# Multimodal Counter-Argumentation in the Workplace:
# The Contribution of Gesture and Gaze to the Expression of Disagreement

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## Abstract

This paper examines argumentative talk-in-interaction in the workplace. It focuses on counter-argumentative references, which consist of the various resources that the opponent uses to refer to the origin/source of his/her opposition, namely the confronted position and the person who expressed it. Particular attention is paid to the relationship – in terms of sequential positioning and referential extension – between reported speech, polyphony, pointing gestures and shifts in gaze direction. Data are taken from workplace management meetings that have been recorded in New Zealand by the Language in the Workplace Project.

**Index Terms**: disagreement, argumentation, reported speech, polyphony, pointing gestures, gaze direction, talk-at-work.

## 1.  Introduction

Argumentation can be defined as a specific way of managing disagreements and conflicts ([1]–[4]). This definition highlights the importance of the contact between a position that is defended in a discourse and its contestation in a counter discourse. This paper focuses on the way this contact is multimodally embedded and managed in workplace meetings held in New Zealand. While the expression of disagreement has been studied extensively (see [5] for references in a discourse-analytical perspective), there has been little research on the multimodal resources – reported speech, polyphony, pointing gestures and shifts in gaze direction – that the opponent combines in context within "multimodal Ensembles" ([6]) or "multimodal *Gestalts*" ([7]) to make reference to the origin of his/her opposition, namely the confronted position and the person who expressed it.

Following an overview of the theoretical framework (2.), I will briefly describe the data I use (3.). I will then analyze several extracts that show how counter-argumentative references are multimodally embedded in their sequential context and, how they subsequently contribute to the general organization of the argument (4.). In the discussion that follows, I will summarize the communicative effects of the phenomena observed (5.).

## 2.  Theoretical framework[1]

### 2.1. Argumentation as verbal practice

Argumentation is often defined as the verbal activity of convincing people. This definition is highly problematic, as has been shown for example by Angenot ([8]). It has been suggested that the issue of analyzing argumentative practices can be more satisfactorily undertaken by approaching argumentation as a verbal way of managing disagreements and conflicts ([1], [2], [4]). In this sense, argumentation emerges when a difference of opinion not only arises, but "crystallizes" ([9]) through the construction and consolidation of opposing positions with respect to a controversial question (e.g. "How should we reduce social inequalities?", "What will be the name of the baby?", "Should we abolish the death penalty?")[2]. Such a definition implies argumentation is both a specific way of connecting utterances (i.e. the textual dimension of argumentation) and managing relationships with others (i.e. the interactional dimension of argumentation). It follows that an interdisciplinary approach to argumentation is needed ([10]), namely through the combination of notions and methods provided by Conversation Analysis ([11], [12]), Interactional Linguistics ([13]) and Text Linguistics ([14], [15]). Despite their differences, these subfields of Linguistics can be adopted as complementary approaches to examine the use of linguistic units in the construction and negotiation of social reality in talk-in-interaction. Particular attention will be paid here to previous studies that stress the importance of embodiment in social interaction ([16], [17]).

As previously stated, this paper focuses on counter-argumentative reference-making. This requires a description of the different resources that are available to the speaker for making reference to someone or something (2.2.), before considering the different ways these resources are articulated so as to work as multimodal references (2.3.).

### 2.2. Resources for making reference

#### 2.2.1.  Linguistic devices

Argumentation, as has been defined above, relies on dialogism in the bakhtinian sense ([18]). For B to oppose to A's position requires A's position to be "taken into account" – without being "taken in charge" ([19]). This can be achieved in two ways: through reported speech ([20], [21]) and polyphony ([22], [23, Ch. 6]).

Reported speech means using "talk to report talk" ([24, p. 1]), as well as the embedded opinion or point of view. There are different ways of reporting speech, from direct, "depicting" forms, such as quotations, to indirect, "describing" patterns where the reported talk is not syntactically isolated, but integrated in the reporting talk ([25]; see also [20], [26],

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[1] An extended version of this section was published in French ([51]).

[2] As shown by Plantin ([1]) and Doury ([52]), the controversial situation can be *in praesentia* (i.e. the opposing positions are defended by two different participants interacting together) or *in absentia* (i.e. at least one speaker argues against a position that no other participant to the interaction defends).

[27]). For example, "She said: 'I disagree'" *depicts* the discourse and the position, whereas "She said that she disagreed" or "She disagreed" *describes* her discourse and position, without quoting it (see also [28]). As evidenced by the use of "she", the possibility of reported speech acting as a reference relies heavily on the presence of referential expressions, such as proper names (*Nathan, Mr. X*), descriptions (*the president*), deictics (*I, you*), or anaphora (*he, she*) ([29]–[31]). In the case where there is no referential expression, recipients tend to evaluate reported speech based on its degree of similarity and proximity to previous talk. This leads us to the second linguistic device used in argumentation.

Polyphony is a complex category. Contrary to reported speech, a polyphonic discourse does not contain or embed another discourse, but only the point of view associated with that discourse. As has been demonstrated by Ducrot ([32], see also [33]), a negative formulation such as "this wall is not white" conveys two points of view (POV) which disagree with each other: While POV1 is [this wall is white], POV2 – which is the one endorsed by the speaker saying "this wall is not white" – is [POV1 is false]. Similarly, the adversative discourse marker "but" is polyphonic, as it "give[s] instruction pointing to the presence of voices other than the author's" ([23, p. 257]). The origin of theses "voices" (i.e. points of view) are implicit, but can be identified: a polyphonic discourse can work as an indirect reference to another discourse and to the speaker who expressed it if the two discourses are spatially or temporally close to one another, such as two columns in a web or newspaper page or two adjacent turns-at-talk in a debate sequence ([34]–[36]).

### 2.2.2. Gaze direction

As has been frequently noted since the first studies on gaze in social interaction (see [37] for a synthesis), gaze in Western culture is used to manage speakership and recipiency, by indexing who talks to whom. In other words, speakers and recipients tend to look at each other. But although gaze is a resource for the speaker to index the recipient(s) of their talk, continuous gaze is marked and may convey other information (e.g. seduction or aggression). Gaze is then frequently available, both to the speaker and the recipient, to build joint attention on a third party (a person, an object or a direction). However, as gaze's "home position" ([38]) is the recipient, a gaze shift to another participant at a specific sequential position can be interpreted as a shift of recipiency, or even as a solicitation (e.g. [39]).

### 2.2.3. Pointing gestures

Gestures cover a larger scope of phenomena ([40]). Pointing gestures, which have been studied extensively, literally point to an element of the context by selecting it as the focus of joint attention [40, Ch. 11], [41], [42]). This deictic resource allows the speaker to make reference to somebody or something independently of what is happening at the verbal level and without having to shift gaze direction. Pointing gestures are then particularly relevant for the study of references in verbal interaction.

### 2.3. The coordination of the multimodal resources: referential extension and sequential positioning

As has been frequently highlighted in Conversation Analysis and Interactional Linguistics, the actual meaning of a resource – not only a linguistic unit, but also a shift in gaze direction or a pointing gesture – is in a mutually constitutive relationship with its sequential context ([37], [40], [42]), which refers both

to the direct pragmatic environment (i.e. the previous and the next actions) and to the broader type of activity participants are performing (e.g. brainstorming, information giving, or decision making). In other words, the referential extension and the sequential positioning of each resource have to be considered dialectically, in order to examine (i) how the different resources are coordinated in such a way as to produce a multimodal reference, and (ii) to which extent discrepancies between the instructions respectively given through the different modes contribute to create meaning in their combination[1].

## 3. Data

The data that I will consider are taken from a corpus of six video-recorded management meetings, held from 2004 to 2006 at a production company in New Zealand. In these meetings, the 11 managers of the company discuss practical issues (human resources, security, schedule) as well as more long-term developments (business model, company philosophy). These data have been recorded by the Language in the Workplace Project (LWP) at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand (for a general overview of the project and data, see [44])[2].

Previous studies suggest that New Zealand English speakers tend to strongly mitigate or even avoid direct expression of disagreement ([45]–[47]). In other words, they display a strong preference for agreement, implicitness and softening strategies such as tag questions, hedges, hesitations and gambits [48]. Stadler notes, in her comparative study of the expression of disagreement in German and New Zealand English, that "New Zealanders' non-verbal behavior in disagreements differs little from their behavior in neutral speech" ([48, p. ii]), which consists for example of looking at the recipient less directly than in other cultures (e.g. in Germany). However, Stadler's analysis is purely quantitative and no attention is paid to the situated coordination of the verbal and non-verbal resources that have been identified above. The present paper provides some insights about the role of pointing gestures and shifts in gaze direction in making disagreement accountable and, therefore, in compensating for the New Zealand preference for verbal indirectness.

## 4. Analysis

The 2-hour management meeting I will focus on was recorded in early 2005. An important portion of it was spent deciding whether to hire a new operator (Sue), who had been separately interviewed by three of the managers a couple of days before the meeting. This meeting is then an occasion for Jeason (JH), the General Manager, Seamus (SB), the Managing Director and Ivo (IS), the Pre Press Manager, to gather and argue their respective views. Both Jeason and Seamus underline the urgency to hire someone and acknowledge Sue's skills and expertise, although Jeason still expresses doubts about whether the personality will fit in with the company since they have not yet been provided with a reference. In contrast, as the analysis will show, Ivo positions himself as an opponent, by expressing doubts about the relevance of Sue's specific skills

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[1] Situations of pure redundancy between the meanings conveyed through the different modes are theoretically possible, but empirically unverified in the previous studies cited.
[2] Two cameras and one audio recorder were used; researchers were not present at the time of recording. All names are pseudonyms, and any identifying material has been removed.

in view of the evolution of the operational workflow the company will have to face in the near future. It should be noted that, before Extract 1, Ivo has been arguing that hiring Sue would be over-hasty, because the current production operators will soon be trained in the position that Sue would fill.

**Extract 1a[1]**
```
1  SB  %+¶the right time is not when the work arrives
       %looking at IS--------------------------->18
       +looking at IS--------------------------->22
       ¶looking at SB--------------------------->3
2  ??  #1 ((clears throat))
#im1
```

Following work by Ducrot and Nølke on negative formulations ([32], [33]), Seamus' assessment can be considered polyphonic as it combines two contesting points of view (POV). While Seamus takes POV1 [the right time is when the work arrives] into account, he endorses POV2 [POV1 is false]. The disagreement is mitigated, as POV1 is not explicitly attributed to Ivo. However, Ivo is identified as the origin (or at least as representing the contested POV) through Seamus and Jeason's continuous gaze in his direction (see image 1[2]).

**Extract 1b**
```
3  IS  no ¶ that's right (..) i mean that
       ---¶shift to table----------------------->6
4      (1.2)
5  IS  yeah (.) well it ((sighs)) u:m (..) my-
6      my thing is (...) is ¶ the (1.0) she is a
       ---------------------¶shift to SB--------->9
7      person who can put impost together quickly
8  JH  mhm
9  IS  but ¶ she won't be able to she won't (...)
       ----¶shift to JH------------------------->
10     know ¶ where to put them (...) that's that's
       -----¶mult. shifts betw. SB and JH-------->39
11     where we [the bottleneck is XX]
```

Ivo stops looking at Seamus during the concession (lines 3-5), but shifts his gaze back again when returning to his argument at line 6 ("my thing is…"). After Jeason's agreement (8), Ivo starts looking at him while introducing his counter-argument through a negative formulation ("but she won't be able…"), before concluding with "that's where the bottleneck is". This contests Jeason's own identification of the "bottleneck" several minutes before and, by shifting his gaze during the negative formulation, Ivo seems to group Seamus and Jeason as people committed to the point of view contested by his negation.

**Extract 1c**
```
12 SB           [we still need to her to do that
13     would we or i mean what a what sort of
14     position would you
15 IS  the that's where the m- metric side of things
16     comes in
17 JH  yeah
```

---

[2] The fact that Jeason's back is turned, at least in part, to the camera makes the identification of his gaze direction difficult, but by zooming in, it is apparent that his head is clearly turned to Ivo and not to the speaker, Seamus.

```
18     %(1.2)
       %shift to JH----------------------------->
19 IS  i mean that's where the % hold-ups are
       -----------------------%shift to IS------>25
20 JH  yeah
21     (...)
22 SB  okay + but we and we haven't got that
       -----+shift to SB------------------------>32
23     (..)
24 IS  not yet=
```

In his reply, Seamus appears to change his strategy. He is still looking at Ivo, but verbally he moves from an inclusive "we" in an assessment (12-13) to directly question Ivo, who is continuously shifting gaze direction very quickly between Seamus and Jeason. Both Ivo's first answer (15-16) and the recompletion (19) are followed by Jeason's agreement. While Seamus looks at Jeason after the first agreement (17-18), he continues gazing at Ivo not only after the recompletion (19) but also after Jeason's second agreement (20). By not looking at Jeason at that sequential position, Seamus seems to display the direct confrontation which is at stake between Ivo and him. When taking his turn at line 22, he begins with a concession ("okay") and continues with a negative formulation ("we haven't got that"), which contests Ivo's reformulated point of view ([we have got that]). Ivo answers "not yet", which concedes to Seamus' assessment without agreeing with it, as the situation he describes is presented as inevitable.

**Extract 1d**
```
25 JH  =so % what what #2 ivo's saying is that she's
       ----%shift to JH------------------------->28
#im2 (JH points to IS)
```
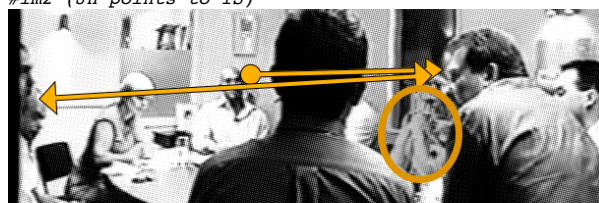
```
26     not that guru that we talked about
27     [she's not going
28 IS  [yeah she is not % she's not the
       ----------------%shift to IS------------->end
29     [(layout guru X)] she's the one that maybe&
30 ??  [XX XX XXX      ]
31 JH  [um XX XXX      ]
32 IS  &+creates the template really quickly
       -+shift to IS---------------------------->38
33 JH  mhm
34 IS  i mean and and i'm sure any any of the
35     operators like XX do the same
36 SB  yeah
37     (...)
```

In lines 25-26, Jeason reformulates Ivo's argument through indirect reported speech which he addresses to Seamus. However, just before mentioning Ivo, Jeason points to him. In this way, Jeason makes use of a variety of modes (gaze, speech, head orientation, and gesture) to not only show that he is taking Ivo's position into account, but also to mediate the direct confrontation between Seamus and Ivo, who is looking at Jeason. Ivo then takes this opportunity to support his position by providing new arguments (28-35).

**Extract 1e**
```
38 SB  I mean thi[s well she +
       ----------------------+shift to SB-------->48
39 IS            [she become X
40 SB  i ¶ guess the other thing that comes into
       --¶shift to SB--------------------------->end
41     play too even if the timing's not absolutely
42     perfect (...) u:m
43     (1.0)
44     these people don't grow on trees even with
45     her experience=
46 IS  =yeah
47     (...)
```

```
48 SB  +you know it's har- they're hard to find
         +shift to IS------------------------------>end
49      especially when you want them
```

Next, while looking at Ivo, Seamus provides a complex argument by articulating two negative formulations: "[P] even if the timing's not absolutely perfect, [Q] these people don't grow on trees". While [P] is a way for Seamus to reformulate and concede the counter-argument that Ivo would, or may, formulate against Seamus' argument, [Q], which is also polyphonic because of the negation, reformulates and contests Ivo's position. In combination with the continuous gaze towards Ivo, these negations are used to attribute and make accountable the disagreement in the absence of explicit reference to the contested position.

After the exchange in Extract 1, Seamus continued to highlight the urgency of finding someone in order to deal with the upcoming rush. In Extract 2, although Ivo participates minimally (with the production of only two regulators), he stays at the center of the multimodal attention displayed in both Seamus' and Jeason's argumentation[1].

**Extract 2a**
```
1  SB  %um so (.)+ in the#1 term in the in the scheme
         %looking at IS----------------------------->15
                   +looking at SB------------------>12
#im1 (SB points to IS)
```

```
2       of things (..) when we're looking at risk
3       and do we d- employ this person or do we
4       put an extra person in (..) that is
5       infinitesimal compared with a (...) um (...)
6       punt that we've already taken
7  IS   mh
8  JH   yeah
9       (1.0)
10 SB   it's just a absolute no brainer to me (..) um
11      (3.5)
```

At line 1, Seamus points to Ivo. In the absence of a negative formulation that would convey Ivo's point of view, this pointing gesture appears as a way to counteract the collegial "we" (lines 2, 3 and 6) and the impersonal formulation ("that is infinitesimal…"), which follows. As before, Seamus keeps looking at Ivo even when Jeason takes his turn to agree with him. Through the use of the directed pointing gesture, the attention is then exclusively focused on Ivo.

**Extract 2b**
```
12 SB  +and if timing dictates that you you make
         +looking at the table-------------------->18
13      the decision now and we wing it and we work
14      out how she fits or if your #2 if you've
15      decide that #3% she is
         --------------%shift to JH--------------->25
```
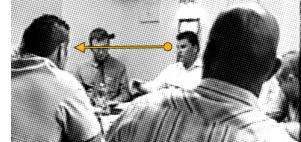
```
16 JH  yeah i mean my my decision is not do we
17     (..) do we need another person the decision
18     is + is she the right person that's (a)
         ---+shift to SB-------------------------->24
19     that's (.) you know
20 SB  yeah (.) is has she the right attitude and
21     (.)
22 JH  yep
23 SB  yeah=
```

Just after the long pause following Seamus' conclusion ("it's just an absolute no brainer to me", at line 10), Jeason shifts his gaze to the table, while Seamus takes another turn and proposes two possible decisions regarding the timing (12). Although Seamus says "if you have decide[d]" while looking at Ivo, he progressively orients himself to Jeason just before expressing the subordinate clause "that she is…" (see images 2 and 3). This shift seems to function as a repair of recipiency, which displays the participants' orientation to Jeason's leadership and professional role in the company. This hypothesis is also supported by Jeason himself, who not only takes his turn while Seamus' clause is syntactically incomplete, but also begins it with "yeah I mean *my* decision…" (16; but see also the shift to a much more open and collective "*the* decision" at line 17). Collaborating with Seamus (19-23), Jeason reformulates the situation and his point of view on the situation.

**Extract 2c**
```
24 JH  =yep (.) + is she gonna fit with the team
         --------+shift to IS--------------------->28
25      properly and % that sort of thing (...) um
         ------------%shift to IS------------------->
26      i'm % keen to #4 talk to darryl and um ivo
         ----%shift to JH------------------------->38
#im4 (JH points to IS)
```

```
27      about where exactly where she will fit
28      +#5 in that (...) as well that's w- that is
         +shift to SB----------------------------->30
#im5 (JH points to IS)
```

```
29      part of the decision because is she the
30      right person + does she have the right
         -------------+shift to table------------->
31      skills (...) + um (.) um it's gonna be part
         -------------+shift to IS---------------->34
32      of it you know i think (...) on the surface
33      she seems to (of) to have the perfect
34      (set of)+ skills but(...) u:[m]+ le- let's&
         -------+shift to ?-----------+shift to IS->
```

```
35 IS                                  [um]
36 JH  &just#6 fit that into our workflow how it's
#im6 (JH points to IS)
```



```
37       gonna + work (...) make sure + we've made
         ------+shift to SB-----------+shift to IS--->
38       that  right decision ((long sighs))
```

Both Jeason and Seamus progressively re-orient themselves towards Ivo when Jeason reformulates again the pending questions (see shifts in gaze direction at lines 24 and 25). Referring to further discussions about the issues raised by Ivo, Jeason mentions him explicitly (26) just after pointing to him (image 4). In doing so, Jeason displays that he takes Ivo's point of view in consideration. Jeason maintains the pointing gesture but shifts his gaze to Seamus (28, image 5) as he mentions the issue they discussed together at the end of Extract 2b. Jeason then looks at the table during another reformulation of the pending questions, before shifting his gaze once again to Ivo.

Jeason continues his turn on the state of the decisions, by progressively inserting clauses that reflect the different points of view at stake. Jeason starts with Ivo (see also "you know", 32), referring to Sue's operating skills and how they will fit in the workflow. Also, by pointing to him just before mentioning the "workflow" (image 6), Jeason orients towards Ivo as the expert for this part of the decision-making process. While inserting a new clause ("how it's gonna work…", lines 36-37), Jeason quickly looks at Seamus, before returning his gaze to Ivo and concluding with the decision, which, surprisingly, seems to have already been made: "(let's) make sure we've made that right decision" (37-38). It is worth noting that here the "we" is unclear in regard to its referential extension; it could be an inclusive "we" (at least I and you) – Ivo is part of the decision – or an exclusive "we" (at least I but not you) – only Seamus and Jeason made the decision. This ambiguity can be considered a resource, as Jeason leaves the door open for Ivo to join the decision, even if he has not yet agreed to it. This last extract is interesting as it shows how Jeason makes the state of the discussion accountable without having to explicitly mention the disagreement at stake.

## 5.  Discussion

The above analysis has confirmed previous studies on typical features associated with the verbal expression of disagreement in New Zealand English: people tend to use only a few explicit resources such as "but" or reported speech quoting or reformulating the contested position; additionally, the frequent use of mitigation strategies – such as hedges ("I think"), gambits ("I mean", "you know"), concessions and hesitations – underlines the dispreference associated with disagreement.

However, the data also highlighted the high frequency and crucial importance of negative formulations for the accountability of disagreement, something which has not been taken into account in previous studies (e.g. in [48]). Negative formulations allow the speaker to uncover (and contest) a point of view without having to attribute it to other speakers in

an explicit way. And as the analysis showed, speakers tend to use gaze direction in order to attribute the uncovered point of view and, in that way, make reference to someone as being its origin and as taking the responsibility for it. In other words, gaze direction compensates for the referential ambiguity of negative formulations.

The analysis also underlined the frequency and importance of the unit *we*, whose referential ambiguity can be strategically used in disagreements. When used and interpreted as inclusive (at least *I* and *you*), *we* can carry the idea of a community of values and interests, for example when mentioning the challenges faced by the company. When used and interpreted as exclusive (at least *I*, but without *you*), *we* splits people and creates coalitions ([49]). Most notably, in the data analyzed, some of the instances of *we* were used in combination with a pointing gesture (while in most of the others, instances of *we* were part of negative formulations). By using a pointing gesture in a specific sequential environment, the speaker organizes the referential extension of *we*, by recalling the relevance of a position that has been previously expressed without having to rephrase it and therefore having to provide accounts about it. However, these pointing gestures occur rapidly and infrequently, which seems to confirm their impoliteness for New Zealand English speakers ([48]).

More generally, this paper showed the crucial importance of gesture and gaze direction for the production and interpretation (i.e. the accountability) of disagreements in contexts where the verbal expression of disagreement is strongly mitigated.

## 6.  Appendix: Transcript conventions

Data were transcribed according to ICOR conventions (v. 2013, *Groupe ICAR*):

| | |
|---|---|
| / \ | Rising and falling intonations |
| : | Prolongation of a sound |
| - | Abrupt interruption in utterance |
| (.) (..) (...) (n) | Pauses (1/4, 1/2, 3/4 second; n = seconds) |
| MAIS | Emphasis |
| [YY YYYY] | Overlapping speech |
| & | Extension of the turn after an overlap |
| = | Latching |
| (it; eat) | Speech which is in doubt in the transcript |
| XX XXX | Speech which is unclear in the transcript |
| ((laughs)) | Annotation of non-verbal activity |

Gaze has been transcribed with the following conventions, inspired by [50]:

| | |
|---|---|
| +---+,*----* | Delimits gaze direction for each participant. The symbols +, ¶ and % refer respectively to JH, IS and SB's gaze. |
| ------------> | The phenomenon continues across the subsequent line |
| ------------>8 | The phenomenon continues across line 8 |
| #1  #im1 | Picture 1, with comments on gestures |

## 7.  Acknowledgements

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