Barack Obama, being sharp

Indexical order in the pragmatics of precision-grip gesture

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Gesture in political oratory and debate is renowned for its nonreferential indexical functions, for the way it purportedly can indicate qualities of speaker and materialize acts of persuasion — functions famously addressed in Quintilian's classic writings but understudied today. I revisit this problematic through a case study of precision-grip (especially thumb to tip of forefinger) in Barack Obama's debate performances (2004–2008). Cospeech gesture can index valorized attributes of speaker — not directly but through orders of semiotic motivation. In terms of first-order indexicality, precision-grip highlights discourse in respect of information structure, indicating focus. In debate, precision grip has undergone a degree of conventionalization and has reemerged as a second-order pragmatic resource for performatively "making a 'sharp', effective point." Repetitions and parallelisms of precision grip in debate can, in turn, exhibit speaker-attributes, such as *being* argumentatively 'sharp', and from there may even partake in candidate branding.

Keywords: gesture, precision-grip, indexicality, pragmatics, focus, politics

Gesture in message politics

That politicians can persuade and cajole through gesture is an old conceit, as the writings of the first-century Roman rhetorician Quintilian, for instance, attest. Yet the contemporary literature on gesture has had little to say about this venerable claim, and what has been said is eclipsed by a mass of op-ed-styled musings by journalists and political commentators, with the occasional cameo played by the more sober if often dubiously trained "body language expert." "Today", complains Streeck (2008) in a case study of political gesture, "most publicized pronouncements on the matter have the quality of pop psychology or pop ethology:

Unconscious motives or psychological dispositions are attributed, often on the basis of a single photograph, and universal meanings of isolated behaviors are invoked, in statements that are sometimes witty, but rarely enlightening."

These op-ed musings belong, in fact, to an industry of media commentary in which no facet of candidate behavior is safe from scrutiny. In coverage of electoral politics even verbal slips and gaffes — like Mitt Romney's use of "Obama" when he was quoting "Osama" — can become signs revelatory of a candidate's character, thoughts, machinations (Silverstein, 2011a). Apply this to gesture and the result is a caricatured version of a familiar view, "… that gesture 'leaks', betraying a speaker's true feelings and thoughts, perhaps in opposition to more treacherous (because more conscious?) words which may try to conceal them" (Haviland, 2006, p. 67). If anything, the commentators' pursuit of deep meanings betrays something about its own dispositions, its suspicion that candidates are opaque, dissimulated creatures whose signals — like public-relations copy and clever advertisements — demand critical readings, so that voter-consumers can see who candidates "really" are and make informed, market-driven "choices" (see Lempert, 2011; Lempert & Silverstein, in press). Rather than treat candidate gestures as if they were unmediated indexes of speaker subjectivity, I trace pathways of semiotic motivation that run from cospeech gesture to candidate persona — or to what political insiders call simply, and misleadingly, "message".

Message, in politicoglossia, does not mean the "topic, or theme, or central proposition" of political communication (Silverstein, 2003a, p. 5; Hill, 2000, pp. 264–265), such as what things candidates say about immigration policy, deficit reduction, or tax reform. Rather, it refers to the "publicly imaginable 'character' with biography and moral profile built around and projectable in relation to issues under current debate" (Silverstein, 2011b, p. 54). Since the early 1990s, presidential campaigns have relied increasingly on consultants who employ techniques developed for commodity branding. Marketing principles and methods have been employed to target consumer-voters effectively in an emerging industry sometimes called "political marketing" (Needham, 2006; Newman & Sheth, 1985; Newman, 1994; Kavanagh, 1995; Mauser, 1983). Candidate branding informs electoral politics today, especially in presidential campaigns, and this involves, broadly speaking, the creation of durable associations that surround and seem to stem naturally from the candidate's being, like 'experience' that radiates from Hillary Clinton or 'authenticity' from Sarah Palin. Gesture does not and cannot directly index candidate brand (cf. Ochs, 1993).

In this paper I undertake a case study of Barak Obama's use of what I shall here refer to as a "precision grip gesture". As will be explained in more detail below, this is a gesture in which the hand is shaped so that the tips of the thumb and index finger are held in contact, the other fingers flexed to be in contact with the palm of the

hand (see Figure 1). By examining how Obama used this hand shape in gestures in televised debates (2007–2008), I tease apart distinct effects of cospeech gesture in discursive interaction, showing how some effects presuppose others, suggesting forms of semiotic motivation among them. I trace "orders" of indexicality (Silverstein, 2003b), demonstrating that (a) precision-grip gesture indexes a first-order 'focus' effect in terms of information structure; that (b) it has undergone a degree of conventionalization and reflexive reanalysis and has re-emerged as a second-order metapragmatic icon (an image of an act) for doing what we may gloss colloquially as "making a 'sharp', effective point"; and that (c) felt repetitions and parallelisms (cf. catchments McNeill, 2005) of precision grip in debate can invite one to infer not just that one is *making* a sharp point, but that one *has* a sharp point to make, or even that one *is* sharp, argumentatively speaking. Which means that a gesture trained on discourse can, under certain conditions, traced below, come to index qualities of speaker and from there may even contribute to candidate brand.

Looking sharp

Barack Obama did not look sharp at all in the first democratic primary debate of the campaign season. The televised debate was held in South Carolina on 26 April 2007 and featured eight candidates and two moderators, Brian Williams (NBC News) and David Stanton (WIS News). At a certain point, Williams presents a hypothetical scenario in which another 9/11-style-attack occurs while the current debate is in progress. What would you do as President? Obama gets the question first.

> Senator Obama, if God forbid a thousand times we learned that two American cities had been hit simultaneously by terrorists and we further learned beyond the shadow of a doubt it had been the work of Al Qaida. How would you change the US military stance overseas as a result?

Obama's response:

> Well, the first thing we'd have to do is make sure that we've got an effective emergency response, something that this administration failed to do when we had a hurricane in New Orleans. And I think that we have to review how we operate in the event of not only a natural disaster, but also a terrorist attack. The second thing is to make sure that we've got good intelligence, a., to find out that we don't have other threats and attacks potentially out there, and b., to find out, do we have any intelligence on who might have carried it out, so that we can take potentially some action to dismantle that network. But what we can't do is then alienate the world community based on faulty intelligence, based on bluster and bombast. Instead,

the next thing we would have to do, in addition to talking to the American people, is making sure that we are talking to the international community. Because as already been stated, we're not going to defeat terrorists on our own. We've got to strengthen our i[===]gence relationships with them, and they've got to feel a stake in our security ~~uh~~ by recognizing that we have mutual security interests at stake.

After Obama's turn-initial *well*, he begins ordinally with a *first*, promising order — a concrete plan, perhaps. But if a plan is being unfurled, it is a long, seemingly interminable one, enumerated and folded into two hierarchically nested layers. There is a "first" step and a "second", the second consisting of two substeps, an "a" and a "b". When he finally gets around to saying what he'd concretely do in response to the terror attack, it's buried several strata and clauses deep. Qualified by *potentially* and hedged with an indefinite *some*, "take action" sounds tentative, noncommittal. And though the transcription does not show it, the otherwise tough-sounding complement clause that follows — *to dismantle that network* — is, to compound Obama's rhetorical misfortune, slowed fore and aft, as if with speed bumps, by filled pauses: *uh…to dismantle…uh*. To many observers, and campaign antagonists like the Clinton campaign, Obama's response sounded wonkish, indecisive, weak.

Obama realized he had veered off Message, especially after both Edwards and Clinton — the two other candidates who were given the chance to field this question — answered with the promise of swift retaliation, and he tried to do something about it. Obama's next chance to speak was in response to a question unrelated to terrorism and defense. It was about his personal life, about what he's doing to help improve the environment. He fields the question, "we've also been working to install lightbulbs that last longer and save energy", but then feels compelled to double back to the last question, to get the Message right this time.[1]

(1)

```
Obama    and that's something
         that I'm trying to teach my daughters
         uh
         eight year old Malia
         and- and-
         five year old Sasha
         uh
    ┌ - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - ┐
    ¦ but
    ¦ one thing that I do have to [go back on
    ¦                              P    p     p
    ¦ uh on this issue of terrorism (1.1)
    ¦      P             P
    └ - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - ┘
```

```
we have genuine enemies out there (.7)
   P    P        p  p
that have to be hunted down (1.3)
              P
networks have to be dismantled (.7)
         P           p  p   p
°uh° there is no contradiction
              P  p  p  P
between us
P
uh us-
intelligently using our military (.5)
   P           P         P
and in some cases
        P
lethal force
P        P
to take out (.4) terrorists]
P         P
```

```
and at the same time
building the sort of alliances
and trust
around the world (.5)
that has been so lacking over the laf-
uh last six years
```

This time Obama delivers the tough, respond-to-terror-with-manly-decisiveness Message — but it's late and strident, suggestive of a candidate who is trying too hard, and who may have betrayed how he "really" felt when he first answered the question (which is how some commentators read that moment.) Relevant here is the succession of precision-grip gestures (indicated by "P" below the line of transcribed words — see note 1 for a full explanation of transcription conventions) — his longest stretch of precision grip in this debate.[2] Obama produced no precision-grip gestures whatsoever when he answered the question the first time.

As Obama tries to recover from his botched answer, he seems anxious to demonstrate that he *has* a sharp, effective point to make — and precision-grip occurs robustly. Why should precision-grip be so pronounced? As I suggest below, this kind of moment offers vivid evidence of precision-grip's second-order indexical value; that in debate contexts it has become a gestural resource for making a sharp, effective "point", and that, if repeated enough, it just might be understood to reflect qualities of the speaker, that of *being* sharp.

Obama's precision-grip gestures: An overview

"Precision grip" refers to a family of gestures ("groupings of gestural expressions that have in common one or more kinesic or formational characteristics" — Kendon, 2004, p. 227) named for the prehensile motion in which something small appears to be grasped. Distinct sub-families of precision-grip can and have been distinguished, which vary along such key dimensions as handshape and movement. In Kendon's (2004) research on cospeech gesture in southern Italy, he found two distinct sub-families of precision-grip, the "finger bunch" or "grappolo" (or G-family) and the "ring" (R-family). In the former the fingers are fully extended and the thumb touches their tips, forming a "bunch"; in the latter the thumb touches only the tip of the index finger, forming a circular, "ring"-shape while the rest of the fingers remain spread (see Kendon, 2004; compare with [d] in Figure 1). While both groupings may be considered to belong to the more general family of "precision grip", based on the common kinesic act of grasping something small, Kendon showed that, at least in the Italian material he studied, the contexts-of-use of the G-forms differed from the R-forms. In this essay, I focus not on precision grip *tout court*, but on a sub-family involving index finger to thumb, hereafter labeled "IFT", since these are the precision-grip forms that Obama used in the material studies, this form also being used by most of his democratic rivals from 2007–2008.

Barack Obama's IFT-precision-grip gestures were analyzed in a corpus of 28 televised debates, which include 21 2007–2008 primary debates, the three 2008 presidential debates against Republican candidate John McCain, and four debates from Obama's 2004 Senate race against Republican Alan Keyes. A number of non-debate events (especially public oratory at "stump" speeches, delivered before supporters) were considered as well, and Obama's precision-grip gestures were also compared with precision-grip gestures by the seven other 2008 democratic candidates, using eight consecutive debates stretching from April 26 to September 26, 2007.[3]

It should come as no surprise that the public pronouncements on candidate gesture tend to fixate on highly conventionalized gestures which, like lexical items, are easy to cite in post-event reportage. Obama's precision-grip gestures are not of this sort, that is, they are not what have been termed "emblems" (Efron, 1972; Ekman & Friessen, 1969) or "quotable" gestures (Kendon, 1990, 1992), which are highly conventionalized, easily reportable manual gestures, which sometimes have names, such as the "OK-sign" or "thumbs-up". Gestural emblems have more language-like properties than the more frequent, improvisational and idiosyncratic forms of gesticulation (see especially McNeill, 1992, 2005; Kendon, 2004); they can occur in the absence of speech and count as a meaningful utterance by themselves; and they may have widespread and easily reportable glosses, as in the

case of "thumbs up" often glossed as "good" "fine", and so forth, or the so-called "OK-sign" which can be considered a kinesic equivalent of the expression "OK". In discursive environments in which Obama drums on Message themes, he offers no gestural Message emblems. It is not as if Obama flashes certain gestures when he invokes Hope or Change or rails against Hillary Clinton for allegedly being a Washington Insider. It is not as if there are gestural equivalents to, say, the rugged Carhartt jacket worn during a hunting photo op, or the red or blue neck tie worn as accessory-totems of Republican and Democratic party affiliation. Message does not appear to have been transduced into gesture. Still, conventionalization and emblematization are gradient phenomena, and while precision grip has not developed into a full-blown quotable gesture, I argue that it has undergone a degree of reflexive reanalysis.[4]

A few major dimensions of IFT precision-grip variation can be distinguished based on recurrent forms of the gesture in this corpus (see Figure 1). In terms of form, the canonical IFT for Obama in the 2007–2008 material is one in which the thumb tip touches either the forefinger's distal phalange or the distal interphalangeal joint (illustrated in [b])[5] with fingers adducted ([a] in Figure 1). Obama produces IFT precision-grip with either right or left hand, or, much more rarely, left and right hand together (though not necessarily with the same hand shape). Rare, too, are IFTs in which Obama's fingers are abducted (i.e., spread out rather than curled in toward the palm; illustrated in [d]; cf. Kendon's [1995, 2004] discussion of the R-family in southern Italy). Movement wise, the vast majority of his precision grip gestures involve forearm action that gives precision-grip strokes low-amplitude thrusts either downward, or, more frequently, downward and outward, away from speaker.[6]

Obama's precision-grip gestures differ along certain dimensions and in varying degrees from the seven other democratic candidates with whom he competed in 2007 and early 2008. In a sample of eight debates from April 26 to September 26, 2007, variation was most pronounced in terms of hand shape and less with respect to motion, stroke amplitude, and gesture space. For all eight candidates amplitude overwhelmingly tended to be low and gesture space center, right-center, or left-center (following Pedelty's 1987 division of gesture space; see also McNeill, 1992). In these five debates, all of Obama's onset strokes — the initial IFT stroke rather than successive tokens of the gesture[7] — were precision grips that involved either thumb to tip of forefinger's distal phalange or to the distal interphalangeal joint ([a] and [b] in Figure 1). With the exception of Governor Bill Richardson, all the candidates tended to resort to a precision-grip shape of thumb to tip of forefinger, though several used finger bunches (thumb touches tips of two or more fingers) in varying proportions (e.g., 71% [122/172] of John Edwards' precision grips were

Figure 1. Variation in Barack Obama's IFT-precision-grip shape during debates (2004–2008)

a. thumb touches forefinger distal phalange, fingers curled toward palm (23 July 2007)
b. thumb touches forefinger distal interphalangeal joint, fingers curled toward palm (23 July 2007)
c. two-handed stroke with varied thumb position, fingers curled toward palm (15 Nov. 2007)
d. thumb touches forefinger's distal phalange, fingers spread (21 Oct. 2004)

thumb to forefinger while 29% [49/172] were finger bunches). Richardson was the only candidate for whom a finger bunch was the default precision-grip gesture (95% [119/125]). While I have not investigated this systematically on a larger corpus, from this sample, the argument I make about precision-grip for Obama seems to apply to the other candidates, despite the variation in shape noted above.

1° Focus

Morris (1977, p. 58) suggested in the mid–1970s that IFT precision-grip "reflects an urge on the part of the speaker to express himself delicately and with great

exactness. His hand emphasizes the fineness of the points he is stressing." Similarly, Kendon, drawing on careful "context-of-use" studies, observed that for the IFT-precision grip "the semantic theme that they share is related to ideas of exactness, making something precise, or making prominent some specific fact or idea" (Kendon, 2004, p. 240). If, with Morris and Kendon, we assume that IFT precision-grip expresses some sense of 'exactness',[8] we would expect regularities in semantic coexpressivity, where precision-grip strokes co-occur with discourse that denotes exactness in some respect or capacity. A candidate for 'exactness'-coexpressivity can be seen in a line like this, from a democratic primary debate on January 5, 2008:

```
(2)  that's why I have s- uh proposed [specific  tax relief now immediately]
                                        P        p    p    P    P
```

In (2) the initial, onset stroke coincides with the second, stressed syllable of *specific* and is followed by a succession of precision-grip strokes and lower-amplitude precision-grip strokes. In fact, examples like (2) represent a minority of cases. Very few strokes co-occurred with lexical items like *specific*, *precise*, *specifically*, *precisely*. There is nothing akin to a "lexical affiliate" (Schegloff 1984) for precision-grip, let alone one that denotes exactness. More frequent, and telling, are cases like (3), taken from the first presidential debate of 2008:

(3)

```
Obama   1    but [let's be clear] (.6)
                 P       p  p

        2    uh [earmarks account for eighteen]
                P            P     P  P  p  p

        3    billion dollars

        4    in last year's budget (.7)

        5    Senator McCain is proposing

        6    and this is a fundamental difference between us (.7)

        7    uh

        8    [three hundred billion dollars] (.7)
              P       p       P  p  p p

        9    [in tax cuts] (.6)
              P  P   P p

        10   to some of the wealthiest (.5)

        11   corporations

        12   and individuals in the country

        13   three hundred billion dollars (.6)
```

```
14    now
15    eighteen billion
16    uh
17    is important
18    three hundred billion dollars
19    [is really important]
         P
```

Consider precision grip in line 8, where it occurs with "three hundred billion dollars". While one may wish to argue that the specificity here consists in the numerical value newly introduced to discourse, this does not involve semantic coexpressivity but rather what, in terms of information structure, is referred to broadly as "focus" (e.g., Lambrecht, 1994). Indeed, if we were to say something categorial about precision grip, it would be that it is relatively indexically entailing (i.e., it helps create rather than merely presuppose the existence of the contextual object being indexed [Silverstein, 1976]), and that it indexes 'focus' in respect of information structure.[9]

What kind of focus? Contextualized tokens of precision grip can yield a range of information-based construals, but IFT precision grip alone does not categorially index any one subtype of focus. In the case of the "three hundred billion dollars", for example, precision grip coincides with and perhaps contributes to contrastive focus ($300 billion as opposed to the $18 billion in earmarks mentioned by McCain.) However, in the same stretch of discourse, this application of IFT precision-grip — which we may view as a kind of gestural "highlighting" (cf. prosodic highlighting) — also coincides with the introduction of a new entity. In Prince's (1981) terms, the second two tokens of "three hundred billion dollars here" (lines 13 and 18) are textually evoked entities, entities already mentioned in prior discourse, neither of which receives precision-grip highlighting. On other occasions, precision-grip strokes occur with focus-sensitive operators in language like *but* and *not only*, as in this moment from the first democratic primary debate of April 26 2007.

(4)

```
Obama    1    and that's one of the reasons
         2    why I proposed
         3    that we're going to have to increase
         4    the size of our ground forces
         5    so we can stop (.6)
         6    uh the uh (.6)
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```
7     sort of rotations
8     that we've been placing them on
9     which have been uh putting enormous strain
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10    [not only (.) on (.) the  soldiers themselves]
         P                         p
11    [but also] their families
         P
```

In line 10 of (4) Obama's delivers a IFT-precision-grip stroke with his right hand that moves from his right to his left; this stroke coincides with *not* (*only*) whereby he metaphorically "places" the entity 'soldiers' (which receives lower-amplitude precision-grip strokes) in his left quadrant; next, maintaining the precision-grip shape, he moves his right hand back from left to right, then strokes on *but* (*also*) in line 11, parallelistically placing the entity 'their families' in his right quadrant. A spatial-metaphoric contrast is thus created for the two entities, 'the soldiers' and 'their families'.

In sum: IFT precision-grip may be viewed as a kind of gestural highlighting that indexes a diffuse, underdetermined 'focus' effect. Germane here is Kendon's (1995, 2004) research on southern Italian gesture, where he describes the two precision-grip sub-families, the G-family and R-family. In both groupings, Kendon found that distinct form- and movement-types correlated with distinct information-based construals, ranging from topic-marking to comment-marking to what he has sometimes captioned broadly as "making precise". For example, the closing of the hand to the grappolo form from an open pose was often used to establish 'focus', as if to metaphorically 'seize' or 'grasp' a topic or entity. Other usages include a grappolo that "is sustained, moved outward, and then the fingers open" (Kendon, 2004, p. 233); in this case, a topic is established (again, through the closing into the finger bunch), and then the subsequent opening of that finger bunch coincides with a comment on that topic. For the R-forms, in contrast to the G-forms, "the semantic theme that seems to unite all of these usages is the theme of 'making precise'. That is to say, these gestures are used in conjunction with spoken expressions that either quote some exact fact or figure, or clarify an idea, a description, an observation or opinion" (p. 241).

Here, there is little empirical motivation for subcategorizing precision-grip into R- and G-groupings, and perhaps not surprisingly, the range of effects observed by Kendon, which range from topic-comment, to 'making' precise, are all possible in Obama's IFTs, not by virtue of distinct forms and movements of IFT precision grip alone, but through contextualized tokens of the gesture. Precision grip in southern Italy has apparently been conventionalized differently, and arguably more finely, than precision grip here.

Still, there is a very important similarity between these cases, when we consider a specific use of R form in southern Italy, in which, as Kendon writes, "[t]he hand, posed in the Ring shape, held so the palm of the hand is vertical — the rotation of the forearm is neutral — is moved downward or forward in one or more well-defined baton-like movements" (Kendon, 2004, p. 245). Here the movement is closest to the that of Obama's IFT precision grips, and about this variety Kendon writes that the "speaker is making a specific point, giving a specific piece of information on which he is insistent and which … is *counterposed* to what has been presupposed." (p. 245; emphasis mine). "Gesture sequences of this type", continues Kendon, "are seen where a speaker is making clear an opinion or a position which is explicitly or implicitly in contrast to some other opinion or position" (p. 245).

Indeed, it would be misleading to suggest that Obama's precision grip (and that of the other candidates) contributes strictly information-based effects in discourse. Precision-grip also has extra-discursive, interactional dimensions, as suggested by the fact that onset strokes tend to occur in environments in which the speaker tries to secure recipiency through gaze direction.[10] Effort to secure recipiency is evidenced by the tendency for gaze shifts (not just those of Obama, but also those of the other candidates) to occur immediately prior to the onset stroke (i.e., during the gesture's preparation phase) or during the onset stroke's execution.[11] Precision grip admits of recipient design or perhaps even a measure of 'addressivity' (Bakhtin, 1986; Lempert, 2011), an addressivity not specified through precision grip alone — it is not akin to "deictic", pointing gestures — but through other semiotic modalities and resources, such as addressivity signaled by gaze direction and by linguistic and gestural deixis. Precision grip may therefore be said to have an "addressive" focus as its first-order indexical value, and in many cases — perhaps by default, given the fact that the event is framed as a debate — some degree of interpersonal 'opposition' is presumed.[12]

2° Making a 'sharp', effective point

In his discussion of the pragmatic functions of precision-grip gesture in southern Italy, Kendon (1995) distinguishes precision-grip gestures that count as an act and others that mark relations among discourse units. The "finger bunch" (or "grappolo" in Kendon, 2004) for instance, can be employed in such a way as to "serve as a way of indicating the type of interactional move a turn-taker is making" (Kendon, 1995, p. 248). Using an idiom from speech-act theory, he terms this an "illocutionary marker gesture" (in Kendon, 2004, this is termed a "performative") and contrasts this with other uses of the Finger Bunch and Ring gestures, which he classes as "discourse unit marker gestures", which "serve to exhibit the role within

a discourse of a particular phase or segment of speech, relative to other segments"
(Kendon, 1995, p. 248; in Kendon, 2004 this is termed a "parsing" function). Anal-
ogously, we may feel inclined to say that Obama's precision-grip gestures function
as discourse-unit markers (in addition to whatever information-structural func-
tions they may simultaneously serve), since these IFT gestures seem to operate
like the Ring gestures described in Kendon's study. For this case — and I suspect
for others — such a distinction between gestural discourse unit markers and il-
locutionary markers is not profitably viewed as categorical, a matter of *kind* (on
a similar point, see also Kendon, 2004). Instead, precision-grip's focus effect is
better conceived as a first-order indexical value that has undergone a degree of re-
analysis. In the forensic environment of debate, precision-grip has acquired a sec-
ond-order indexical value where it has come to function in a way that approaches
(nb. *approaches* — a matter of degree[13]) what Kendon has called an illocutionary
marker gesture.

The notion of indexical order stems from work on indexicality in language
(Silverstein, 2003b; Agha, 2007) and seeks to explain the historical process where-
by contingent indexical values change partly in response to reflexive ideological
engagement. As Agha (1998) illustrates in work on Lhasa Tibetan's honorific reg-
ister, for instance, the register's first-order indexical value involves deference to-
ward addressee; that's the base-level indexicality. This, in turn, motivates a second-
order index of speaker demeanor (cf. Goffman, 1956), where repeated deference
to others signals one's *own* 'cultivation'. Semiotic motivation for this movement
across indexical orders comes from a process of reflexive, ideological engagement
("reflexivity", in the broad sense of "activities in which communicative signs are
used to typify other perceivable signs" — Agha, 2007, p. 16) that is institutional-
ized in different ways and in varying degrees. In the history of honorific reper-
toires, this might involve the creation, circulation, and use of prescriptive manu-
als and sanctions employed during language socialization in classrooms, which
forge links between an honorific repertoire and class-inflected models of speakerly
'refinement' and 'cultivation'. Reflexive activity links register forms to models of
speaker, making it easier to "read" those qualities of speaker off of speaker's honor-
ific repertoire *use*. I argue here only that precision-grip has undergone reanalysis,
and offer no account of the historical conditions and reflexive means by which
precision-grip's focus effect has come to mean something new for interactants
(though clearly precision-grip has not been reanalyzed with the aid of a whole
regime of prescriptive metadiscourses in a manner comparable to familiar cases
of honorific register formation.) Precision grip, simply put, has become part of
what it "looks like", in terms of gestural demeanor, to do the argumentative thing
we colloquially call "making a 'sharp' point" — a rhetorically 'effective' utterance

issued in an environment of contention, where different and competing views are presumed to jostle for supremacy.[14]

Precision-grip's reanalysis can be sensed in the way Obama resorted to pre-cision-grip when he tried to recover from that botched answer in his first 2007 debate, as well as in several other forms of evidence. Let us first observe a basic association of precision grip with debate contexts, even if this is a crude measure. In a sample of seven consecutive debates (April 26 to August 7, 2007) and ten non-debate campaign events (April 21 to August 3; almost all of which were campaign stump speeches to Obama's supporters, held both indoors and outdoors) from the same period — precision-grip had almost three times the average density in debate relative to non-debate settings (14.4% and 4.9%, respectively).[15]

Discursively, clues to precision-grip's second-order value can be found in the way candidates sometimes use precision-grip to sign-post that something new, argumentatively, is imminent. In line one of the earlier example (3), note how the precision grip onset occurs with "but [let's be clear]", and that the stroke syncs with *let's* rather than *but* (as one might expect if a strictly information-structural effect were being communicated). Consider, likewise, the following examples from the same debate — the first presidential debate of 2008:

(5)

```
Obama    1    I don't-
         2    I don't know where John's getting his figures
         3    [1- 1- le- let's just be clear]
                P
         4    what I do is I close
         5    corporate (.6) loopholes
```

(6)

```
Obama    1    but I- I j- I j-
         2    I just have to make this [point Jim
                                              P
         3    °uh°
         4    John
              P
         5    it's been (.) your President
                           P    p    p
         6    whom you said you agreed with
                      P           P
         7    ninety percent of the time
              P     P              P
```

```
     8    who presided] over
                 P
     9    this increase in spending (.7)
    10    this orgy of spending
```

(7)

```
Obama   1    but that's (.) senate inside baseball
        2    1- 1-  [1- let's get back
                     P    P   p    p
        3    to the core issue here]
                        P
        4    uh
        5    [Senator McCain is] absolutely right
              P          p
```

In examples (5), (6), and (7), Obama's onset of precision grip, that is, the moment when the first stroke of the succession of IFT precision-grip strokes occurs, coincides with a reflexive caption that typifies his argumentative behavior: "let's just be clear" ([5] line 3; see also [3] line 1); "I just have to make this point Jim" ([6] line 2); "let's get back to the core issue here" ([7] line 2–3). Each of these reflexive captions — being clear, making a point, getting back to the core issue — denote valorized argumentative behavior (his own) and is followed by discursive stance-taking in which Obama disaligns with McCain. (In [7] the concession in line 5, which concerns apparent military progress in Iraq, gives way in subsequent lines to criticism of McCain's position in subsequent line.

A particularly telling moment involving such reflexive, "point"-making captions occurred in the first presidential debate of 2008, just after a turn in which John McCain tried to put Obama on the defensive, and succeeded. McCain argued against raising taxes and ended his turn with a somewhat cryptic barb, "a lot of people might be interested in Senator Obama's definition of rich." Debate moderator Jim Lehrer took the bait, turned to Obama, and asked him if he had anything to say in response. (Italicized and bolded text below indicate stretches of discourse in which Obama maintains "direct" gaze at camera.)

(8)

```
McCain    1    the worst thing we could possibly do
          2    is to raise taxes on anybody
          3    and a lot of people might be interested
          4    in Senator Obama's definition of rich (1.5)
```

Moderator Jim Lehrer	5	`Senator Obama`
	6	`do you have a question`
	7	`for Senator (.) ]McCain on that`
Obama	8	`               ]well 1- 1- 1- 1-`
	9	`let me make just a cou]ple of points`
Moderator Jim Lehrer	10	`                   ]alright`
Obama	11	`[my defini-  uh` ` P   p`
	12	`he-  he-  here's` `            P`
	13	`wh- what I can tell` `                P`
	14	`the American people (.6)` `P     p    p`
	15	*`ninety-five percent of you]`* `P       p`
	16	`will get a tax cut (.8)`
	17	*`a:::nd`*
	18	*`[if (.) you (.) make`* ` P       P        P`
	19	*`m-`*
	20	*`less than two hundred and fifty]`* *`thousand dollars`* `P   P   P  P            P`
	21	*`less than a quarter of a million (.) dollars a year (.8)`*
	22	*`then`*
	23	*`[you will not see`* ` P       P  P`
	24	`one dime's] worth of tax increase` `P   p p`

Right after Obama's reflexive caption of "point"-making in line 9 ("let me make just a couple of points"), he begins a stretch of discourse peppered with IFT-precision-grip strokes and accompanied as well by a "direct" gaze toward camera — a marked gaze behavior in which Obama figuratively addresses the television audience, the "American people" [line 14]). In this swatch of discourse featuring precision-grip, Obama responds to McCain's attack by clarifying who would experience tax increases, and hence what "rich", in effect, means. At what is arguably the crux of his response in lines 23–24, where Obama clarifies that *no* taxes will

be raised — not "one dime's worth" — for 95% of the American people, note the particularly high density of precision-grip strokes per phonemic syllables, which helps make his rebuttal feel "emphatic", perhaps even "strident". At play in this turn is less "recuperative"-point making, as we might say of Obama's attempt to re-do his botched answer about the appropriate US response to a hypothetical terrorist attack, but rather what we might roughly caption as "defensive"-point-making; in this discursive environment, where the need to respond with an effective point has been made conditionally relevant, precision grip occurs robustly — again hinting at precision grip's second order indexical value. Precision-grip is part of what it looks like to make a point.

Or consider, finally, a case in which the debate moderator pointedly asks the candidate for clarification. In an August 19 2007 democratic primary debate, debate moderator George Stephanopoulos tried to get Obama to go on record about whether or not he was indicting front-runner Hillary Clinton or not: "But, when you say that, are you saying that Senator Clinton is part of the failed politics of Washington or not?" (In line 4 of example [9] below, the dotted rather than solid underline indicates a stretch of discourse in which I presume precision-grip handshape was maintained, but which I could not verify from the footage itself because of a camera cut from Obama to Clinton.)

(9)

Obama	1	well what I'm suggesting is
	2	is that [we're going to need somebody
		P P P P
	3	who can break out of (.7)
		P
	4	the political patterns
	5	that we've been in
	6	over the last twenty years
	7	a::::nd
	8	part of that
		P P
	9	is the notion that] (.5)
		P
	10	uh
	11	half of the country is on one side
	12	the other half's (.) in-
	13	on- on the other

In this case, IFT precision-grip stroke-onset occurs, not during the reflexive caption (line 1, "well what I'm suggesting is"), but with the complement clause that comes next and spells out Obama's point. And while not reproduced in the above transcript, IFT-precision-grip recurs during other moments in the rest of his turn. In being asked — quite pointedly — to clarify what he was just arguing, point-making is again made conditionally relevant, and it is in this environment that we see Obama using precision-grip robustly.

To the extent that IFT precision grip has acquired a higher-order indexical value in debate, one that presupposes a lower-order focus effect, this suggests that precision grip has undergone a degree of reflexive reanalysis and conventionalization. Precision grip is not a full-blown emblematic gesture but may be moving in the direction of a so-called illocutionary force marker. In semiotic parlance it may be termed a metapragmatic icon, to the extent that it reflexively (hence "meta-") typifies communicative behavior as a social act ("pragmatic"), and does so by means of felt resemblance ("icon"-icity). This iconic motivation appears broadly tropic or "metaphoric".[16] It appears to figurate 'focus', not through visuo-spatial imagery per se (e.g., where gesture depicts an object or event, operating in a pictorial modality [on this problematic, see especially Streeck, 2009]), but through the prehensile action of grasping something 'small'. The grasping of something small figurates focus *for* some addressee, since addressivity is one dimension of precision-grip's indexicality. As its second-order value in debate contexts, precision-grip helps figurate a 'precise', 'fine', 'sharp' point that is no longer just oriented 'toward' but 'against' some addressee.

The example from the essay's outset — that of Obama's botched answer and attempt to recuperate from it in his next turn — reveals something more, for doesn't Obama appear rather eager to show that he *has* a sharp point to make? Doesn't his sequence of repeated precision-grip gesture strokes seem 'compensatory', akin, perhaps, to the phenomenon of hypercorrection in the sociolinguistic literature, where speakers betray an anxiety in face of some standard by over-doing the 'correct', prestige form? That is, an additional, third-order indexicality seems implicitly in play here — a *speaker*-focal indexicality, where precision grip becomes revelatory of speaker: that Obama himself 'has' a point, that he himself 'is' sharp, argumentatively speaking. This involves non-referential indexicality, since discursively he is neither referring to nor predicating about these qualities of self. And it involves a measure of iconicity (in a broad, Peircian sense), since it does not just point to qualities of self but exhibits these qualities through the formal properties of the sign. In the Peircian-inspired linguistic anthropological literature, this amalgam is typically referred to as an "indexical-icon" (see, for example, Parmentier 1997). This capacity for gesture to exhibit something about speaker becomes regularly

inferable only after precision grip becomes a conventionalized means for making a sharp, effective point. And while it is conceivable that a single precision-grip token could motivate such a reading, it is surely Obama's copious application of precision grip to his discourse, the repetitions and parallelisms or what McNeill (2005) has called "catchments", that invite this construal. "Catchments", the way "one or more gesture features occur in at least two (not necessarily consecutive) gestures" (McNeill, 2005, pp. 116–117), constitute a "kind of thread of visuospatial imagery that runs through a discourse" and is said to reveal "larger discourse units that encompass the otherwise separate parts." McNeill's notion of catchment unduly privileges denotational-textuality, as if such repetitions always reflected running discourse "themes", but here Obama's poetic foregrounding of point-making helps exhibit qualities of self, his prowess. This, just after that prowess was thrown into doubt, not by his weak answer alone but by Clinton's and Edwards' sharper, more "decisive", on-Message responses to the same question. Densely metricalized — "poetic" — precision-grip gestures invite one to infer that Obama, too, *has* a sharp, effective point to make, that he, too, *is* sharp.

Gestural habitus and candidate brand

Precision grip may, under certain conditions, motivate such evanescent, situation-specific inferences about speaker, but what of 'speaker' understood not narrowly as the role-category 'debater' or even 'politician', but presidential *candidate*? Precision grip may not be a gestural emblem, let alone a transduced emblem of campaign Message, but to what extent is it caught up in and perhaps even exploited by a project of candidate branding?

Let us return to Obama's off-Message moment from the first democratic primary debate from April 27. Political commentators seized upon the moment and saw a contrast with Clinton. Members of the McLaughlin Group, for instance, critiqued his response in post-debate commentary on April 27:

> MR. MCLAUGHLIN: … The big question of the night was, how will Obama measure up to Clinton? Here's Clinton on how she would respond, if president, to a major terrorist attack.

> SEN. HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON (D-NY): (From videotape.) I think a president must move as swiftly as is prudent to retaliate. If we are attacked and we can determine who was behind that attack, and if there were nations that supported or gave material aid to those who attacked us, I believe we should quickly respond.[17]

> MR. MCLAUGHLIN: Here's Obama.

SEN. BARACK OBAMA (D-IL): (From videotape.) Well, the first thing we'd have to do is make sure that we've got an effective emergency response, something that this administration failed to do when we had a hurricane in New Orleans. And I think that we have to review how we operate in the event of not only a natural disaster, but also a terrorist attack.

MR. MCLAUGHLIN: Question: How did the two front-runners measure up in the first Democratic debate? I ask you, Eleanor.

MS. CLIFT: I think they both more than held their own, but Hillary Clinton in particular was very decisive in that answer. In fairness, Obama got the question — he was first to get it, so the others did have a chance to think through their thoughts. And you saw him really thinking on his feet. But he tends to talk more in abstractions. She's much better on specifics. And she was really commanding and she was warm. I don't think her front-runner status was threatened in the least.

MR. BUCHANAN: I think her front-runner status is more secure than ever. I think she was excellent in that answer. Her answers were crisp and sharp in the whole debate. She was presidential, John. And frankly, the general consensus is that Barack Obama was gauzy, abstract. He's taking pieces out of his speech and delivering them. And he really performed far below expectations. And I think his momentum has been slowed, if not stopped.

"Gauzy, abstract", says Buchanan. "Tends to talk more in abstractions", says Clift. Clinton, by contrast, is judged "crisp and sharp" and "very decisive". Other commentators tended to agree. This became a running criticism of Obama, that he's good at inspirational speeches but weak on details and substance.

The criticism of Obama aired on the McClaughlin show was no isolated incident. It arose before April 2007 but became acute in the wake of his early debate performances, between April 26 and August 2007 especially. Obama came to be haunted by criticism that he was weak on details, on specifics (criticism that targeted, interdiscursively, Obama's existing status of being a gifted, inspiring orator). Some of his advisors have suggested that this off-Message period for Obama was due in part to his campaign's own miscalculation, debate strategy gone awry. Obama's initial strategy in the 2007–2008 Democratic primary debates is reported to have been this: He had planned to go "thematic" to set himself apart from then front-runner Hillary Clinton.

> What made it worse was that Obama knew he'd helped build this box himself; that he'd left himself open to, and even invited, the charges of insubstantiality that were bedeviling him. He had signed on to the strategy of stressing thematics over specifics, on the grounds that waging a battle with Clinton on the policy margins would pay paltry dividends (Heilemann & Halperin, 2010, pp. 111–112).[18]

Clinton would reign over policy detail, Obama would stress "thematics". After the first few debates, it became clear that Clinton's quick, sharp, lucid responses made Obama's look anemic, insubstantial. "All sizzle and no steak." That's how *Game Change* authors John Heilemann and Mark Halperin (2010, p. 111) put it, summarizing the perception at the time. In that insider account of the Obama campaign, the authors briefly discuss this off-Message period in 2007, when Obama struggled with the debates. They report as well on a self-conscious attempt by the Obama campaign to turn back this criticism in the late spring / early summer of 2007. A concerted effort was made to be more substantive and sharper, to be, dare we say, more 'precise'?

> He wanted to be seen as substantive. He *was* substantive. And not being viewed that way was hurting his chances, he thought. I've spent my whole life caring about policy, he told his staff. I want to have new ideas, I want them to be specific. I want to make sure that no one can say they're not specific enough. (Heilemann & Halperin, 2010, p. 112)

While the exact timing of this reported effort to retool Obama's debate strategy is not revealed in *Game Change*, it likely occurred in the June-July window, and it is curious that at the end of June, in the June 28th debate, a spike in precision-grip density occurs.

Back in 2004, at least in his debates, Obama did very little precision grip in the four Illinois senate debates against Alan Keyes (the density averaged less than 1% and ranged from .03 to 2.5).[19] In the first two debates of 2007, the densities were higher than 2004 but still rather modest (7.7 on April 26, 5.2 on June 4). But on June 28, 2007 the density increases (and there is no corresponding increase in precision-grip density in non-debate contexts, as mentioned earlier) nearly three-fold, from 5.2 percent to 14.7 percent, and for the remainder of the debates — with just two exceptions — remains consistently high, never falling below 14.5. This increase in density early in the debate season of 2007 appears to coincide with a period in which the Obama campaign took stock of the first couple debate performances and tried to adjust.

Precision-grip density is a crude measure — a hint, at best — and it is very unlikely that this means Obama's consultants coached him on precision-grip or tried to convert Message into cospeech gesture in a project of characterological antithesis (Lempert, 2009) — the attempt to argue, in effect, that one is *not* gauzy and abstract through acts of exhibiting the opposite qualities. This must remain speculative, but if this shift in density betrays anything, it reveals changes in Obama's gestural habits that are *responsive* to the interdiscursive dynamics of Message politics but are not, properly speaking, "transductions" of Message into gestural form. "Transductions", meaning conversions of signs from one semiotic modality to another, often

in a bid to generate power (Keane, MS). In product design and branding methods, it is quite common for strategists to convert verbalizable abstractions — for example, abstract nouns like "strength", denoting a desired characterological brand attribute — into palpable semiotic form (words and expressions, a kind of attire, etc.), so that these forms can then serve as design elements that suggest or "index" the brand, at least for those able to construe them. Gestural transductions of Message would mean that precision-grip has become emblematized for some social domain of people, but there is no evidence that it has.

Figure 2 synoptically represents the levels of analysis and chains of semiotic motivation through which, via analytic reconstruction, one can move through orders of indexicality from a focus effect in discourse to candidate brand. As depicted here, the indexical "focus" shifts as one traces the pathways of motivation from signs that point to discourse to those that point to candidate brand. The relevant units of analysis change as one moves through these orders as well, for the conditions under which "brand" becomes recognizable, for instance, are quite different from those that motivate readings of speaker-persona. Candidate brand is necessarily an interdiscursive precipitate (see Agha and Wortham 2005). Interdiscursive, because candidate brand — its distinctiveness — becomes possible only within a relational field of competition, figured often as a "market", in which brands are expected to jostle and vie for consumer-voter attention; and because mass-media commentary by professional journalists and pundits mediates Message, interpreting it "for" the electorate that these commentators ostensibly serve (Lempert & Silverstein, in press).

orders of indexicality	indexical focus	function	units
1°	discourse/ addressee	focus indexical in respect of information structure (contextualized tokens can yield range of construals, such as 'new'-ness, contrastive focus, topicalization, etc.)	stroke-token
2°	addressee	metapragmatic icon for 'making a sharp, effective point'	stroke-token
3°	speaker	indexical icon for 'having a sharp point', 'being argumentatively sharp/effective', etc.	catchment(s)
4°	**candidate**	**indexical icon of brand qualia** (e.g., 'Precise', 'Decisive' — and *not* "gauzy and abstract", not "all sizzle and no steak", etc.)	interdiscursive, mediatized catchments

Figure 2. Orders of indexicality for precision grip

A final, substantive qualm. Candidate branding is notoriously multi-modal, so why privilege gesture? Verbal performance commands attention in debates and stump speeches and town hall discussions, and a vast range of semiotic materials — nearly anything, it would seem — can be exploited to serve as brand diacritics: staging and scenography for campaign events; candidate wardrobe, accessories, and hair style; website design and signage; the campaign bus' exterior design and color; legible, sartorial paraphernalia — hats, pins, t-shirts —, donned by staff members and supporters.

Isn't it misguided, then, to have tried to tease out one strand, manual gesture, and then ask about its role in holding this cross-modal fabric of candidate brand together? In abstracting out gesture and speculating about its role in candidate branding, as I've done at this essay's close, do I not risk committing a metonymic fallacy, where one ascribes performativity to a part — gesture — that is not experienced as a part, that carries no meaning as a part, that has no Message performativity as a lone sign? While the exercise of abstraction performed here, that of lifting out and inspecting cospeech gesture, does carry this risk, it may also be precisely the kind of exercise that can put to rest exaggerated claims made about what gesture does in political oratory and debate. The exaggerations (and there are many) include that of *pervasive emblematicity* (as if most if not all political gesture were carefully engineered to achieve rhetorical effects and hence strongly conventionalized) and *indexical im-mediacy* (as if the indexical path from sign-vehicle to object were 'direct'.) In showing how these intuitions break down, this exercise can deter us from trying to jump from tokens of gesture to qualities of politician — a jump familiar in popular pronouncements on political gesture but also in classic writings like that of Quintilian. (While cautioning orators against the use of crude, "imitative", overly theatrical gesture, Quintilian offered copious advice on all sorts of gesture, and often treated these communicative behaviors as if they had straightforward indexical ties to desired actions and rhetorical effects. An example: "To strike the thigh, a gesture which Cleon is supposed to have first practiced at Athens, is not only common, but suits the expression of indignant feeling and excites the attention of the audience" [p. 374, Book XI].) This view of gesture makes it seem as if non-referential indexicality in gesture were as simple and unmediated as smoke to fire and, at the same time, as heavily conventionalized and rigidly signifying as, say, brand logos. In a sense, this view of political gesture is akin to neo-physiognomics — physiognomy being that old science of reading off facts about people from observable qualities of their bodies, moral attributes from the morphology of the face or head, or, in this case, qualities of politicians from the movement of their hands. In tracing the often sinuous pathways of semiotic motivation and teasing apart levels of analysis, it becomes possible to address with more care the old question of how gestural signs participate in the art

— or applied science, as the political marketing industry would now have it — of political persuasion.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Transcription conventions are as follows: line breaks mark intonation unit (IU) boundaries; "(…)"=parentheses are used for unfilled pause durations (generally .5 seconds or more for inter-IU pauses, with a lower pause-length threshold for intra-IU pauses); "(.)"=unfilled micropause, noticeable but generally less than .4 seconds; "[___]"=left and right brackets with underlined text mark stretches of discourse with precision-grip; specfically, the left bracket marks precision-grip "onset", that is, the first stroke in a series [see note 7]; the right bracket marks the end of precision-grip hand-shape; **bold**=prosodic prominences (indicated only in example [1]); P=precision-grip strokes; p=lower amplitude precision-grip strokes. Note that only precision-grip gestures are marked in transcript. Other gestures are left untranscribed.

2. This longest stretch was nearly 18 seconds; the second longest in this debate was slightly under 13 seconds; the average was 6.5. Clinton's answer to the earlier question, which promised swift retaliation, featured no precision-grip gestures. Edward's answer, which also led with the promise to act "swiftly" and "strongly" in response to the hypothetical terrorist attack, featured just a brief, 2.8 second-long stretch of precision-grip gesture — a length that was quite close to average for Edwards in this debate —, despite his rather long, 75-second-long turn. Obama was thus not echoing the gestural accompaniments of either Clinton or Edwards.

3. The other candidates were Joe Biden (Senator, Delaware), Hillary Clinton (Senator, New York), Chris Dodd (Senator, Connecticut), John Edwards (formerly a Senator for North Carolina and Vice Presidential candidate in 2004), Mike Gavel (former Senator for Alaska), Dennis Kucinich (Member of the House of Representatives, Ohio), and Bill Richardson (Governor, New Mexico).

4. I use "reanalysis" loosely to mean transformations in how a gesture is used and interpreted, changes motivated especially by reflexive processes (defined below). I do not suggest that such changes work the same as historical-linguistic processes of grammatical "reanalysis". In extending "reanalysis" to gesture, I draw inspiration especially from Agha (2007), who uses the term more expansively and for whom reflexive activities are an engine of semiotic change.

5. This thumb-position permits precision-grip to shade into a pointing gesture, specifically when the hand is rotated so that the palm faces outward and away from speaker, as illustrated in (b) (Figure 1). This hand-shape is indeed sometimes used by Obama for gestural deixis and for repeated, downward-directed lectern tapping. Precision grip should not be conceived as a discrete, circumscribed category of gesture but as a caption for a range of features that share a family resemblance and that overlap partially with features of other families. That said, it may well be the case that the precision-grip gestures documented here — and presumably in the repertoires of most American English speakers — are comparatively fuzzier or "sloppier" in gestural articulation relative to the Neapolitan precision-grip gestures studied by Kendon; for the latter population, distinct types of precision-grip (R-form and grappolo) exist, and intermediate forms between R and grappolo hand shapes do not much occur (Adam Kendon, personal communication.)

6. Exceptions include expressions like *not only / because*, which, as example (3) shows, often involves a spatial-metaphoric contrast in which the gesturing hand uses left / right quadrants to set off contrasted entities in discourse.

7. In this article I frequently limit my observations to the "onset" stroke (the first in a series) in cases where there are a succession of precision-grip strokes. I do so because I wish to exercise care around questions of coexpressivity and not assume that the first stroke-token in a succession of similar strokes has the same coexpressive motivation as its successive iterations through 'repetition' (same shape hand, hand-shape, motion, etc.) and 'parallelism' (i.e., repetition with some degree of variation) and / or lower-amplitude gestural strokes. This issue has been under-examined in the literature.

8. There is no place here to reflect on what terms like "exactness" and "delicacy" and "fineness" could or should mean with respect to precision grip. Is it, on analogy with language, some epistemic 'modal' or quasi-modalizing function that precision grip contributes? Or perhaps precision-grip's contribution should be studied even more broadly in terms of "stance" (e.g., Matoesian, 2005; Englebretson, 2007; Du Bois, 2007; Jaffe, 2009; Lempert, 2008). While contextualized tokens of precision grip can help motivate a wide range of semantic and pragmatic effects, some of which may be glossable as 'exactness', as I argue below, it is the last on Kendon's (2004, p. 240) list of what precision grip generally does (viz. "… making prominent some specific fact or idea") that most closely approximates what I found in the data analyzed here.

9. Following Silverstein (1976), an index (e.g., a deictic expression in language) can be considered relatively "creative" or "entailing" to the degree that the feature of context being indexed does not exist independently from the sign-vehicle at the moment of semiosis; the index can thus be said to help bring into being the contextual fact rather than merely "presuppose" it.

10. I thank Jack Sidnell for encouraging me to explore efforts to secure recipiency.

11. Proportion of gaze shifts preceding or coinciding with onset stroke, by candidate: Joe Biden 9/16 (56%), Hillary Clinton 28/41 (68%), Chris Dodd (58/85 68%), John Edwards 38/51 (75%), Mike Gravel 14/15 (93%), Dennis Kucinich (65/85) 77%, Barack Obama 78/117 (67%), Bill Richardson 58/82 (71%).

12. Additional evidence for precision-grip's addressivity may lie in the second-order indexical value of precision-grip, described below. I argue below that it has come to serve as a pragmatic readymade for "making a sharp, effective point". To the extent that these are oppositional acts, they can be said to have an implicit deictic vector toward some addressee.

13. Luke Fleming and I (Fleming & Lempert, 2011) have argued that performativity is a gradient phenomenon, a matter of degree, not kind. It is vital to retain a gradient sense of performativity in this case. Obama's precision-grip's second-order value is not as easily reportable as the illocutionary force markers described by Kendon (1995), but the lack of ease in metapragmatic reportability alone does not mean that the criterial gesture lacks a measure of "illocutionary force".

14. In tracing the pathways of semiotic motivation that explain precision-grip's reanalysis, I perform an abstraction that brackets, for purposes of analytic reconstruction, the co(n)textual embeddedness of precision-grip — it is, after all, *co*-speech gesture and is not experienced in isolation (Agha, 2007) — and instead likens its reanalysis to that of a discrete linguistic form-type (e.g., a lexical item, a phonological variable studied by sociolinguists). It should be apparent from my analysis that the second-order indexical value described here is *not* a value that inheres in the gestural form, since this value is only (potentially) salient through an emergent configuration of co(n)textual facts, the most obvious of which is that the event unfolding is a "debate." In my analysis of higher-order indexical effects, specifically, that of speaker-focal indexicality, the conditions that afford these effects are multiplex. For discussions of text and textuality which inform this analysis, see especially Agha (2007).

15. Using ELAN (developed by the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics), precision-grip "density" was assessed by coding as single annotations stretches of precision-grip, defined on the left boundary by onset stroke (excluding any preparation). Any successive precision-grip strokes and lower-amplitude repetitions were included as part of the annotation and the right boundary was delimited using the moment the precision-grip hand-shape ends. All stretches of Obama's speech in which his gestures were visible (not obstructed by camera position or cuts to the crowd) were then separately annotated, and then the ratio of the total duration (measured in milliseconds) of precision-grip highlighting to the total time in which gestures could have been displayed was assessed. As I discuss later, the first two debates (4/26 and 6/4) were low in precision-grip density, though this changes dramatically in late June. For now, the basic observation is that no corresponding spike in precision-grip density occurs during the same period and that, on average, precision-grip density in debates greatly exceeds that of non-debates.

16. McNeill (1992, 2005) would consider precision-grip "metaphoric", but in a much stronger sense than I wish to argue here, for he would assume that metaphoric conceptualization (where one domain is grasped in terms of another) underwrites this gesture. While there is no space here to problematize his distinction in imagistic gestures between 'iconic' and 'metaphoric', I do not want to presume this sense of metaphoricity for one obvious reason: As a gesture that has apparently undergone a degree of conventionalization, it is unclear whether the metaphor is available to speakers, or to hearers, any more than well-worn tropes and metaphors in language are.

17. Clinton's response in full:

> Well again having been a Senator uh during nine eleven, I understand very well the extraordinary horror of that kind of an attack and the impact that it has far beyond those who are directly affected. I think a president must move as swiftly as is prudent to retaliate. If we are attacked and we can determine who was behind that attack, and if there were nations that supported or gave material aid to those who attacked us, I believe we should quickly respond. Now that doesn't mean we go looking for other fights. You know, I supported President Bush when he went after Al Qaida and the Taliban in Afghanistan. And then when he decided to divert attention to Iraq, it was not a decision that I would have made had I been President, because we still haven't found Bin Laden. So let's focus on those who have attacked us and do everything we can to destroy them.

18. It is unclear to me whether this reported strategy was operative in the first couple debates. There is some discursive evidence of this strategy in July. It may be that the plan either took on more urgency in the wake of Obama's initial, weak performance or perhaps was even developed as a response to his sub par performance.

19. Obama's 2004 debate appearances featured little in the way of precision grip, but that was not true of his celebrated speech later that year at the Democratic National convention. Not only was the density of precision grip high relative to his 2004 debates (11.8%), but there was an unprecedented diversity of precision-grip forms, most of which never appeared again in the 2007–2008 video corpus of debates. In his 2004 speech, more than a third of his precision-grip gestures were finger bunches in which thumb touches the tips of index and middle fingers, and there was an instance of a finger bunch where thumb touches the tips of three fingers. Slightly more than a fifth of his precision-grip gestures were thumb to tip of middle finger, not index finger. This event was clearly an exception.

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