

Spatial and dynamic exaggeration as expressive markers in gestural-based choreographic practices.

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When gestural movement material is employed within modern dance choreography, it often takes the form of exaggerated enactment – that is, spatial and dynamic features of everyday gestures are exaggerated. This may in part be an artefact of the need to make the movement effectively communicative (Tujillo et al, 2018) within the visibility constraints of a theatre context, however, the choices made often coincide with the characteristics of non-verbal expressives with exaggerated enactment in dance being used to convey emotions and attitudes (Espinova 2019).

This explorative study examines two examples of gesture-based dance theatre built around politically charged interactions: *The Green Table* (Kurt Jooss, 1932) and *The Statement* (Crystal Pite, 2016). Choreographed 84 years apart the former re-presents diplomatic negotiations, the latter corporate machinations – both have visual and conceptual parallels with the post-colonial sculpture of Yinka Shonibare, and the propaganda drenched theatrics of Vladimir Putin's progression towards war in Ukraine (figure 1).



Figure 1: (clockwise from top left) American Ballet Theatre in *The Green Table* © Marty Sohl; Putin meets world leaders © Sputnik; Nederlands Dans Theatre performing *The Statement* ©NDT; *Scramble for Africa* by Yinka Shonibare, 2003

The study considers Esipova's proposal that:

"[there are] non-word means of conveying emotions and attitudes:

–intonational: higher intensity, "choppy" meter, higher/lower pitch

–hand gestures: beat gestures (+ "choppy" meter), sometimes with an iconic component

–facial expressions: smiling, frowning, eye-rolling, the surprised facial expression (O O)" (2019:8).

In particular I unpack ways in which dance employs strategies that are analogous to intonational features of speech - embodied means of communicating emotional intensity. Speech itself has been shown to employ magnitude symbolism, a form of iconicity which includes extending vowel sounds e.g. "loooooong" (Dingemanse, 2015). Similar, but more extensive strategies are found in the prosodic role of non-manuals in sign languages (Pfau & Quer, 2010) and in sign language poetry, which uses modifications of features such as hand shape, use of space and flow for meaningful effect (Blondel & Miller, 2001). In embodied song practices "High intensity is often embodied as shaking motions within articulators, fast and/or large motion and the involvement of more of the body, including the face" (Fisher, 2021:12) in combination with sign language interpretations of lyrics.

The analysis in this study employs a modified version of the MultiModal MultiDimensional (M3D) ELAN coding scheme, which includes tiers for form, role and prosody (Rohrer et al., 2021). Analysis of *The Green Table* is also informed by reference to the Labanotation score (Guest, 2013). Three recurring gestures which appear in both works were selected for analysis. Each also has a lexicalised form in ASL, which serves as a reference, allowing for comparisons to be made in terms of positions and pathways in space, shape of pathway contours (e.g. smoother or more angular traces in space); dynamic contrasts – such as faster acceleration and deceleration (including shaking), and marked 'holds' (pauses).

The gestures selected are (in their ASL lexical form (Handspeak.com)):

- Two hands, palm-up at chest height, shoulder width apart, with lateral shaking
– ASL gloss: "'WHAT?' Used interrogatively to ask for information"
- Pointing gesture with the finger-tip of one hand in contact with the palm of the other
– ASL gloss: "'THIS' Used to identify a specific person or thing close at hand or being indicated or experienced; referring to a specific thing or situation just mentioned."
- Flat palms, with downward orientation, slowly move downwards a little, twice
– ASL gloss: "'CALM' To become quiet or calm, especially after a state of agitation."

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Dance works:

Jooss, K. *The Green Table*. 1932 (Video: unknown)

Pite, C. *The Statement*. 2016. (Writer: Jonathan Young; Video: Nederlands Dans Theatre 1. Film director: Tommy Pascal)

ASL signs:

WHAT: <https://www.handspeak.com/word/search/index.php?id=2383>

THIS: <https://www.handspeak.com/word/search/index.php?id=2786>

CALM: <https://www.handspeak.com/word/search/index.php?id=301>