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The Role of Hand Gestures on Emotional Intensity and Phenomenological Ratings of Autobiographical Narratives

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Abstract

Gesturing helps cognitive load (Kita et al., 2017) and access to details in autobiographical memories (Aydin et al., 2023). We examined gestures' roles in narrating emotional autobiographical events in first (L1) and second language (L2), expecting (1) gesture use to increase phenomenological ratings (reliving, visual imagery, auditory imagery, and importance) of the events and emotional intensity in both languages and (2) the effect to be more prominent in L2 than L1, where cognitive load increases. Twenty-nine participants (Mage=21.24) narrated positive and negative events in L1-Turkish and L2-English. No difference between L1 and L2 was found in phenomenological and emotional intensity ratings controlling for English proficiency and current mood. Representational gestures predicted imagery for negative events in L1, and non-representational gestures predicted emotional intensity and reliving for negative events in L2. Representational gestures' recollecting and non-representational gestures' fluency-resolving functions might have increased phenomenological ratings, particularly for negative events.