

Introduction

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The Nonverbal Shift in Early Modern English Conversation

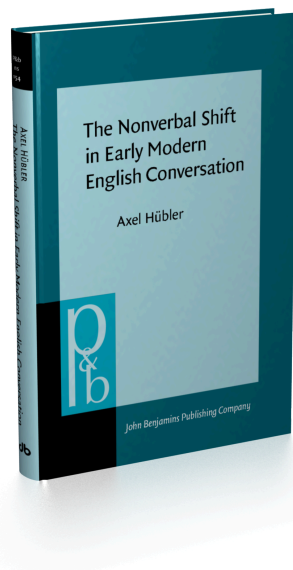
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Introduction

As a pan-European movement we find during the 16th and 17th centuries an acute concern for all aspects of conversation. It is embedded into what Elias (1939/1982) calls the civilizing process. Elias elaborates in detail how, in the course of time – more specifically during the period extending from the Middle Ages to the early Modern Times –

the regulation of the whole instinctual and affective life by steady self-control becomes more and more stable, more even and more all-embracing. (Elias vol. II, 1982: 230)

An important factor is the development of monopolies of power with their linkage to institutions such as the royal courts, and their exertion in certain restricted occasions such as military conflicts and criminal prosecutions. These developments open up public spaces that are free of violence and, consequently, allow for chains of action of a wider scope and for more complex structures of interdependence than previously possible.

Here the individual is largely protected from sudden attack, the irruption of physical violence into his life. But at the same time he is himself forced to suppress in himself any passionate impulse urging him to attack another physically. [...] The closer the web of interdependence becomes in which the individual is enmeshed with the advancing division of functions, the larger the social spaces over which this network extends and which become integrated into functional or institutional units – the more threatened is the social existence of the individual who gives way to spontaneous impulses and emotions, the greater is the social advantage of those able to moderate their affects, and the more strongly is each individual constrained from an early age to take account of the effects of his own or other people's actions on a whole series of links in the social chain. The moderation of spontaneous emotions, the tempering of affects, the extension of mental space beyond the moment into the past and future, the habit of connecting events in terms of chains of cause and effect – all these are different aspects of the same transformation of conduct which necessarily takes place with the monopolization of physical violence, and the lengthening of the chains of social action and interdependence. It is a “civilizing” change of behaviour. (Elias vol. II, 1982: 236)

The individual's fluctuation between extreme feelings is replaced by a tendency toward temperance; attenuation (instead of uninhibited expression) is now the appropriate policy of behavior.

At the center stage of this investigation is the communicative art of Early Modern English conversation. As conversation is a social practice, it is shaped by the wider socio-cultural norms of the speech community in which it takes place and must thus also be assumed to reflect ongoing civilizing processes in this community. More specifically, what is of interest here is whether the general trend toward attenuation rather than open and unrestrained expression also caused shifts in conversational behavior such that its more directly physical/bodily aspects – expressed, for instance, in the spontaneous gesturing that normally accompanies speech – were subdued in favor of less directly physical modes of expression.

The argumentative thrust of the subsequent chapters is directed toward deducing and warranting for 16th and 17th century England the hypothesis of a change in the modes of conversational behavior, restricted to the courtly society of the day and employed by its members as a distinguishing feature. In particular, the trimodal nature of conversation, represented by the verbal, the vocal/prosodic, and the kinesic mode, is argued to have changed with respect to the relative weight of the two nonverbal modes, the restrictive control of kinesic (gestural) means of expression drifting toward an increased use of vocal (prosodic) means.

The assumption of an underlying compensatory mechanism as the driving force behind this shift from gestural to vocal behavior takes McNeill's (1992) theory of the integral role of gestures in thinking-for-speaking as its point of departure (see chapter 2). The substitutability of gestural by prosodic behavior is claimed to rest on an isomorphism holding between the two modes. This view is further supported by Ivry/Robertson's (1989) neurocognitive frequency theory as well as by insights from the theory of task dynamics and relevant experimental findings in neuro-psychology (see chapter 5).

Two kinds of historical documents are presented as bearing direct evidence of the hypothesized shift from gestural to voice behavior: the most influential courtesy books of the time (see chapters 1 and 6) and a range of contemporary documents (letters, diaries and chronicles), which contain individual observations and evaluations of gestural behavior (see chapters 3 and 6).

Developments in the English lexicon provide rich indirect evidence. First, lexical means arise in substantial amounts during the 16th and 17th century that are shown to be capable of serving as partial substitutes for gestures (see chapter 4). Second, there is, around the same time, a significant increase in neologisms, which reflects the increased social appreciation of the vocal mode of conversational behavior (see chapter 7).

The investigation concludes with an in-depth analysis of two exemplary narratives from present-day conversational data (see chapter 8) and an outline of how the assumed shift in the nonverbal modes of conversational behavior can be integrated into current theories of language change (see chapter 9).