

Speakers also use gesture to mark the focus of verbal elements. Seyfeddinipur (2004) describes a gesture sequence with discourse structuring usage observed in Persian speakers marking the topic comment structure of the co-occurring verbal utterance (see Kendon 1995; 2004a: 233–6 for Italian). The sequence is a combination of two hand shapes marking the topic–comment structure of the spoken part of the utterance. In the example, first the speaker has the right hand closed to a fist with the tip of the index finger and the tip of the thumb touching each other and forming an oval shape. Then the speaker opens the gesture; the index finger and thumb get extended while the other fingers remain curled, the so-called Pistolhand (as a consultant called the gesture). The speaker performs this gesture sequence—Ring–Pistolhand—in synchrony with the topic–comment structure of his unfolding verbal utterance. The Ring gesture is synchronized with the topic part of the verbal utterance and the Pistolhand with the comment part of the utterance, i.e. the verb complex (see Fig. 6.2).

Figure 6.2.



Example of a gesture combination with discourse structuring or parsing function. Straight lines between gesture names mark duration of the gestural configuration; hold means that the hand is held still.

p. 152 Little is known about the kinds of repertoires and the different uses and pragmatic effects these gestures can have, and how the cultural environment shapes such repertoires.

6.2.3 Interactional organization

Gesture and speech also interact in the organization of the conversation itself. Studies in the tradition of Conversation Analysis have shown how speakers temporally organize their gestures to regulate the interaction.

In a conversation, speakers coordinate their activities in a systematic way. If speakers are interrupted while gesturing, they can freeze their gesture and hold the hand in the air, signalling that they want the floor back (Schegloff 1984; Goodwin 1986). Addressees can yield the floor by lifting the hand, and they can display that they are giving up this intent by dropping the hand again. And listeners can gesture without interrupting the speaker but still indicating how they are taking what the other is saying. It is clear already on this coarse-grained level of observation that gesture is used to organize turn-taking.

Gestures can foreshadow what will be said or done next, which enables addressees to foresee points in time when the turn of the speaker may end and they can take over, so that a gapless switch of speakers is possible (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974; Schegloff 1980; 1984; Streeck 1995; 2009a; 2009b; Mondada 2007). So, for example, when a speaker begins a turn with a counting gesture (e.g. thumb is extended while the other fingers are curled and palm is up), the addressee can infer that the speaker will list something in their upcoming talk. Also, when a speaker encounter problems in finding a word, gesture can play a role in coordinating the conversation during the search (Fornel 1991; Goodwin and Goodwin 1986; Hayashi 2003; Schlegel 1998).