

Artículo de investigación

**Nonverbal means of communication in modern literature:  
J. M. Coetzee's novel "the master of Petersburg"**

Невербальные средства общения в современной литературе:  
роман Дж. М. Кутзее "Осень в Петербурге"

Medios no verbales de comunicación en la literatura moderna:  
novela de J. M. Coetzee "El maestro de Petersburgo"

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**Abstract**

The article is devoted to the study of gestures as semiotic units of communication that perform certain functions, obeying certain laws. The task was to determine the main ways of encoding and decoding nonverbal behavior in a literary text. The study was conducted on the material of the prose of J. M. Coetzee, the famous writer and Nobel Laureate. The subject of the study is the verbal representation of the characters' nonverbal behavior in his novel "*The Master of Petersburg*". The aim of our study is to identify and analyze gestures in J. M. Coetzee's work that act as markers of the characters' emotional state, correlate with their psychological portraits, convey their feelings, experiences, and reveal their personal qualities.

**Keywords:** Coetzee, geste, kinema, Master of Petersburg, nonverbal communication.

**Аннотация**

Статья посвящена изучению жестов как семиотических единиц общения, выполняющих определенные функции и подчиняющиеся определенным закономерностям. Задача состояла в том, чтобы определить основные способы кодирования и расшифровки невербального поведения в художественном тексте. Исследование проводилось на материале прозы Дж. М. Кутзее, известного писателя и нобелевского лауреата. Предметом исследования стала корреляция между вербальным и невербальным поведением персонажей в романе писателя «Осень в Петербурге». Цель исследования - выявление и анализ жестов в произведении Дж. М. Кутзее, которые служат маркерами эмоционального состояния персонажей, соотносятся с их психологическими портретами, передают их чувства, переживания и раскрывают их личные качества.

**Ключевые слова:** Кутзее, жест, кинема, Осень в Петербурге, невербальная коммуникация.

## Resumen

El artículo está dedicado al estudio de los gestos como unidades semióticas de comunicación que realizan ciertas funciones, obedeciendo ciertas leyes. La tarea consistía en determinar las principales formas de codificar y decodificar el comportamiento no verbal en un texto literario. El estudio se realizó sobre el material de la prosa de J. M. Coetzee, el famoso escritor y Premio Nobel. El tema del estudio es la representación verbal del comportamiento no verbal de los personajes en su novela "El maestro de Petersburgo". El objetivo de nuestro estudio es identificar y analizar gestos en el trabajo de J. M. Coetzee que actúan como marcadores del estado emocional de los personajes, se correlacionan con sus retratos psicológicos, transmiten sus sentimientos, experiencias y revelan sus cualidades personales.

**Palabras clave:** Coetzee, geste, kinema, maestro de Petersburgo, comunicación no verbal.

## Introduction

Gestures are nonverbal means of communication. R. Birdwhistell, B. Corte, J. Fontany, J. Greimas, P. Ekman, A. Kendon, R. A. Marmot, F. Puyatos studies have shown a significant part of the information is transmitted precisely through gestures. It explains the scientists' growing interest to this problem nowadays. Modern gesture typologies are based on various parameters. Firstly, the distinction between two groups of gestures depends on their connection with words: whether they are interdependent, or whether gestures perform an auxiliary function and their meaning complement the words meaning. The latter is especially significant when transmitting information over a long distance or verbal communication is impossible, for example, under water. The degree of correlation between the meaning of the word and the gesture is also important, i.e. how the word meaning corresponds to the meaning of the concomitant gestures. It can be complete (the meanings of the gesture and the words coincide) or contradictory (the meanings of the gesture and the words do not match or they are even completely opposite). Secondly, the meaning of the gesture can be pre-codified, common to any social group or spontaneous, existing only in a certain context, unique and individual. Thirdly, there are motivated and occasional gestures. Fourthly, the semantics of gestures differ. Since their meaning can correlate with different aspects of human life (emotional, mental, volitional, axiological, etc.), this classification is quite flexible and it may consist of various groups.

The study of gestures is carried out on the basis of oral and written speech. In the latter case, it can be texts of various styles and genres. Among them, a significant place is occupied by works of fiction. The relevance of studying the features of verbal representations of nonverbal semiotics units on the material of literary texts is due to the fact that today the research center has shifted from the description of the gesture as a separate

unit of nonverbal communication to the description and interpretation of communication as a holistic system, which includes both verbal and nonverbal behavior. Our research is aimed at further studying gesture as an important element of nonverbal semiotics in its relation to speech and how it functions in a narrative that describes the communicative situation. The analysis focuses on a systematic study of the relationship between linguistic and paralinguistic speech factors and their semantic and pragmatic potential, as well as on the specificities of verbal display of meanings transmitted by a nonverbal way.

## Literature review

Currently, representatives of various sciences are exploring how nonverbal means contribute to the creation of a holistic artistic image, participate in characterizing characters, and help the reader to penetrate deeper into the characters' inner world, to feel their mood and emotional state. There are more and more psycholinguistic works that relate to various aspects of this problem. R. A. Marmot turns to the analysis of nonverbal semiotic signs in the work devoted to G. de Maupassant's works (Marmot, 1986). F. Puyatos is interested in the paralinguistic aspect of the novels by M. de Cervantes, E. Zola, J. Joyce and other writers (Puyatos, 1997). A. J. Greimas and J. Fontany explore the world of affects, passion and related cultural gestures based on the works by M. Proust, L. Aragon. The scientists point out that gesticulation is one of the most important means of conveying emotional experiences of literary characters (Greimas, Fontany, 1991). In addition, it should be kept in mind that by gestures due to the political, cultural, social situation of the interlocutors, the reader is able to understand the system of values and worldview that form the basis of the social structure in an adequate way.

Ch. Darwin is considered a pioneer in the study of nonverbal communication. In his work "*The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*" (1872) the foundations of a scientific approach to the study of emotions and ways of their bodily representation were laid (Darwin, 2012). In 1952, the American anthropologist R. Birdwhistell introduced the concept of "kinesics" and developed a grammar of nonverbal behavior by analogy with linguistics (Birdwhistell, 1970). Currently, body movements, facial expressions and gestures are being studied by representatives of such areas of nonverbal semiotics as auscultation, haptics, olfaction, proxemics, phonemics, phonation, kinesics (Kreidlin, 2002)]. Among these disciplines, we are primarily interested in kinesics, which studies body movements (facial expressions and gestures) used in communication process.

### Materials and methods

Selecting the main methods of analysis, we turned to nonverbal semiotics based on the fact that the gesture system is most effectively considered as one of the varieties of sign systems. It will allow to consider gestures as semiotic units of communication that perform certain functions, follow certain laws, and determine ways of encoding and decoding nonverbal behavior in a text.

Considering gestures in terms of pragmatics will provide an opportunity to study the relationship between the gesture and the one who uses it, as well as to determine the totality of conditions in which a particular gesture functions, to identify the communication success rate. This way of studying the text shows the relationship between the gesture and the agent, it correlates with the agent's chronotope and defines its connection with reality.

A unified definition of the concept of "gesture" still does not exist. In a broad sense, a gesture is understood as "an action or an act that has not only a practical orientation, but a relevance to a certain meaning. It is always a sign and a symbol, therefore every movement is a gesture, its meaning is the author's intention" (Lotman, 1975).

Unlike most specialists in nonverbal semiotics, literary scholars deal with written sources. It means that they do not study gestures as such, but they study their verbal representations, how gestures function in fiction. The methodological basis of this article is works by F. Poyatos

(1997), B. Korte (1997), and others who developed the classification of nonverbal behavior. Taking into account the traditional typologies of nonverbal behavior (P. Ekman (1972), A. Kendon (2004), etc.), we relied more on the works of scientists who turned to the study of the transmission and perception of gestures in literary narrative. Among the various typologies of gestures that exist nowadays, we turned to the typology offered by M. Zhornikova (2004). The researcher differentiates gestures according to the part of the body they correspond to. According to the strength of emotions, we distinguish weak, moderate and exaggerated gestures. By the degree of their correspondence to the internal state, we distinguish gestures that convey emotions in an adequate way and simulated, contradictory ones, which hide the character's internal state. Each character has a unique set of gestures. All of them form a gesture dictionary of a fiction work. According to B. Korte, "the body language of literary characters is a subsystem within the entire iconic repertoire of the text" (Korte, 1997).

### Results and discussion

The subject of the study was the verbal representation of the nonverbal behavior of the characters in "*The Master of Petersburg*" by John M. Coetzee.

The aim of our study is to identify and analyze those gestures in the novel that act as markers of the character's emotional state, correlate with his psychological portrait, convey his feelings, experience, and reveal his personality. The work by the famous South African writer, Nobel Prize Laureate in Literature (2003), J. M. Coetzee, provides the reader with rich material for observation in this regard. Its plot is based on a fictional episode from F.M. Dostoevsky's life, when the news of Pavel Isaev's death, his stepson, forces him to come to St. Petersburg, where all the subsequent events of the novel take place (Dostoevsky's meeting with the terrorist Nechaev and his minions, one of which was Pavel, his romance with Pavel's landlady, his complicated relationships with her daughter Matryona, etc.). Moreover, J. M. Coetzee not only managed to create a completely true-to-life image of a Russian writer, but he also quite accurately conveyed the high degree of emotional tension typical of "Demons" or "Crime and Punishment" narrative.

In "*The Master of Petersburg*" all the main types of body gestures present – manual, foot, head, eye and some others. The high frequency of eye

gestures is logical, because, firstly, the communication contact between the characters is most often established in the novel by means of eyes (regulators, according to P. Ekman). Besides, the eyes are considered the organ that is best suited to express the person's emotions and/or the state of mind. That is why communication between characters can occur in a nonverbal way. So, while visiting his stepson's grave, Dostoevsky stares at Matryona the way that scares her, although he says nothing: "Something flashes from his eyes toward her; she turns away in confusion and presses against her mother." (Coetzee, 1995) However, due to the use of improperly direct speech, the reader can "hear" the hero's inner monologue at the moment of Dostoevsky's eye contact with the child, when it becomes clear that the girl interpreted the message contained in his gaze correctly: "Back to the nest! A terrible malice streams out of him toward the living, and most of all toward living children." (Ibid.) This anger makes Matryona feel confused, and the feeling of fear that the girl experiences is expressed in a body gesture, while she is snuggling up to her mother, seeking protection and safety.

The character's gaze can express a variety of feelings: doubt, amazement, joy, love, fear, etc. The emotion is often called by a narrator or character directly (for example, "looks with amazement," "looks calmly and firmly," "looks stupidly, unapproachable", looks "enjoying surprise" or "the eyes sparkle" in anger, etc.).

In the novel, gestures of arms and legs have an increased semantic meaning, forming a complicated system of interdependent *kinemas* (Birdwistel, 1970) – the minimum units of sign language that are the primary elements of body movements endowed with a certain meaning and performing an expressive and/or communicative function. First of all, these are gestures expressing a number of negative emotions – anger, disgust, and so on. For example, the death of Dostoevsky's adopted son causes him to feel a fierce anger directed against other children. It is expressed in a symbolic gesture, which has an intertextual reference to the mythological motif of the Massacre of the Innocents. This gesture, analyzed in detail in the scientific literature on the material of various myths, primarily the biblical story about the birth of Moses and the New Testament story about Jesus Christ, was transformed in the work by Dostoevsky into a dilemma about the child's tear. Its source came from Ivan Karamazov's words who, in a conversation with Alyosha, claims that all the harmony of the world "is not worth the tears of

that one tortured child" (Dostoyvsky, 2008). Polemicizing with the character of a Russian writer, Coetzee puts his Dostoevsky in the place of Tsar Herod. The grief caused by his son's death makes the character of the novel to feel anger against other children.

This gesture is repeated a few times in the novel. For the first time, it is seen during Dostoevsky's visit to his stepson's grave in the form of hidden aggression directed against an imaginary baby: "A terrible malice streams out of him toward the living, and most of all toward living children. If there were a newborn babe here at this moment, he would pluck it from its mother's arms and dash it against a rock. Herod, he thinks: now I understand Herod! Let breeding come to an end!" (Coetzee, 1995) Similar intentions are attributed to Pavel, who could have reacted to the birth of Dostoevsky's son from the landlady Anna Sergeyevna. Pavel's imaginary gesture is repeated almost literally: "Pavel would take a brother by his foot and dash his brains out against the wall. To Pavel no saviour but a pretender, a usurper, a sly little devil clothed in chubby baby-flesh. And who could swear he was wrong?" (Ibid.) The famous mythologist J. Campbell points to the existence of a connection between the plot of "the Massacre of the Innocents" and the birth of a savior. As we see, in the novel this myth is presented in an inverted form: the newborn baby is presented as a possible impostor, and Paul, like Dostoevsky, takes the position of Tsar Herod, although their intentions are presumably opposite.

A different degree of intensity of the same feeling gives rise to a whole series of *allokinemas* (according to R. Birdwistle) – various variants of the main kinema (in this case it is a gesture of a blow).

A variation of this gesture is a "lash" which is a weaker form of anger expression directed at landlady's daughter Matryona: "There is a rush of feeling in him, contradictory, like two waves slapping against each other: an urge to protect her, an urge to lash out at her because she is alive". (Ibid.) The character's desire is ambivalent, he simultaneously experiences opposite feelings, but only anger receives a gesture of expression as the most adequate for him.

In other cases, when Dostoevsky wants to hit another person, this gesture has no mythological background, performing a characterological function: the character appears to the reader as a quick-tempered person able to control his anger.

This is manifested in Anna Sergeyevna's relation to him: "For the second time this day he has an urge to hit her. And it is clear that she senses his anger: in fact, she pokes out her chin as if daring him to strike." (Ibid.) Here, for the first time in the text of the novel, we meet a return gesture: the landlady, despite the fact that she is physically weaker than Dostoevsky, with her gesture – her head held high and her chin extended towards the supposed blow – demonstrates determination and independence. A continuation of this dialogue of gestures is the character's reflection on his behavior and emotional state, conveyed in a third-person narrative using an improperly direct speech: "Why is he so irascible? What is coming over him? Is he turning into one of those old men with no control over their temper?" (Ibid.) In this way, a correlation is made between the gesture expressing the emotion and the word denoting it. The blow gesture is the character's mental reaction to his accusation of betraying one of the women in Nechaev's group: "If he had a stick he would hit her." (Ibid.) Why, in order to hit the Finnish girl, you need to have some object in your hand, although in other cases this is not required, it becomes clear from the analysis of the emotions that the character experiences during his communication with Nechaev and his followers. Most often, this is an aversion, due to which Dostoevsky tries to avoid possible body contact with them. If this does not succeed, then this kind of body interaction of the characters is described as something ugly, shameful and dirty, and the character himself notes it, wondering about the reasons for this behavior: "But why his fastidiousness about touching her?" (Ibid.) The terrorist Sergey Nechaev himself appears in Dostoevsky's memoirs in a rather unsightly appearance. Dostoevsky conveys Nechaev's internal state through the character's mimic reaction to an imaginary gesture: "The look on his (Nechaev. – Authors) face that of a boy surprised at stool with his trousers around his knees, vulnerable but defiant." (Ibid.)

Dostoevsky also feels a revulsion to Ivanov who spies on him. While at Nechaev's, the character tries to recall the image of his son, but Ivanov's hands suddenly appear in his mind instead. Unlike Pavel's blurred face, they are clearly visible and comparing them with worms leaves no doubt about the emotions experienced by Dostoevsky: "He makes an effort to revive the vision of Pavel and his bride, but of all people it is Ivanov who comes instead, or at least Ivanov's hands: pale, plump fingers emerging like grubs from green woollen mittens." (Ibid.) It should be noted that the real Ivanov was a student and at the

same time he was a member of Nechaev's secret organization "People's Reprisal Society" (Obshchestvo narodnoy raspravy). In Coetzee's novel, he is a beggarly drunkard who mourns his children and wife's death. Perhaps, he is more reminiscent of F. M. Dostoevsky's Marmeladov, and not of Ivan Shatov, as one might expect. However, both authors of "*The Master of Petersburg*" and "Demons" adhere to a historical fact in that part of the plot where Ivanov (his name is Shatov in "Demons") is killed on the order of Nechaev, who claimed in "The Catechism of a Revolutionary" that "the revolutionary is a doomed man. Merciless for the state and for the entire class-educated society in general, he should not expect any mercy for himself" (Nechaev, 1989), and consistently pursuing his convictions in life.

By isolating one part of the character's body (Ivanov's fingers) and describing it as something independent, living its own life, Coetzee follows the tradition laid down by Nicolai Gogol in his novel "The Nose" and continued by Stefan Zweig in the novel "Twenty-Four Hours in the Life of a Woman". In Zweig's work, a woman watches at the hands of roulette players, perceiving them as a separate being, having its own character, habits and, unlike an impenetrable mask of a secular person, openly exposing the passions and emotions that people usually hide from the others. But if in Zweig's work this technique is used to characterize the heroine, then Coetzee in this way demonstrates the nature of the ugly, mutilated externally and internally world of Ivanov, the Finnish girl and Nechaev. In this sense, it is indicative that the terrorist appears before Dostoevsky in a travesty look – dressed in a woman's gown. His ridiculous appearance evokes ambivalent feelings in the protagonist, and Nechaev's attempt to "seduce" Dostoevsky turns out to be a parody of a chess game in which the character's legs are used like chess pieces. They represent the bodily lower stratum, in terminology used M. Bakhtin's in "*Rabelais and Folk Culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*" which distinguishes between *official* and *folk cultures*. Actually, the dialogue between the characters is forced almost completely into paraverbal area, where the place of verbal remarks taken by gestures, accompanied by Dostoevsky's mental reflection: "He takes one of the chairs; she sits down opposite him. The table is narrow. *Her foot touches his; he shifts his foot.* (Hereinafter, italics highlight the movements of the feet of the characters. - Authors).



Though she has her back to the window, he now understands why she is so heavily powdered. Her skin is pitted with smallpox scars. What a shame, he thinks: not a beauty, but a handsome creature all the same.

*Her foot touches his again, rests against it, instep to instep.*

A disturbing excitement creeps over him. Like chess, he thinks: two players across a small table making their deliberate moves. Is it the deliberateness that excites him – *the opposite foot lifted like a pawn and placed against his?* And the third person, the watcher who does not see, the dupe, looking in the wrong place: does she play her part too? <...>

*The foot still rests against his, but now there is something inert about its pressure, inert and lumpish and even threatening. No longer a foot but a boot.* <...> She, or he, is speaking. Nechaev himself – no doubt about that”. (Coetzee, 1995) During the dialogue with Nechaev, Dostoevsky’s attention moves down from the ugly, covered with smallpox face to character’s legs, and then focuses on the leg, which is first compared with a pawn, after that a living part of the body (foot) is replaced by the boot which was “revived” and separated from its owner. This metonymic trick, consisting in narrowing the character’s image to the details of his costume, serves as a means of distancing the protagonist from the alleged killer of his son. The scene in which Dostoevsky wraps Nechaev in his arms is especially strange and illogical: “He takes a step forward and with what seems to him the strength of a giant folds Nechaev to his breast. Embracing the boy, trapping his arms at his sides, breathing in the sour smell of his carbuncular flesh, sobbing, laughing, he kisses him on the left cheek and on the right. Hip to hip, breast to breast, he stands locked against him.” (Ibid.) We find the explanation in the previous episode, which describes Nechaev’s unusual gesture. Telling the writer how impressed he was with “Crime and Punishment”, Nechaev suddenly interrupts his soliloquy and, instead of yet another remark, “he claps a hand to his breast, then, as though tearing out his heart, flings the hand forward. The oddity of his own gesture seems to strike him, for he blushes.” (Ibid.) It is thanks to this gesture that Dostoevsky understands that a “creature of Doctor Frankenstein’s, coming to life” is before him (Ibid.), and his disgust for Nechaev is replaced by a feeling of compassion for the monster’s “innocent soul”. Hugging the killer, the character of Coetzee commits an act of excess or transgression (M. Foucault). Overcoming the

boundary between the possible and the impossible, he destroys the boundaries established by public law, moral standards, cultural traditions, which at the physical (body) level is expressed in the form of epileptic seizures of the protagonist of the novel. In its turn, this episode perfectly illustrates the experience of linguistic transgression – the language going beyond its own limits, which became possible thanks to paralinguistic means, in this case, a gesture.

The gestural dialogue between Dostoevsky and Nechaev rhymes with the scene between the writer and the landlady, while the exchange of gestures from the bottom of the body moves up to the level of the hands and head. The subject of conversation between Dostoevsky and Anna Sergejevna is Nechaev, but gestures, partly being a reaction to the remarks of the communicant, at the same time have additional meanings related not only to the topic of the conversation, but also to personal relationships between the characters. Gesture communication develops into a separate plot that has an eyeball (Dostoevsky takes Anna Sergejevna’s hand, the answer to which is her surprised facial expression), the development of action (“He is still holding her hand. From it he feels a pressure, answering his, that he can only call kindly.” (Ibid.) – this is how the character responds to Dostoevsky’s passionate gesture), climax (Dostoevsky mentions in his speech about the terrorist a metaphorical gesture - he shut his ears, not wanting to listen to Nechaev’s calls) and the denouement (Anna Sergejevna’s reaction to this panegyric in honour of Nechaev is more eloquent than the words: “Her hand, that has been a living thing, has suddenly grown lifeless” (Ibid.)). Further words only confirm the complete disagreement of the character with the position of her opponent. Thus, communication between them takes on a polyphonic character when two storylines (verbal and nonverbal) develop in parallel, partially coinciding, but at the same time developing their own special theme.

In general, gestures expressing negative emotions prevail in Coetzee’s novel: fear, horror, and disgust. They help to express such feelings of the protagonist as sadness, grief, sorrow for the deceased son. Together, they form the *inner plot* of Dostoevsky’s mental suffering, developing in parallel with the main events of the novel. The character’s experiences are reflected in his posture, for example, he covers his face with his hands, wrings his hands, splashes his hands in despair, cries, his face distorts suffering,

trembling covers his whole body. External gestures are complemented by internal gestures that convey in a metaphorical form the heartache of a father who has lost his child: "He feels the cord of love that goes from his heart to his son's as physically as if it were a rope. He feels the rope twist and wring his heart. He groans aloud. 'Yes!' he whispers, welcoming the pain; he reaches out and gives the rope another twist." (Ibid.) In addition, body gestures of grief are supplemented by voice – groaning, loud crying, screaming.

The most often response gesture in the novel is a hug: the mother hugs Matryona by the shoulders, calming her in this way, the main character expresses a desire "to embrace her, wants to take her in his arms and repair whatever is fractured." (Ibid.) Similarly, Dostoevsky mentally imagines the deceased son, which he did not recall for some time: Paul "returns, whining, pale, searching for a place to lay his head." (Ibid.)

### Conclusions

Thus, in a literary text, in contrast to the reality simulated by it, gestures are not only described, but also commented on by the narrator or characters, explained, and the emotion that they express can be called directly or determined contextually. In addition, not only the gestures of the characters themselves, but also other characters' reaction to them, both external (response gesture, act, word) and internal (mental reception of the gesture and its interpretation), acquire special significance. In the novel by J. M. Coetzee, two main groups of gestures are presented. The first includes eye gestures, the second consists of gestures made with hands or feet. Separate gestures can be used to convey the same emotion (synonymous gestures), and vice versa, the same gesture can occur in different contexts and have different semantics (homonymous gestures). As the story develops, a dictionary of a character's gestures, on the one hand, and a dictionary of gestures of the work as a whole, on the other, were formed. The functional spectrum of kinemas expressing emotions in Coetzee's novel includes characterological, symbolic, intertextual, communication, plot-generating and transgressive gestures.

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