

# Gesture and Gaze in Persuasive Political Discourse

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**Abstract.** Persuasion in political discourse is a very popular topic, which raised a lot of debate among researchers. Yet, not so much literature has been devoted to the persuasive impact of facial expression and gaze in persuasion. This paper is an introduction to further research and gives some examples of persuasive gesture and gaze, by trying to prove how important these aspects of communication may be in persuasive political discourse. Also, the focus of the paper is to show how politicians make use of them in order to express positive or negative evaluations about the opponent and thus, raise emotions in the public.

**Keywords:** Gesture, gaze, persuasion, persuasive strategies.

## 1 Introduction

In persuasive discourse, as argued by Poggi (2005), locutor A has the goal to convince interlocutor B that the goal proposed by A is the best possible option also for the goals of B, and not just an option among many others. Therefore, to persuade is to convince others about the importance of the goals we propose them to pursue.

In order to do so, politicians use many persuasive strategies. To better exploit the persuasive techniques of *logos* (rational arguments), *ethos* (the Speaker's credibility and reliability) and *pathos* (the appeal to emotion), already illustrated by Aristotle, politicians, along with words, often employ gestures and gaze in a persuasive way.

A resolute gaze may be used for example when one wants to stress that he is being serious and therefore he is a person that people can count on, one who keeps his promises. On the contrary, the speaker may employ a discontent facial expression and an accusing gaze while talking about his opponent, thus implying that the other candidate is not worthy of the audience's trust.

## 2 Gesture in the Greek and Roman Treatises

The importance of gesture in political discourse has been acknowledged back since the ancient Roman treatises of Rhetorics. While in the Greek treatises, Aristotle didn't consider it essential in the delivery of a discourse, which, he believed, should contain only facts, in the Roman treatises, instead, gesture starts to be seen differently.

Cicero thought that gesture is worthy of cultivation and emphasized how gesture and especially the face should be used to express the feelings that lie behind a discourse.

The most complete analysis of gesture is that of Quintilianus in his XI Book of *Institutio oratoria*. His book is a comprehensive treatise on all aspects of rhetoric (Kendon, 2004).

For Quintilian, *gestus* refers not only to actions of the hands and arms, but also to the posture and carriage of the body, the actions of the head and face, and also to the glance. Glance, to Quintilian, is the most important for the “creation of the overall emotional effect of the discourse” (Kendon, 2004).

According to Quintilian, by gesture and other body movements, “we can demand, promise, summon, dismiss, threaten, supplicate, express aversion or fear, question or deny [...], indicate sorrow, hesitation, confession, penitence, measure, quantity, number and time [...], express approval, wonder or shame.” (Quintilian, 2006).

I follow Quintilian’s view, who designated by *gestus* not only actions of the hands and arms, but also the posture and carriage of the body, the actions of the head and face, and also the glance.

In fact, in my analysis of gesture, I took into account the facial expression as well (for instance smile, grimaces), and not only the actions of hands.

### 3 The Absence of Gestures in Absence of Speech

As we saw, both gesture and facial expression are extremely important in the delivery of the political discourse. Many handbooks dedicated to young orators have been written with the purpose of teaching them how to employ gesture and facial expression in order to obtain the desired effect.

Gesture and gaze, though, may have a persuasive impact not only in the accompaniment of speech, but also while one is silently listening to the opponent’s speech and cannot interfere verbally (for example, when it’s the opponent’s turn to speak, the other candidate may express his disapproval by making use of gestures or facial expression).

A very expressive gesture which can be made in absence of speech, and which may be employed by a candidate while his opponent is speaking, is the symbolic gesture of the “tulip hand”. According to Poggi (2007), this is an ambiguous gesture, which can be disambiguated by looking at the context, that is, at the non-manual components like facial expression. The audience may easily disambiguate the “tulip hand” gesture, which has more than one interpretation, and see that in that particular case, the meaning of the gesture is one of criticism.

### 4 Persuasive Gesture and Persuasive Gaze

In order to analyze and classify several persuasive gesture and gaze items in the political discourse, I adopted the annotation scheme built up by Poggi and Pelachaud (2008), where they investigated the impact of gesture in political discourse.

As in the study conducted by these two authors, my hypothesis was that the persuasive import of gaze, just as that of words and gestures, depends on the meanings it conveys. Therefore, to assess how persuasive the gesture or gaze exhibited in a discourse might be, one has to assess its meanings.

The annotation scheme below contains the analysis of gesture and gaze items, and is divided into 12 columns.

The columns contain, respectively:

- In column 1 there is the number of the gesture under analysis and its time in the video;
- Column 2 contains the speech parallel to the gesture under analysis;
- In column 3 there is a description of the gesture in terms of its parameters (Poggi, 2007): handshape, location, orientation and movement.
- Column 4 contains the literal meaning of the gesture. A gesture, as any communicative signal, by definition means something, that is, it corresponds to some meaning; this meaning can be codified, as in a lexicon, or created on the spot but in any case comprehensible by others, and then shared; and it may be paraphrased in words. (For examples of the signal-meaning pairs in gestures, see Poggi, 2007). This verbal paraphrase is written in col. 4;
- In column 5 there is a classification of the meaning written down in col. 4, according to the semantic taxonomy proposed by Poggi (2007), who distinguishes meanings as providing information on the World (events, their actors and objects, and the time and space relations between them), the Sender's Identity (sex, age, socio-cultural roots, personality), or the Sender's Mind (beliefs, goals and emotions);
- Since, according to Poggi (2007), any signal, beside its literal meaning can have one or more indirect meanings, that is, a level of information that can be inferred from the literal meaning, columns 6 and 7 contain, for possible indirect meanings of the gesture, the same analysis of columns 4) ,5). (Poggi & Pelachaud 2008).
- Columns 8), 9), 10), 11) and 12) contain the same analysis as for gesture, but this time for gaze. (Poggi and Vincze 2008)

Also in this case I wrote down the meanings I attributed to the Speaker's uses of gaze, on the basis of the lexicon of gaze hypothesized by Poggi & Roberto (2008). They are the meanings and persuasive functions I think the Speaker has the goal (not necessarily a conscious goal) to convey, and make no assumption as to whether they in fact are persuasive for the real audience.

The political character under analysis is Ségolène Royal, the Socialist Party's candidate for President of France in may 2007.

The one minute fragment is drawn from the political show "*A' vous de juger*", held in the studios of the French channel France 2, after the first electoral round, when Royal came second after Nicolas Sarkozy. The host, Arlette Chabot, interviews Mrs. Royal about her political vision and projects for France.

In the fragment presented below, Royal mimics Sarkozy's discourse, expressing in this way her disapproval and her rebellion against her opponent's politics. She even compares him to Père Fouettard<sup>1</sup>, the evil counterpart of Saint Nicolas.

The French legend says that during the night of 5<sup>th</sup> December, the two characters go together and visit all the children. The latter brings presents and sweets to those who behaved properly, and the former whips the bad ones.

By comparing her opponent to Père Fouettard, she implies that his program is too punitive against the unemployed people: unless they accept one of the first 2-3 job offers, the unemployment subsidy will be stopped.

Also, by making appeal to irony in order to criticize her opponent, she evokes a negative emotion in the public. Due to the fact that emotions have got a very strong motivational power, often rhetorical figures are employed in speech to induce an emotion.

The decision who to vote is also based on what the electors think about the speaker and about his opponent. Therefore, in such important moments as pre-electoral encounters, which may change people's opinions (at least as far as the "undecided" segment of population is concerned), there is a high desire of controlling the impressions of the public.

But what are the persuasive means through which politicians try to appear credible or through which we infer our interlocutor's honesty?

## 5 Persuasion : A Case of Social Influence

In Petty's and Cacioppo's view, persuasion goes through two routes : central and peripheral. The central route consists of attentive examination of the arguments which are present in the message, and occurs only when a receiver possesses both the motivation and ability to think about the message and topic. The peripheral route occurs when the receiver lacks ability and/or motivation to engage in much thought on the issue. Using the peripheral route, the listener decides whether to agree with the message based on other cues besides the strength of the arguments in the message, such as whether the source is credible or attractive, the number (but not the quality) of arguments in the message, or length of the message. (Petty, Cacioppo, 1986).

Petty's and Cacioppo's central route reminds us of Aristotle's *logos*, while the peripheral route could be identified with the persuasive strategies of *ethos* and *pathos*.

The two authors sustain that we use the central route when we have to make important decisions which will affect our future, and on the contrary we let ourselves conducted by the peripheral route when it's about less significant things. In this last circumstance, we may choose for instance a car by taking into account the less significant properties of the vehicle, as let's say colour or model, and don't pay attention to aspects as cylinder capacity or how many miles per litre you may achieve. In this case we would let emotions and aesthetics principles govern us, and not rational arguments.

But is it always the case?

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<sup>1</sup> Fouet (fr.) – whip.

While in Petty and Cacioppo's theory, one of the routes excludes the other and vice-versa, in Chaiken's view, one and the same individual may elaborate the peripheral and central cues simultaneously. For example, the reliability and credibility of the source of the message may influence the listener in the elaboration of the message, along with the rationality of his arguments.

According to Poggi (2005) as well, people is persuaded more by emotion than by logical arguments, because of the fact that emotion triggers important goals. Emotions are there in order to protect our most important goals. For example, why do we have the emotion of fear? Because it makes us run away when our life is in danger. Therefore fear protects us and monitors our goal of survival.

Due to the fact that emotions protect our most important goals, the goals triggered by emotions are important as well. That's why, in our case, if the Persuader (A) tries to influence the electors (B) to adopt her goals not only by rational arguments, but also by making appeal to emotions, there are more possibilities that the electors pursue A's goal.

Also, if the relation between A's goal and B's goal is made credible not only through arguments but also by emphasizing the reliability of the Persuader, A's goal is more likely to be pursued. Therefore, B must evaluate as positive not only the goal proposed by the Persuader, but also the Persuader himself. (Poggi 2005).

We can see now in what great extent pathos and ethos – that is the peripheral route – are important in persuasion. According to this view, the decision of adopting the Persuader's goals is taken on the basis of the two routes considered altogether, or in other words, on the basis of the three persuasive strategies described by Aristotle : *logos*, *ethos*, *pathos*.

Therefore, when judging Ségolène Royal's speech, the electors take into account the logical arguments brought by her (that is her political ideology and projects for France), her credibility and honesty and last but, as we saw not least, the emotions which she induces to the audience.

## 6 Qualitative Analysis of Gesture and Gaze in Persuasion

The fragment below comes right after the part where Ségolène Royal tells the public that she has met a man at the RMI<sup>2</sup>, who leaves home every morning, with a suitcase in his hand, because he doesn't want to let his child understand he is unemployed. He doesn't want his child to be ashamed of the fact that his father doesn't have a job.

This is the fragment under analysis:

*Donc quand je vois des misères sociales comme cela et que j'entends une espèce de discours tonitruant euh... ils n' y a qu'à, vous allez voir ce que vous allez voir, de Père Fouettard disant aux uns et aux autres vous vous allez faire ça, ou sinon vous serez sanctionnés, alors qu'il y a tellement d'abus de l'autre côté parmi les amis du pouvoir, je me dis que ça... ça n'est pas bon pour la France, ça n'est pas ma vision des choses.*

<sup>2</sup> Revenu Moyen d'Insertion (Fr.) – Guaranteed minimum income. System of social welfare provision that guarantees that all citizens or families have an income sufficient to live on, provided they meet certain conditions. The primary goal of a guaranteed minimum income is to combat poverty.

*So when I see cases of extreme poverty like this one, and when I hear a sort of thunderous discourse...for all that I care, you can do whatever you like, you just wait and see, a Father Spanker discourse, telling everybody you, you are going to do this, otherwise you'll be sanctioned, when there are so many abuses on the other side among the friends of power, I say to myself that this, this is not my vision of things.*

At line 2, she starts to mimic Sarkozy. As far as her nonverbal behaviour is concerned, we notice that she lets the public know that she is about to start mimicking her opponent by the exaggerated rotation of the head, performed while speaking about his "thunderous discourse". In fact, the literal meaning of her gesture is that she is mimicking Sarkozy, and by doing so she raises an emotion in the public. The indirect meaning of her gesture is to make fun of the opponent, and in the same time, she is showing the public what kind of person Sarkozy is.

By making fun of her opponent, she expresses a negative evaluation about him, inducing the public to feel the same. We can interpret her dramatisation as a parody, a way to make fun of Sarkozy's proposal. In this way she conveys a negative evaluation of her opponent through a pathos strategy.

In fact, if the persuader (A) when trying to convince the persuadee (B), makes appeal to emotions and not only to logical arguments, there are more possibilities that B pursues A's goal (GA), because emotions are a very important motivating device. This way Royal pursues a pathos strategy by raising an emotion in the public. (see Poggi 2005).

We understand she is enumerating the things Sarkozy said, because of her intonation, typically employed in enumeration. In fact, she says : "*for all that I care, you can do whatever you like, you just wait and see*", and rapidly gazes in an accusatory way at both interlocutors (Arlette Chabot and Gilles LeClerc), addressing both of them. She employs a discontent facial expression and an accusing gaze while talking about Sarkozy, thus implying that she totally disagrees with his manner of treating the unemployed. The tone of her voice rapidly changes, because now she is imitating Sarkozy directly addressing to the unemployed people: "*you, you are going to do this, otherwise you'll be sanctioned*". While saying this last sentence, she looks down, as if looking at the unemployed, though performing a "deictic in absence" gaze (that is, a gaze that points to someone who is absent) and her right shoulder raises at the same time. We can't see her right hand, but from the movement of her shoulder we understand she did the performative gesture of order, mimicking this way Sarkozy giving orders to the unemployed. During all her mimicking, she keeps her head and chin raised, imitating Sarkozy's superiority posture.

In line 5, while saying: "*when there are so many abuses on the other side among the friends of power*", she makes a grimace of disgust (see Picture 1). The literal meaning of her facial expression is that she is disgusted by Sarkozy's power abuses, and in this case there is an indirect meaning as well, she is trying to transmit to the public that they should be disgusted too. While saying "*so many abuses among the friends of power*", she frowns, squeezes eyes and her right eye winks. This is a complicity look, meaning that Sarkozy and the powerful people who do the abuses are his friends, while as an indirect meanings she aims to transmit that people can trust her, that she is on their side.



In line 6, while stating *"I say to myself that this.."*, she shakes her head in sign of denial. The direct meaning of her gesture is one of disagreement with Sarkozy's politics, while at an indirect level aiming to transmit that this is not good for France.

In fact, in line 7, she says it verbally as well: *"this is not good for France, this is not my vision of things"*. While saying this last sentences, she smiles, the literal meaning of her facial expression being that she is happy with her vision of France, which is totally opposite to that of Sarkozy. She thus transmits a positive emotion to the public, and the indirect meaning of this is that she wants to induce courage and hope to people. She has her eyebrows raised and an oblique gaze, looking towards the interlocutor. The literal meaning of her oblique gaze is demanding for approval. She turns her head away, but still keeping eyes on her interlocutor (in this case, Arlette Chabot) in order to see her facial expression and so to understand if she agrees with her. (see Picture 2). The meaning type of her gaze item is a performative. There is also an indirect meaning: even if she is in search of approval from her interlocutor, she is sure of the correctness of her statements. In fact, it seems that she is stating something, and then obliquely looks at her interlocutor, as if asking : *"Isn't it?"*. She doesn't ask the question verbally, but she doesn't has to, her gaze is very expressive by itself.

## 7 Conclusions

What I presented above only gives some examples of persuasive gaze and gesture used in political discourse.

It's important to specify that while the gestures' meaning is not universal, but culture-specific, the meaning of gaze might be universal. As Poggi emphasizes, only the norms of use of the gaze are certainly different, according to the country from which the Sender of the signal comes from, but as far as the meanings of a specific gaze are concerned, they might be the same everywhere.

Subsequent research will imply analyzing more items of gesture and gaze extracted from political debates and assessing if the meaning of these items are actually persuasive for the audience.

n.	Speech	Gesture Description	Literal. M	Type	Indirect M.	Type	Gaze	Literal. M	Type	Indirect M.	Type
1 51.17	<i>Donc quand je vois des mi-sères sociales comme cela et que j'entends</i> So when I see cases of extreme poverty like this one, and when I hear	Open hands on the table. Beat of hands on the table	I emphasise it.	ISM Important PERS Logos			Looks rapidly to both Int.	I address both of you  I'm indignant	ISM Performative  ISM Emotion	Pay attention, it's important  I want you to be indignant	ISM Importance  PERS Pathos
2 51.19	<i>une espèce de discours tonitruant</i> a sort of thunderous discourse	Rotation of the head Angry and disgusted grimace	I am mimicking Sarkozy	ISM Emotion	I am ridiculing Sarkozy →  I show you what kind of person he is  I am less punitive than Sarkozy	ISM Emotion PATHOS  ISM Negative evaluation of the opponent LOGOS  ISI Ethos benevolence	She looks straight at Int.  Looks down at Int.	I accuse Sarkozy  I feel contempt towards Sarkozy	ISM Perf Logos  ISM Emotion	I ask you to feel the same I do.	ISM PERS Pathos
3 51.23	<i>euh ils n'y a qu'à vous allez voir ce que vous allez voir, de Père Fouettard disant aux uns et aux autres</i> for all that I care, you can do what you like, you wait and see, of Père Fouettard, telling everybody	Short, rapid movements of the head by looking to both Int.  Beat of the head	I am strict.	IW	I am miming Sarkozy. I want you to make fun of him.  What I say is important	ISM Emotion PERS Pathos  ISM Pathos	She rapidly looks at both Int and then keeps gaze fixed on Int. 1.	I address both of you.	Important PERS Logos		



<p><b>4</b> <b>51.29</b></p>	<p><i>vous vous allez faire ça, ou sinon vous serez sanctionnés</i>  <i>you, you are going to do this, otherwise you'll be sanctioned</i></p>	<p>Raised head and chin  Left shoulder raises, she raises the left hand to mime Sarkozy who gives an order.</p>	<p>Feel indignant of Sarkozy's judgement.  I give you an order</p>	<p>ISM Emotion  ISM Performative</p>	<p>I mime the way of speaking of Sarkozy.  I make fun of him.</p>	<p>PERS Pathos  ISM Negative evaluation of the opponent Logos</p>	<p>Looks down, looking at the people Sarkozy gives orders to.  Looks to both Int.</p>	<p>I am miming Sarkozy looking at the people to whom he is giving orders.  I address to both Int.  I am ridiculing Sarkozy.</p>	<p>IW Deixis in absence  ISM Meta discursive</p>	<p>I want to make fun of him.</p>	<p>PERS PATHOS</p>
<p><b>5</b> <b>51.32</b></p>	<p><i>alors qu'il y a tellement d'abus de l'autre côté parmi les amis du pouvoir</i>  <i>when there are so many abuses on the other side among the friends of power</i></p>	<p>Grimace, the angles of the mouth are lowered.</p>	<p>I am disgusted (by the power abuses of Sarkozy and his men.)</p>	<p>ISM Emotion</p>	<p>Be disgusted as well!</p>	<p>ISM PERS Pathos</p>	<p>Frowns brows, Squeezes eyes. Right eye winks.  Looks down while saying "on the other side, among the friends of power"</p>	<p>Complicity look  Friends in illicit things  She looks at the opponent's party.</p>	<p>ISM PERS Pathos  IW Deixis in absence</p>	<p>Sarkozy favours his friends.</p>	<p>IW Negative evaluation of the opponent</p>
<p><b>6</b> <b>51.36</b></p>	<p><i>je me dis que ça...</i> <i>I say to myself that this...</i></p>	<p>Head down Shakes the head in sign of denial. Blank expression of the face.</p>	<p>I don't agree (with Sarkozy's politics.)</p>	<p>ISM Evaluation</p>	<p>This is not good for France.</p>	<p>ISM PERS Logos</p>	<p>Raised brows. She looks down at Int. Eyes wide open, she looks straight into the Int.'s eyes.</p>	<p>Emphasis on this part.  Demanding for approval.</p>	<p>ISM Important PERS Logos  ISM Performative</p>	<p>I am sure of this</p>	<p>ISM Certainty Ethos Competence</p>
<p><b>7</b> <b>51.37</b></p>	<p><i>ça n'est pas bon pour la France, ça n'est pas ma vision des choses. this is not good for France. this is not my vision of things.</i></p>	<p>Smiles.</p>	<p>I am happy with my view of France</p>	<p>ISM Emotion</p>	<p>I want to induce you courage, hope.</p>	<p>ISM PERS Pathos</p>	<p>Raised eyebrows Looks obliquely to her interlocutor.</p>	<p>I ask you for your approval</p>	<p>ISM Performative</p>	<p>I am sure of this</p>	<p>ISM Certainty Ethos Competence</p>

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