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## FROM CLEANING TO TOTALITY – THE SEMANTIC CORE OF THE “DUSTING OFF PALMS” GESTURE AMONG THE HAUSA OF NORTHERN NIGERIA

### **Abstract:**

The paper shows a close relationship between speech and gestures by arguing that in oral utterances the verbal part is one of the components of the message, while the other is embedded in gesture. The analysis is based on a few hours of recordings containing natural discourse, mainly sermons preached by Hausa sheiks and religious leaders from Northern Nigeria. The focus is put on the use of a recurrent gesture referred to as the “dusting off palms” gesture. The semantic core of the gesture based on the contextual analysis shows that it refers to cleaning, mental dirt, rejection, termination and totality. The link between all of these notions is to be found in the action which gave rise to the gesture: dusting off palms after a manual job.

**Keywords:** Hausa, gesture, dusting off palms, Nigeria, semantic core of the gesture

### 1 | INTRODUCTION

Every day we perform thousands of movements. Some of them are incidental, while others are conscious, controlled, repeated and done on purpose. Many of these controlled movements we make with our hands. The more often we use them, the more internalized they are to such an extent that our body starts performing these movements almost automatically and often recalls them not necessarily in order to perform a given action but, for example, in order to show this action to someone. The movement is also recalled when we think or talk about the action. Such an imitation of the action gave rise to gestures. Many gestures are

embodied, i.e. “based on bodily experiences in and with the world (Bressem 2013: 405)”. Once an action turns into a gesture it links a concrete action to an abstract notion – a schema. A mental schema is a larger unit of knowledge showing how knowledge is combined into clusters. It is also quite general and represents “a variety of particular instances, much as a prototype represents the particular instances of a category” (Reed 2012: 223). Thus, there is a clear relationship between a gesture and a thought. This relationship, rather than being unidirectional seems to be circular, i. e. gestures reflect our mental processes but also help to shape them (Cartmill, Beiloch, Goldin-Meadow 2012).

One of the gestures whose etymology is derived from a concrete action is what I call in this paper, “dusting off palms”. The gesture has been described by Calbris (2011:213) in the following way: “the palms are brushed against each other in two downward movements as if one wants to remove dust off each palm after finishing a manual job”. The gesture is used by speakers belonging to different communities and its form differs according to where and by whom it is performed. This paper scrutinizes the use of the gesture among the Hausa speakers from Northern Nigeria. There, the gesture has two variants: palms are brushed either in downward, vertical movements or in horizontal movements. The action is repeated several times or reduced to a single rubbing movement. Sometimes the gesture is performed in a very dynamic way – the palms hit each other quickly making a clapping sound and the moment of actual rubbing is reduced to a minimum. Sometimes, however, the movement is slow – one palm wipes against the other slowly from the base of the palm to the tips of the fingers and no clapping sound is audible and if anything can be heard it is rather a scraping sound.

The gesture of “dusting off palms” can be classified as a recurrent gesture (Ladewig 2014). Recurrent gestures are conventionalized to a certain degree and show a stable relationship between a form and a meaning. This stable form-meaning unit recurs in different contexts and is used by various speakers from a particular speech community (Ladewig 2014:1559). The recurrent gesture always has a semantic core (Ladewig 2014:1562) or a semantic theme (Kendon 2004) and “this theme (...) through the way it interacts with the (usually verbal) meaning of the

spoken component of the utterance, contributes to the creation of a highly specific local meaning (Kendon 2004: 226). For example, the semantic theme of a well described open hand palm down gesture appears to refer to the interruption of some process or line of action in progress, but when applied to a specific context it can function as a gesture of negation, evaluative intensification, denial. It also commands the interruption of something (Kendon 2004:226). Thus, a given recurrent gesture plays various different functions within a discourse.

Hausa people intuitively feel the semantic core of the “dusting off palms” gesture. When asked about the meaning of the gesture<sup>1</sup>, they say that it refers to finishing something (*nuna kwarewar abu* ‘show finishing a thing’); it may co-occur with the adverbial intensifier *kwata-kwata*<sup>2</sup> ‘at all’, or be equivalent to such expressions as *ba ruwana* ‘it’s not my business’ (lit. there is no water of mine) and *shi ke nan* ‘that’s it’. It may be considered an equivalent of a statement ‘It’s over/finished; there’s nothing else to talk about’. The gesture is also used in Hausa sign language with the meaning ‘it’s not my business’. The analysis of how it functions in a discourse mostly confirms the intuition of native speakers. The gesture has a summative force; it may also emphasize totality or completeness, it may accompany negative sentences<sup>3</sup>, and it may co-occur with statements referring to rejection or denial. The only thing which was not indicated by native speakers, but comes out as a result of an analysis of the speech co-occurring with the gesture are two opposite notions: cleaning/cleanliness and being dirty/dirt.

The crucial thing necessary in order to understand the semantic core of a gesture is to find its origin, the action that gave rise to a given gesture. The gesture of dusting off the palms is derived from the action of clearing

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<sup>1</sup> The question about the meaning of the gesture was presented to the students of Bayero University Kano and Federal College of Education during fieldwork conducted in Kano, Nigeria in August 2016.

<sup>2</sup> *Kwata-kwata* is a bipolar adverbial intensifier that can be used in positive and negative clauses. In positive clauses it conveys a maximally emphatic meaning of ‘completely, entirely, totally’. When used as a negative-degree polarity adverb it means ‘not at all, not even a bit’ (Jaggar 2009: 66-68)

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of other Hausa gestures co-occurring with negative sentences and the gestures expressing negation see Will (2017) and Yakasai (2014).

or brushing the hands. Imagining this action is really helpful in linking all of the components of the semantic core of the gesture. The action takes place when something dirty and unpleasant sticks to the palms and one wants to get rid of it. It may also take place after finishing a manual job. Finishing a job means two things: either (a) that the job was completed and there's nothing else to be done (so an external force was responsible for ceasing the job) or (b) a job was not completed, but the person doing it decided to stop it for some reason (because of tiredness, it was getting dark, it was time to finish the job, he/she had enough of it – the work was interrupted/incomplete because of an internal force). The components of the action – the dirt, the action of cleaning, finishing the job preceding dusting off the palms – would be found in the examples of using the gesture.

## 2 | METHODOLOGY

In collecting the data I followed the method adopted by Antas (2013:10) and relied on pieces of natural discourse, which were not recorded with an intention to study gestures. Such a method has its shortcomings (Will 2016:186), but allows for scrutinizing the use of a given gesture in different verbal contexts. The data was accessed via YouTube service and consists of sermons and announcements given by the most popular northern Nigerian sheikhs and religious leaders. The length of each video varies from fourteen minutes to an hour and a half. The language of all of the videos is Hausa. The examples shown in the paper were extracted from eight videos. It should be emphasized that the use of a given gesture depends on the temperament of a speaker as well as his preferences for performing particular gestures. Therefore some speakers are overrepresented. In one of the films, the speaker had not used this gesture even once in a half an hour interview although his gesticulation was rather rigorous. Instead, he often used another gesture having a very similar meaning – the gesture of wiping the back of the hands (Will 2017:26).

It has been proved that co-speech gestures are strictly connected with verbal utterance (McNeill 1992). That is why the verbal part of the utterance which accompanies the gesture was analyzed in order to find a key-word or phrase which directly refers to the gesture. Picking up

these lexical elements allowed us to establish a semantic core of a gesture. The relationship between various words or phrases co-occurring with the gesture may seem to be vague at first glance, but the more occurrences of a given gesture, the more links between the words accompanying the gestures appear.

In order to establish the semantic core of a given gesture, a method of micro-analysis advocated by Kendon (2004) was used. “Micro-analysis always combines the analysis of form with attention to the exact moment of production, in relation to the ongoing utterance and the actions of the co-participants (Streek 2009:24)”. That is why a larger fragment of speech was analyzed, especially the one preceding the gesture. Without this broader context, it is easy to misinterpret the meaning.

### 3 | THE SEMANTIC CORE OF THE DUSTING OFF PALMS GESTURE

The following section involves a description of examples showing different contexts of using the gestures. Each example contacting a fragment of speech is illustrated by the sequence of pictures containing the print screens from the videos. In each example the moment of the gesture appearing is underlined.

#### 3.1. CLEANING

As mentioned in the introduction, the etymology of the gesture is quite obvious – dusting off or cleaning the hands after a manual job. The reminiscences of the action of cleaning are present in words co-occurring with the gesture, which additionally confirm the hypothesis concerning the origin of the gesture. A speaker talking about the importance of keeping one’s environment and one’s body clean states:

- (1) *duk wadannan abubuwa ki ringa amfani da ruwa kina tsaftace su, kina gyara su*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> All fragments of the speeches and interviews has been transcribed by the author. Hausa examples as well as words and phrases discussed in the article are all written in standard Hausa orthography.

‘all these things, always use the water to clean them, to make them neat’



FIGURE 1. Source: Salihu Lukman (2015), minutes 24:40-24:41.

When uttering the phrase concerning cleaning things, the speaker wipes his palms once in a very slow way referring to the primary meaning of the action which gave rise to the gesture – cleaning.

However, cleaning does not need to refer to a physical action as described in (1). Cleaning often has religious or ritual dimension and the process of physical cleaning is necessary for cleaning the mind (Reader 1995:240). It may also refer to clearing the mind of bad thoughts. In (2) the speaker explains that the first wife should keep calm and take things easy when her husband marries another wife. She should also avoid showing contempt, fury and maliciousness. He summarizes his speech with the following advice:

- (2) *ki saki jikinki warkam, sai ki ga jikinshi ya yi sanyi*  
 ‘relax (lit. release your body), take it easy and you will see that he  
 [your husband] is cooled down (lit. his body is cold)’



FIGURE 2. Source: Salihu Lukman (2015), minutes 13:06

When uttering the phrase *saki jikinki* ‘relax’ the speaker performed a gesture in the following way: first he slowly wiped his left palm with his right palm and then he repeated the movement in a very dynamic way twice, and made a clapping sound. The phrase co-occurring with the gesture refers to relaxing, i.e. cleaning the mind from a negative approach towards a new wife, getting rid of jealousy. This physical cleaning is present in the gesture. Another explanation of using the gesture is also possible. What triggered the occurrence of the gesture is the literal meaning of the Hausa phrase *saki jiki* ‘relax’ which is composed of the verb *saka* ‘to release’, ‘to let go’ and a noun *jiki* ‘body’. It is worth indicating that the expression the speaker used is a metaphor and the gesture refers to the source domain of the metaphor rather than to its target domain<sup>5</sup> (Antas 2013: 202). Therefore, in (2) the speaker could refer to the primary meaning of the verb *saka* and show the action of letting something go or freeing something, which is similar to the action of dusting off the palms; in both cases one gets rid of something – either dust/dirt or a concrete object such as a key or a bag.

Another example of using the gesture is connected with the statement concerning the Jews and Christians who would be rewarded or blessed if they followed the teachings of the prophet Muhammad. The expression that appears at the very moment of performing the gesture *yi alheri* is composed of two words, the light verb *yi* ‘to do’ and the noun *alheri* which means ‘good deed, gift, act of generosity, blessing, kindness, a good term’. I believe that the use of the gesture was attracted by the fact that the reward or acceptance the speaker has in mind can be connected somehow with the action of cleaning – getting the reward is closely connected with being spiritually clean. But another explanation of

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<sup>5</sup> As observed by Antas, a gesture refers to a concrete action, not to an abstract concept. Therefore, when a Polish speaker utters an idiom: *trzymać Pana Boga za nogi* ‘to be lucky’ (lit. to keep God’s legs) the gesture co-occurring with the expression does not indicate luck, but refers to the literal meaning of the idiom and indicates gripping someone (Antas 2013: 201). Antas notices that when the two modalities – verbal and gestural – co-occur, a process of demetaphorization takes place. The language metaphor is demetaphorized by the gesture which imposes an explicit interpretation of a metaphor by displaying its metonymic source (Antas 2013: 202).

using the gesture is also possible – it can be connected with the phrase following the expression *yi alheri* which is *duniya da lahira*. It refers to this world as well as to the Next World, which is believed to be the final destination for every Muslim. But the expression *duniya da lahira* is commonly used to mean everywhere, anywhere you are; so *duniya da lahiya* indicates totality, completeness – a notion which is also associated with the gesture (see section 3.5):

- (3) *Su ma, Yahudu da Nasara, da sun bi annabi da su za a yi musu alheri duniya da lahira*  
 ‘but also them, Jews and Christians, if they follow the prophet,  
they would get a reward in this world and in the Next World’



FIGURE 3. Source: Sunnah TV Nigeria (2014a), minutes 18:07.

### 3.2. MENTAL DIRT

An inseparable component of the action of dusting off is the existence of dust or any other dirt which covers the hands – something one wants to get rid of. Many examples of using the gesture of dusting off palms refers to this component. However, I haven’t found an example of using the gesture in which the speaker refers to physical dust in the same way he refers to physical cleaning as in (1). Whenever speakers refer to something dirty, it is always “mental dirt”, i. e. something undesirable or problematic. For example, a speaker who is talking about Nigeria and the problems it faces states:

- (4) *sai ya ce: amma matsalarku shi ne leadership, ba ku da shugabanci*  
 ‘your problem, it is leadership, you have no leadership’



FIGURE 4. Source: AbdulQadir Muhammad Bello (2013), minutes: 1:10.

When expressing the phrase *shi ne leadership* ‘it is leadership’ the speaker performs the gesture of dusting off his hand once in a very quick way and the clapping sound accompanies his performance. Possibly, the gesture refers to *matsala* ‘problem’ which Nigeria should get rid of and the speaker indicates it by imitating the action of getting rid of the dust covering the hands. The gesture seems to be a metonymic base of a more abstract concept, i. e. *matsala* ‘problem, affair, obstacle’. However another explanation of using the gesture in (4) is also possible. The gesture precedes the clause: *ba ku da shugabanci* ‘you have no leadership’. This lack, the absence, nonexistence, closely connected with the notion of termination (see section 3.3) could also trigger the use of the gesture.

The association of the gesture with mental dirt is also visible in the utterance quoted in (5), where the speaker is warning women who are listening to his speech against focusing on material things when they are preparing themselves for marriage. Instead of buying goods for the house, the woman should prepare herself mentally:

- (5) *sai ya zama ta jera komai na zaman gidan aure amma abu daya ta rasa, shi ne ba ta sallama da zaman gidan miji ba. To wannan zai kawo mata cikasa rayuwa*  
 ‘So it happens that she collected everything to live as a married woman (lit. in a married house), but she missed one thing, which

is: she did not welcome living at her husband's house. That will bring a blemish on her life'



FIGURE 5. Source: Salihu Lukman (2015), minutes 10:30.

Before uttering the word *cikas* 'blemish' the speaker rubs his palms once to indicate the mental dirt, understood as a defect or stain that should be removed.

In (6), where the speaker is talking about one of the prophets who experienced nothing but trouble since he became a Muslim, this mental dirt is rendered by the word *wahala* 'trouble'.

(6) *Musa'ab (...) bai taba ji wani sakamako ba. Tun da ya musulunta a wahala yake [pause].*

'Musa'ab (...) did not feel any reward. Since he became a Muslim, he had been in trouble.



FIGURE 6. Source: Salisu Lukman (2014b), minutes 34:08-34:09

The speaker repeats the dusting off gesture three times in a steady way and finishes performing it a moment after he finishes his speech as if emphasizing the amount of trouble the character in the story experienced.

In another example the speaker says that if a man claims something that does not belong to him, he makes a mistake, but if he fights for something in accordance to the law, he should not be blamed.

(7) *to amma abin da mutum ya cancanta ko aka zalunce shi, matuƙar ya kai kara wajen da yake ga al'amar adalci, to a nan ba laifi ya yi ba*

‘but if a person deserves something, even if he would be oppressed [because of that], if he brings his case where he can claim justice, in this case, he does not do anything wrong’



FIGURE 7. Source: Sunnah TV Nigeria (2013), minutes 24:40-24:41.

The speaker wipes his palms once just before uttering the word *laifi* ‘wrong doing, crime, flaw’. The statement concerning committing a crime or doing something wrong is negated. Thus, the speaker on the one hand refers to the mental dirt like in (5), on the other he refers to cleaning (see section 3.1). By wiping the dirt from the palm, the speaker exonerates the very person he mentions, indicating the guilt-free. It is important to emphasize here that the two notions – cleaning and being dirty – are strictly connected: there is no cleaning without dirt and dirt is something which needs cleaning. Although, from the semantic point of view dirt and cleanliness are two antonyms, on the gestural modality they are strictly related – a single wiping movement shows both the existence of the dirt and getting rid of it which results in cleanliness. Rather than representing them as two polar opposite notions, I would say they are two notions situated on a circle showing the process of cleaning, getting clean and then getting gradually dirty – the stage where the cleaning is needed again. Thus, it is not surprising that the gesture is used not only

when the speaker is talking about getting rid of “mental dirt” but also when he refers to getting mentally dirty. It is exemplified by an utterance where the speaker talks about betraying the principles of Islam after consulting a witch doctor.

- (8) *wanda ya je wurin boka, boka ya fada mishi magana ya amince da ita hakika ya kafirce wa abin da aka sauka wa annabi, Sallallahu Alaihi Wasallam. Ya kafirce wa Alkur'ani, ya karyata Alkur'ani, ya yi wa Alkur'ani tawaye*

‘The one who went to the witch doctor and the witch doctor told him something and he agreed with it, he truly betrays the things sent through the prophet, peace be upon him. He betrays the Quran, he contradicts the Quran, he rebels from the Quran’



FIGURE 8. Source: Salihu Lukman (2015), minutes 7:26.

First the speaker performs this gesture once (Figure 8) in a vertical movement making the clapping sound. Later on, he performs the gesture three times in a horizontal way and this time the performance is less dynamic, more wiping-like and with no audible sound. The gesture co-occurs with two verbs *kafirce* ‘betray’ (lit. become a pagan) and *karyata* ‘give the lie to’; both conveying the notion of getting mentally dirty. If we remember the circular process which connects two notions, cleanliness and dirt, we can assume that by performing the gesture the speaker proceeds with the next step which should be done by someone who got dirty (in a mental way), i.e. cleaning. However, another interpretation of the gesture is also possible. The speaker wanted to emphasize that someone who visits the witch doctor betrays the teachings of the Quran completely, totally (cf. section 3.5).

### 3.3. TERMINATION/FINISHING

Apart from referring to cleanliness and dirt, the gesture of dusting off palms often occurs in contexts where completing or finishing something is emphasized. As mentioned in the introduction, the action of dusting off the palms takes place after finishing the job or after stopping the job. Therefore, the notion of termination is a necessary component of the semantic core of the gesture. When referring to finishing something the gesture may co-occur with the phrase *shi ke nan* ‘that’s that’. The close connection between the phrase and the gesture is not accidental. The phrase has a summative force, especially when it occurs as a clause-initial connector (Jaggar 2001: 510).

(9) *shi ke nan duk an gama* ‘that’s that it’s all been finished’

This summative force of the gesture as well as the phrase *shi ke nan* is visible in (10), where the speaker is warning women against going to the witch doctor and using black magic in order to control their husbands. In (10) he describes one such method:

(10) *Tsokar nama fa, yankar nama, za ta je ta saka shi a cikin farjinta ya kwana. Gari ya waye sai ta fito da wannan tsokar nama, ta dafa shi sai ya ba mijinta ya ci. Shi ke nan. [pause] ta mallake shi* ‘A piece of meat, a cut piece of meat, she will take and put it to her vagina and keep it for a night. When it’s getting light, she will take this piece of meat off, cook it and give it to her husband to eat. That’s it. [pause] She fully controls him’

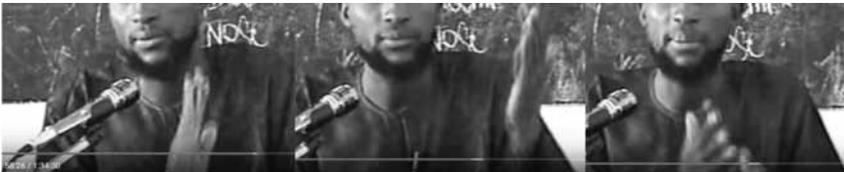


FIGURE 9. Source: Salihu Lukman (2015), minutes 58:26-58:27.

The speaker starts performing the gesture when making a pause just after uttering the phrase *shi ke nan* ‘that’s it’ and keeps on dusting off

his palms when giving the final conclusion to the story. The gesture is repeated three times and a clapping sound (which can be heard when the palms touch each other while the last performance of the gesture takes place), gives an extra emphasis to his concluding remark.

The same exact function of the gesture – concluding a story – can be observed with reference to the same speaker, who is explaining that the coexistence of love and harm is impossible in marriage. The gesture is used exactly when the speaker utters the phrase *shi ke nan* ‘that’s it’. In (11) there is his explanation which precedes using the gesture, quoted for a better understanding of the context:

- (11) *Mijinki yana sonki amma kina wulakanta shi. To, ba zai iya jure ga so ga cutarwa ba. Sai wannan kiyayya sai ta kori soyayya. Shi ke nan. Aure ya kare*  
 ‘Your husband loves you, but you treat him with contempt. He will not be able to stand love and harm [at the same time]. This hate will chase the love away. That’s it. The marriage ends.



FIGURE 10. Source: Salihu Lukman (2015), minutes 33:13.

Since the gesture is used to indicate that something is finished/over, it is not surprising that one speaker uses it at the end of his utterance saying an Arabic formula often accompanying fulfilling the task:

- (12) *alhamdulillah wa s-Salatu wa s-Salam ‘ala Rasulullah*  
 ‘praise Allah and peace be upon the Prophet’



FIGURE 11. Source: NNTV-Africa (2012), minutes 14:54.

The phrase in (12), usually used in shortened form *alhamdulillah*, expresses gratitude to God for something: completing a task, avoiding a danger. It is used in response to situations “both mundane, as on concluding a meal or a journey across town, and the extraordinary, as on the birth of a child” (Gaudio 1996: 82). Here the gesture together with the religious phrase denotes finishing the message the speaker gave.

A slightly different interpretation of this gesture is used by another speaker who is trying to show that one should not shout in order to reprimand people, but rather explain what is intended in a steady, controlled voice:

- (13) *kada wanda ya sa waya a caji a wurin nan. Jama'a, kada wanda ya sake shiga wurin nan. Kawai. Ya isa. Shi ke nan. Haka ne sunna ta muna.*

‘Do not charge your phone here! People, do not enter here again! That’s enough. That’s it. That is how sunna shows it’.



FIGURE 12. Source: Salihu Lukman (2014b), minutes 20:05.

When saying *haka ne* ‘that’s it’ the speaker wipes his palms. Just like in example (10), (11) and (12) the gesture is somehow connected with the idea of summarizing the story. The speaker emphasizes that one can behave only the way he suggests, one shouldn’t do or add anything else and such is the conclusion of his story. The gesture occurs just after the speaker utters the phrase *shi ke nan* ‘that’s it’. In his utterance there are other words which also have a summative force: the adverb *haka* ‘thus’, which actually co-occurs with the gesture and in fact refers to the summary of his explanation. Another word connected with concluding a statement is the verb *isa* ‘to be sufficient’. There is also an adverb *kawai* ‘only, alone’ giving a sense of exclusiveness and totality (cf. section 3.5). All of these expressions go along with the action of dusting off the hands.

### 3.4. REJECTION

Many examples show that that the action of dusting off the palms is connected with the idea of rejection. It is not surprising since rejecting is simply getting rid of something and once you dust off your palms you get rid of the dust or the dirt. The notion of rejection is clearly expressed in (14) where the speaker gives advice to people to stop doing anything which may bring on the wrath of God:

- (14) *duk abin da yana cikin sha'aninsa ya jawo wa mutum fushin Ubangigi, to ka bar shi*  
 ‘everything of this kind that brings on the wrath of God to a man, well, leave it’



FIGURE 13. Sunnah TV Nigeria (2014b), minutes 16:59-17:00.

When uttering the phrase: *ka bar shi* ‘leave it/give it away’ the speaker rubs his palms several times.

Since the idea of rejection is closely connected with negation, it is not surprising that many examples where the “dusting off (the) palms” gesture emphasizes rejection contain morphological markers of negation. In (15) the speaker explains the misinterpretation of the concept of humility. He states that if someone behaves in a modest way but steals and cheats at the same time he cannot be considered humble. The speaker rejects the idea both verbally by negating the sentence and in a gestural way by wiping his palm once.

- (15) *ya ci kudin wani ya yi yaudara, ya yi makirci. Wannan ba tawadu'u ba ne*  
 ‘He stole someone’s money, he cheated, he was crafty. This is not humility’



FIGURE 14. Sunnah TV Nigeria (2014b), minutes 15:18-15:19.

Similarly in (16) the gesture emphasizes rejecting an idea by the speaker who does not agree with something. The speaker answers the question about the origin of the day of mourning celebrated by Shia Muslims on the 10th day in the month of Muharram and performs this gesture twice; first when he says that the feast has no origin and a few moments later when he repeats the statement and wipes his palm once:

- (16) *sabo da haka in da ta yi magana asali ne, musulunci bai karan-tad da wannan ba*

‘that is why if she is talking about the origin, Islam does not teach about it’



FIGURE 15. Source: Sunnah TV Nigeria (2014b), minutes 22:49-22:50.

### 3.5. TOTALITY/COMPLETENESS

Closely connected with the idea of finishing or completing is the idea of totality. Being total is being complete, whole. Totality seems to be the most abstract component of the semantic core of the gesture, but it is strictly connected with its primary meaning – dusting off the palms. One gets rid of the dust because the job was completed and there’s nothing else to do or one wants to stop the job for some reason and decides to end it in one moment, because he/she was pressed to the wall, reached a critical point or was brought to an end. Somehow this abstract notion is also visible in the speech modality. The words that carry the idea of totality are often functional words (quantifiers, determiners), rather than lexical ones and many of these words accompany the gesture. For example, the speaker who answers the question about using birth control pills states that due to using the pills the menstruation blood first disappeared completely. The gesture renders this idea of completeness together with an expression *gaba daya* ‘all together’ (lit. front one):

- (17) *wa ya ce a sha kwayar hana haihuwar? A dalilin shin wannan kwayar hana haihuwar sai jinin hailsa gaba daya yake je*  
 ‘Who said to take birth control pills? Because of taking these pills, the menstrual blood went away completely’



FIGURE 16. Source: Sunnah TV Nigeria (2014b), minutes 42:39-42:40.

The speaker wipes his hands once in a slow movement finishing with a dynamic jerk of the left hand. Apart from emphasizing totality, the gesture seems to express disappearance, going away, nonexistence – the notion that appeared as an alternative explanation of the gesture use in (4).

Exactly the same expression – *gaba ɗaya* – emphasizing the idea of totality is used in (18) where the speaker talks about a wife who wins her husband’s love and admiration by her total devotion to every-day home duties. When uttering the statement quoted in (18a) the speaker performs the gesture four times starting from a slow wiping of his left palm in a horizontal way and finishing with a very quick dusting off the palms in a vertical way making a clapping sound. He concludes his story about the devoted wife by stating the sentence quoted in 18b.

- (18) (a) *sai ta mai da kanta baiwa a gida ta tattake kanta gaba ɗaya*  
‘she turns herself into a slave at home, she disregards herself  
totally’



FIGURE 17. Source: Salihu Lukman (2015), minutes 38:45-38:48.

- (b) *sai waye gari, takardun gida na hannunta, takardun motoci na hannunta, takardunshi na kuɗi na banki, komai yana hannunta, komai ta kwace sabo da limana*  
 ‘at the end of the day (lit. at dawn), the property deeds belong to her (lit. are in her hands), the car papers belong to her, his bank papers belong to her, everything is in her hands, she took over everything because of her good-will’.

In 18b the gesture is repeated six times in a very quick and dynamic manner with a lot of clapping. It seems to be triggered by the universal quantifier *komai* which is mentioned twice by the speaker. But the intensive use of the gesture may also emphasize the end of the story (see section 3.3).

A similar expression (i.e. a fixed phrase indicating totality) is used by another speaker who talks about the necessity of keeping face-to-face contact between relatives, even if some people claim that contact through the phone is sufficient. When uttering the phrase *ba komai* ‘that’s o.k.’ (lit. there’s nothing), the speaker makes a single wiping movement. The gestural part of the utterance does not refer to the actual meaning of the phrase it co-occurs with, but to its literal meaning, i.e. to the universal quantifier *komai* which means ‘everything’ or ‘nothing’ (in negative sentences). However, it is also necessary to state that the Hausa expression *ba komai* is used in many contexts as an equivalent of the phrase *shi ke nan* ‘that’s it’ (compare ex. 11). Both play a similar pragmatic function in the language and can be translated as: ‘that’s o.k.’, ‘alright’, ‘no problem’.

- (19) *ya ce: ba komai, magana ta waya ta isa*  
 ‘he says, that’s o.k., talking by phone is sufficient’



FIGURE 18. Source: Sunnah TV Nigeria (2014b), minutes 40:58.

The fragment of the utterance quoted in (20) is part of the story where the speaker explains that someone called the fire brigade after noticing the fire in the neighborhood. But the fire car could not pass the road due to the crowd of people who gathered around to watch the fire, so that the calling of the fire brigade was useless because they could not help anyone. There seemed to be no determiner which would mark the notion of totality in the text accompanying the gesture. A closer look at Hausa grammar, however, shows that there is one: *wani*. Although *wani* is a specific indefinite determiner ‘some’, ‘one’, when it is used in negative assertive clauses, it is read as a negative counterpart of ‘some’ and it is equivalent to ‘not any X’ (Jaggar 2001: 315).

- (20) *sai ya zama kiran da aka yi wa ‘yan kwana-kwana bai yi wani amfani ba ke nan*  
 ‘so it happens that the call they make to firefighters, was of no use’



FIGURE 19. Source: Salihu Lukman (2015), minutes 5:50.

#### 4 | CONCLUSION

When we gather all of the lexical items co-occurring with the “dusting off palms” gesture, we can clearly see that they refer to some part of the semantic core of the gesture: cleanliness (*tsabtace* ‘clean’), cleaning the mind (*saki jiki* ‘relax’, *yi alheri* ‘bless, get a reward’), mental dirt

(*wahala* ‘trouble’, *matsala* ‘problem’, *cikas* ‘blemish’, *laifi* ‘fault’, *kafirce* ‘become a pagan’, *karyata* ‘give the lie to’), termination (*shi ke nan* ‘that’s it’, *alhamdulillah* ‘God be praised’, *haka ne* ‘that’s it’), rejection (*bari* ‘leave’), totality (*gaba daya* ‘completely’, *komai* ‘everything/nothing’, *wani* [+ negation] ‘any’) and denial or absence (morphological negation). Although the phrase *ba ruwana* ‘it’s not my business’ which was indicated by Hausa speakers as a lexical equivalent of the gesture was not found in the data, its meaning, i.e. rejection, the will to get rid of something is well represented in the examples.

There seems to be no correlation between the form of the gesture (space, movement size and direction, number of rubbing movements) and its semantic core. The form of the gesture, especially the number of rubbing movements is more related to the temperament of the speaker as well as some metalinguistic elements such as prosodic features of the utterance or discourse flow. For example in (5) and (6) the gesture refers to mental dirt. However in (5) the speaker performs the gesture only once and then he switches to another topic, while in (6) the speaker repeats the rubbing movement several times and continues to perform it while he pauses as if he wanted to get a tighter hold on this topic.

All of the components of the semantic core of the gesture are strictly connected with the action that gave rise to the gesture. The person who dusts off the palms wants to make them clean and hence the notion of cleanliness. The action of cleaning is strictly connected with the existence of dirt, dust or filth, i.e. there is no cleaning without dirt and that is how the meaning component connected with mental dirt came into existence. Furthermore, dirt is something we want to get rid of; hence the notion of rejection. Denial is simply rejecting a more abstract idea. Since the action of dusting off the palms often takes place after completing the job, the notion of termination or finishing presents itself. Finally, completing the task or finishing the job assumes completeness and totality as well as absence since there is nothing left to do. The semantic link between all of these components of the semantic core of a gesture can be compared with the links between the words in a semantic word net<sup>6</sup>, where, for example, dusting is

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<sup>6</sup> cf. Princeton University “About WordNet”. WordNet. Princeton University. 2010.

a hyponym of cleaning, while cleaning can be defined as removing dirt, filth or unwanted substances from something and removing is a synonym of taking away or getting rid of something. Therefore, one gesture encompasses many meaningful components which can be expressed with words.

One has to bear in mind that splitting the semantic core of a gesture into several meaningful components is somehow artificial and done because of the analytical nature of research. Although the appearance of a certain lexical item in the utterance may suggest that the speaker wanted to emphasize this very salient feature such as getting rid of something undesired or indicating totality, every interpretation should be treated with caution due to the nature of gestures – they are global and synthetic. Global means that the meaning of the parts is determined by the whole (that is why dusting off the palms is performed in a slightly different way each time) – the gestalt of the form. The synthetic nature of gesture is connected with the fact that “one gesture can combine many meanings” (McNeill 1992). Therefore, in many examples given in the paper two or more components of the semantic core of the gesture fit perfectly. For instance, in (16), the most salient feature that the speaker emphasizes with his gesture seems to be rejection, but it can be totality as well because the speaker rejects the idea completely. Thus the gesture in (16) could be also analyzed as a nonverbal marker of totality, replacing one of the verbal statements indicating totality such as: ‘at all’. Similarly in (2), the gesture seems to refer to cleaning the mind, but it can also indicate rejection since the lexical item co-occurring with the gesture, *saki* ‘release’ is a synonym of the verb *bari* ‘to leave’ in (14) where the meaning of rejection seems to be stressed. In contrast to language which is made up of smaller elements such as phonemes, morphemes, phrases and clauses, gesture represents a gestalt which is indivisible and unmitigated. As noticed by Antas (2013) every gesture is predicative in nature and presents a full statement. It may be connected with certain phrases or words, but this relationship is never one to one, i. e. no single phrase can be the only equivalent of a gesture. The examples show that the “dusting off palms” gesture triggers the utterance of some phrases, i. e. *shi ke nan* ‘that’s it’ or words belonging to a certain semantic net, but the repertoire of words or phrases that can accompany the gesture is not limited.

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