocutors sends (emblematic) signals of consent, disagreement or disapproval (Kendon 1984, 1988, Johnson, Ekman, Friesen 1975). It can be juxtaposed with shaking one’s head (or clicking one’s tongue and shaking one’s head), which means ‘no’.

Finally, emblems have the function of designating objects or actions. Kendon believes that this function applies to about 20% of emblems. Thus, emblems are not direct equivalents of words (lexems) because in most phonic languages the names of objects and actions (nouns and verbs) make up the most numerous group. Example: putting your fist with the small finger and thumb stretched out close to your ear – ‘phone’, ‘call me’ or ‘someone’s calling you’.

Two important conclusions can be made about descriptions of functions of emblems in literature. First, emblems perform functions typical of other gestures only to a small extent (mainly as illustrators or regulators). Second, researchers do not simply transfer language or expression functions which have been described long ago (e.g. Bühler, Jakobson etc.) but suggest their own terminology.
### 3.3 Semiotic status – coding/decoding

There are many difficulties in establishing the semiotic status of emblems. Publications devoted to the subject interchangeably use the notions of *conventionalisation, arbitrariness* and *symbolicity*. Whereas the first of these must be taken for granted, the others raise serious doubts. Emblems are signs which are very much conventionalised, so their form and meaning result from social custom. They simply need to be learnt by users. Arbitrariness, on the other hand, translates into lack of motivation, a condition which cannot be ascribed to emblems. Most of them are motivated signs (or rather signs losing motivation) with specific history and even etymology behind them. This is discussed most thoroughly by McNeill. He believes that forms of emblems are obligatory, arbitrary and culturally specific. Meaning, however, does not depend on the context and is prespecified (McNeill, 1992: 48). In McNeill’s classification emblems are divided into two groups different by their semiotic nature: iconic and metaphoric gestures.

What is also interesting is the way emblematic gestures are created and received. On the one hand, the sender uses them consciously (intentionally) and in a non-spontaneous manner which could even result in exaggeration or theatricality (Knapp, Hall). Bearing this in mind, Kendon calls them quoted gestures and endows them with social rather than idiosyncratic coding. On the other hand, it is possible to use emblems in a form which is veiled or distorted or to unconsciously use a gesture which is interpreted by the receiver as a hidden insult. To account for such cases, Ekman (2003) uses the term *leaks*.

The problem of decoding is similar. Emblems are decoded following socially constructed rules with the usual intention of stimulating the receiver or force him to react (Orzechowski 2007). Incidentally, the scope or consistent recognisability of a gesture is a basis of considering it an emblem. Measurements used by Johnson, Ekman and Friesen (1975) show that emblems must be recognised by 70% of the population studied.

The place of articulation of emblems is also worth mentioning. They are mostly created by means of hands, but also by moving different body parts. This applies especially to the use of mimics, however, the mimic emblems are far more theatrical and artificial than the mimic expressions (Knapp, Hall 2000; Allen 1999).

### 4 Typology/classification of emblems

From the perspective of our research it also seems important to differentiate the group of emblems internally. Unfortunately, there are few existing classifications and typologies and the criteria on which they had been established are not clear. Appearing quite often is the thematic criterion allowing researchers to establish a list of themes applying to emblems. It seems, however, that this is not a good approach as such publications usually establish a lot of different groups with small representations and a lot of emblems classified as “other”. Such classifications may be found in Jarząbek (a dozen or so thematic groups with the most numerous ones being: disrespect, disapproval, gratitude, threat) and also in Johnson, Ekman and Friesen who suggest eight such groups (commands, physical states, insults etc.).

Emblems can also be divided following a traditionally understood function or a speech act (Ekman, Kendon, Sparkhawk). This approach usually results in establishing such groups as commands, greetings, insults, requests, impositions, offers and so on (after: McNeill, 1992: 64; Argyle, 1988: 192).

### 5 Own research

The goal of our research is to exhaustively describe the structure, functions, meanings of emblematic gestures and their relationships with the Polish speech. The idea behind this research was to develop a multi-media dictionary of those gestures including a complete lexical and graphic description. Here is where the first stage ends – compile a list of gestures, which could be considered as emblems.

Another stage is to create a metalanguage, which defines their structure (for the dictionary purposes). However, the most important part of our research is – in our opinion – an analysis of
functions, pragmatic typology (acts of speech) and reconstruction of the cultural picture of the world recorded in emblems. In this context it is important to describe the secondary use of emblems in pop culture and art (film, advertising etc.). Results of this study shall be referred (compared) to analogous research conducted in Greece and Great Britain.

The purpose of this text was to present a procedure which first helps recognize a gesture as an emblem and then produce its systematic description and analysis. Such an extensive range of works requires research tools of various disciplines are joined together. The key perspectives which determine our framework include cognitive linguistics, pragmatic linguistics and cultural linguistics (and on the method level: an experimental method and a multimodal discourse analysis). The procedure that we developed helps examine the range of decoding and the extent of coding specific emblems. As a result it is possible to establish the range and frequency of such gesture’s occurrence in the specific area and its use by members of a selected social group. Furthermore, a detailed interview and a film analysis (documentaries, feature films) are employed in order to find out the relationship between the gesture and the language.

The Ekman and Friesen method applied by us is sufficient at the preliminary stage of research only (creating the list). Then it is necessary to combine this method with tools present in sociology and discourse analysis. Otherwise, such subtle features as a limited range, a context of use, presence in the discourse etc. escape one’s attention.

As our analysis shows, establishing a corpus of Polish emblematic gestures requires taking into consideration the following features: an expressly defined form (though some gestures can be encountered in a few versions), a specific meaning and a common name, which is spontaneously used in a discourse as well as the story known to a part of the society. Some of them also demonstrate a limited range of occurrence (age, gender, the environment). They depend on the language; they are accompanied by uttered phrases (mainly idioms), they are verbally paraphrased, they play roles of various acts of speech, whereas in their original function they substitute speech. The name of an emblem can often be found in Polish idioms. Below is an example of an extract from our database:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FEATURE</th>
<th>Example – forearm jerk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Morphology</td>
<td>One hand slapped to the upper arm, and that arm raised with a fist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Common name</td>
<td>wał; gest Kozakiewicza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 and its spontaneous use in discourse</td>
<td>„pokazać komuś wała”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Etymology: history/ story, tradition</td>
<td>Władysław Kozakiewicz – to the Russian public in 1980 at the Summer Olympic Games in Moscow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Supporting verbal phrase (idiom)</td>
<td>takiego wała (jak Polska cała) or tu się zgina dziób pingwina (a tu mandolina)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Iconicity</td>
<td>Penis (penetration)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Variation</td>
<td>one-hand version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Range</td>
<td>Limited (informal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Speech acts</td>
<td>(strong) insult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Recurrent decoding</td>
<td>100,00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Verbal paraphrasing</td>
<td>“fuck you”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Primary usage – speech replacement</td>
<td>Limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Metaphorical use in speech (emblem’s name included in the idiom)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Meaning</td>
<td>‘fuck you’, ‘up yours’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Function</td>
<td>evaluative response</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 Once the list of emblems is complete, an on-site interview is conducted with individuals of different age, gender, education, place of living (town/village)
6. Conclusions

Emblems are an indispensable element in non-verbal human communication and they are a rich source of information about conversation participants and the culture they belong to. They perform various functions including the one to regulate [personal/intercultural relations] and express politeness. Due to their strictly lexical meaning they support the learning process and foreign language acquisition (see Allen 1999). They are also useful in diplomacy. Being ignorant of emblems or reading emblems in accordance with the norms of one’s own culture leads to many misunderstandings or conflicts (Hall 1984, Szczepaniak 2009, Schneller (after: Kurcz, 2005: 223). It is therefore all the more justified to put emphasis on thorough studies devoted to emblems and their recognition.

Bibliography