

## GESTURE AS CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC PRACTICE

**John B. Haviland**

*CIESAS-Sureste, Mexico & Department of Anthropology, University of California at San Diego, USA*

**Keywords:** Gesture, language, culture, pragmatics, meaning, social interaction, language ideologies, sign language

### Contents

- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. Recent approaches to gesture](#)
- [3. Gesture: What is it, and what is it not?](#)
- [4. Forms and meanings: universals, specifics, and etymologies](#)
- [5. Ideologies](#)
- [6. Conclusion: masterful gesturing](#)

[Related Chapters](#)

[Glossary](#)

[Bibliography](#)

[Biographical Sketch](#)

### Summary

Gesture is a ubiquitous, though often overlooked part of human language, often supposed to be more "natural" and "expressive" than speech, but clearly linked, both in form and meaning, to the words it usually accompanies. Recent work, relying on video recording, proposes different typologies of gesture, based on its semiotic properties or links with spoken language. Gestures, which range from "emblems" or conventional gestural holophrases to less regimented "gesticulation" accompanying talk, are often conventionalized and linked not only to linguistic structure but also to other social and cultural aspects of utterances. Using space directly, gesture is a further link between utterances and the social and spatiotemporal contexts in which they occur, as well as with other ongoing practical activities. The same semiotic properties associated with verbal signs inhere in gesture, both with respect to form and meaning, and gesture can incorporate different perspectives and stances in a way paralleling the rest of language. Moreover, gesture contributes to ideological attitudes and beliefs about language and communication more generally and is central in attributions of linguistic style and mastery.

### 1. Introduction



Gesture is so much a part of human interaction that it is sometimes easy for analysts to ignore. Perhaps because it seems obvious, unremarkable, and even *natural*, it often slips through the nets of linguistic science. Unlike the arbitrary, conventional, highly structured digital codes of spoken language—socially learned, highly structured on multiple overlapping levels, sociopolitically regimented, and often endowed with ideological, even mystical character—gesture seems mundane, direct, spontaneous, and

perhaps too prosaically corporeal to be of much interest to the study of human minds. And although both words and gestures are ephemeral, vanishing almost as soon as they appear, there is no widespread technology of inscription for gestures, no tradition of writing that—before the advent of sound film and video—could render gestures as liable to repeated scrutiny and analysis as words.

Nonetheless, gesture has occasionally attracted analytical attention. Roman and medieval rhetoric linked oratorical success to expert deployment of gesture as an aid to persuasion. Graphic art from all parts of the world has always relied heavily on stylized gestures—from depicted movements of the hands to bodily postures and facial expression—in representing emotional states and human relationships. Despite speculative theories in the 18<sup>th</sup> century linking "natural" systems of gesture to presumed universals in the genesis of language and expression, it has also been a commonplace among careful observers of gesture—especially the conventional and culturally specific manual holophrases known as "emblems"—(1) that apparently identical gestural forms, involving handshapes and movements, may have radically different meanings from one society to another, or even within a single communicative tradition, and conversely (2) that different cultures use different ways of expressing similar 'meanings' in gesture. Classic studies of highly conventionalized and geographically widespread emblems, especially by Desmond Morris and his colleagues, amply illustrate the former point—that what is apparently the very same gestural form (an "OK" hand, for example, or the two index fingers held upwards in a "V" shape, perhaps with different orientations of the palm, or the purse hand—see below Figure. 13) may convey entirely different messages from one communicative context to another.

For an example of the second point—that the "same meaning" can be conveyed by different conventional gestures—consider two interestingly different ways to signal "telephone" (or "talk on the telephone")—both iconic, that is, both indicating by "resemblance" aspects of the act of talking on the telephone, but depicting, in the Italian case (Figure 1), the form of the telephone apparatus itself, but in the American version (Figure. 2), the way of holding it in the hand instead—a difference of viewpoint and perspective, and a difference in whether the hand stands for (part of) the protagonist's body or for an inanimate object. The semiotic means by which a gesture "stands for" something, as well as aspects of the conjured "scene" from which a gestural depiction takes its effects, will be themes of the discussion that follows. The difference illustrates how cultural practices provide the matrix in which gesture forms part of utterance.



Figure. 1: "Telephone" in Italian



Figure. 2: "Telephone" in American.

## 2. Recent approaches to gesture



In recent years, iconic recording techniques have enabled detailed studies of the morphology and interactive delicacy of gesture, spawning what must be considered a whole new branch of enquiry, or at least a qualitatively new aspect of what has been an ancient preoccupation of students of human communication. In addition to allowing detailed and careful studies of gestural movements themselves and their temporal organization, both with respect to speech and otherwise, new representational techniques inspire a series of research questions about how an individual's bodily movement contribute to communicative practices more generally, as well as how they enter into interaction between individuals and with their environment.

Considerable research tries to relate gesture to psychological processes, including psycholinguistic aspects of speech production and reception, usually considered as phenomena located in individual cognition, and with varying degrees of sensitivity to the interaction between speech and context (for example, in deixis). The influential work of David McNeill bases an entire theory of speech production on the close coordination in the utterance between imagistic gesture and spoken language. Considerable psycholinguistic debate surrounds the extent to which gesture might be important, too, in speech comprehension. This article will not try to review such research, nor will it consider important topics like the acquisition of gestural competence in children, or the consequences and results for gesture of different sorts of aphasia or apraxia, both areas which deserve more research than they have received thus far. We shall also not be concerned with popular theories about gestural "leakage" and the ways "body language" is purported to reveal inner states and dispositions despite verbal and other attempts by speakers to conceal them.

This short article will review recent approaches to gesture to question its simplicity and presumed *naturalness*, and to explore the role of *convention* in gestural practice. We assume that gesture is an integral part of utterance and, although perhaps complementary to other aspects of linguistic structure, an essential element of normally situated linguistic interaction. We aim throughout to relate gesture to wider linguistic and cultural practices. With respect to the former, we will discuss how gesture is both inherently linked to speech, and shares its semiotic modalities, and yet differs from verbalizations in terms of its dimensionality and to some extent its expressive virtues. In particular, most typologies of gesture are based on its relationships to speech, and just as spoken language is plurifunctional, operating simultaneously on different planes of action, so, too, is gesture. Similarly, gesture displays the hallmarks of all cultural practice: based on culturally specific standards of form and use and organized around coordination between individuals. Like other cultural behaviors, it involves both action and ideology—that is, it expresses, in meaning and form, systems of belief, both explicit and implicit, about how things are and ought to be. Finally, like all cultural practices, it raises in a problematic way the contrast between sociocultural particulars and human universals.

## 3. Gesture: What is it, and what is it not?



Definitional questions inevitably arise: what counts as "gesture" and what does not? There are several traditions here, and recent advances partly depend on the recording techniques already mentioned which allow analysts to systematize differences and

parallels between different sorts of phenomena.

The "emblems" mentioned above resemble spoken language enough to have long ago entered metalinguistic consciousness as a kind of speech substitute or complement. These are what most people think of as gestures: conventionally formed shapes and movements of hands and arms, with specific shared meanings, sometimes paraphrasable in words (though the paraphrases are by no means functional equivalents of the emblems themselves as they are ordinarily used), and notably culturally variable. Emblems are, in fact, integral parts of language, learned as part of language socialization, subject to local standards of well-formedness and appropriateness, and temporally integrated with the speech stream—sometimes overlapping talk, sometimes inserted into inter-talk gaps, sometimes simply replacing talk. Emblems are thus closely tied to language formally, functionally, and even ideologically; aside from entire linguistic systems based on manual, facial, and postural signs—*sign languages*—emblems are the most language-like of gestures.

At the other end of the spectrum, observers have also long noted behaviors of the body that do not seem to be "part" of language at all, though they may accompany it. Body shifts, self-grooming, nervous twitches, tics and other involuntary or unconscious movements, however revealing they may sometimes seem to both analyst and native as indicators of bodily or psychological states, have usually been relegated to a quite different category from gesture, fundamentally unlike intentionally communicative behavior, or only incidental to it.

Conceptually intermediate between conventional emblems and bodily movements apparently not linked to speech are what are usually called "gesticulations," well-formed but non-conventionalized or spontaneous movements of the body, apparently closely synchronized with talk, and seemingly linked expressively to what speakers are saying. These two properties of gesticulation in relation to speech give gesticulation its distinctive character as part of linguistic practice: nonce gestures are co-expressive with words and phrases, and they are temporally linked with them in spontaneous real time utterance production. Some gesture research has posited the existence of a gesture's "lexical affiliate"—some part of the accompanying speech stream with which a gesture is thought to be most directly co-expressive and which never precedes the gesture's performance, though word and gesture may often be exactly co-synchronous.

For example, in a story about a sick horse, a Tzotzil speaker from southeastern Mexico describes how the horse would roll around on the ground, occasionally trying to stand up. He uses several expressive verbs to describe the horse's motions, and exactly synchronized with each verb he performs a representational gesture that further illustrates the movement involved. Using his right hand (notated by the letters RH on the gestural transcriptions) he indicates a side to side motion as he says *xbalet* "rolling" (in line 1, where the Tzotzil root *bal* is shown in italic type), a kind of rotation when he says *sjip sten sba* "throw himself, throw himself down" (line 2), and a kind of rising and falling trajectory when he says *chva`i* "stand up from time to time" (line 3). This kind of close correspondence in both timing and meaning is characteristic of gesticulation in relation to speech.

(1) The sick horse

[           RH up  
[           RH palm vertical fingers out moves across lap to R

[ RH moves back L, fingers point down (see Figure. 3)

**1 chba jk'el li jka` te chbalet iko:m**

*I went to see my horse which had remained rolling.*

RH makes little clockwise circle (see Figure. 4)

makes bigger backhand clockwise circle, higher (see Figure 5)

**2 sjiip sten sba ti jka`e**

*my horse would throw itself down*

RH turns over palm down, cupped, raised

drops rapidly to rest (see Figure. 6)

**3 chva`i batel un**

*and stand up from time to time.*



Figure. 3: remain rolling



Figure. 4: throw self



Figure. 5: throw self down



Figure. 6: stand up sometimes

Gesture is also integrated with the wider contexts of speech, in a variety of theoretically important ways. It frequently involves the immediate spatio-temporal environment in which it occurs, linked to the physical surround directly by physical manipulation of objects, less directly by pointing, indicating, and placing objects within the surroundings, and sometimes in stylized ways involving virtual objects and mimed

manipulations. Indeed, perhaps it is more accurate to say that gesture interacts with a virtual or conceptual environment, sometimes projected from the immediate socio-physical context, sometimes projected ONTO that context by the communicative act itself. The previous example of the story about a sick horse illustrates the latter situation, since the speaker's hand seems to stand for a virtual horse, and its movements mimic those of the remembered real animal. Even cursory observation of most people's pointing gestures, similarly, reveals that people point sometimes at real entities, perceivable in their environs, sometimes at virtual entities "introduced" into a universe of discourse by the pointing gesture itself (in the manner of pronouns in American Sign Language), and sometimes at entities not immediately perceivable in the environment but somehow projectable, perhaps historically or socially, from the target of the pointing gesture—as when one can point at a child to refer to its parent, or to a now vacant house site to refer to the former owner of the absent house (see Figure. 21 below). Gesture can directly incorporate objects from the environment. A tool in use can be turned into a gesture of demonstration (as when a farmer, hoeing his corn, can actually kill weeds with the tool, simultaneously demonstrate how to use the hoe, and also use it to point out a particular kind of weed). Perhaps more interestingly, manipulation of real objects and tools in the environment can give rise to stylized gestural movements, which communicate about the original actions in various ways, and which—in their gradual simplification of form and corresponding increase in symbolic meaning—resemble the grammaticalized forms of spoken language over time.

One particularly graphic example of the ontogenesis of gesture from instrumental action comes from my own recent research on a string quartet master class, in which professional string players instruct a group of students in musicality and performance. One of the professional musicians started with real demonstration—playing his instrument directly (as in Figure. 7). He progressed to a kind of partial demonstration, still holding the bow and demonstrating the motion, but without actually playing the instrument (see Figure. 8). He stylized the demonstration still further by using only his arm motion, without holding even the bow (see Figure. 9), and thenceforward he was able to recall the bowing technique in question with only a stylized wrist flick (see Figure. 10).



Figure. 7 Bowing demonstration with viola



Figure. 8 Stylized demonstration with only the bow.



Figure. 9. Stylized bowing motion



Figure. 10. Stylized bowing gesture in the hand

Gesture is not only linked to the immediate context of the speech act and its surrounding activities, but it is also formally integrated with the wider sociocultural setting. There is, first, an obvious connections with culturally learned ways of using the body in a given sociocultural milieu. Very little research exists that connects overall patterns of bodily activity (for example, in work or play) with gestural styles, although observers of gesture have long noted radical differences in the amount and apparent importance of gesturing that accompanies in speech in one society (for example, that of Naples) as opposed to another (for example, that of London). Aside from specific cultural conventions governing how and when symbolic gestures like emblems are to be performed, it is also frequently the case that a given society has explicit conventions governing the appropriateness of gesture at all—consider, for example, the prohibition in some cultures on pointing as "impolite." We return to issues of sociocultural ideology about gesture in the final part of this article.

#### 4. Forms and meanings: universals, specifics, and etymologies



We have characterized gestures as movements largely of the hands and arms, although it is clear that a range of other body parts can be involved in gestural morphology, including not only what performs a gesture but where it is performed in relation to the body as a whole. A defining feature of conventionalized emblems is that they are subject to standards of well-formedness: there are "correct" ways of performing them, and changes to the "citation" form results in something either different or meaningless. This is another aspect of their "quotability"—not only that such gestures can be in some ways rendered into words, but that can be "quoted" by *citing* the correct way of performing them: "you do this [gesture], and it means X."

It is an empirical matter to catalogue the sorts of formative elements involved in emblems, as well as less regimented gesticulation, in the cultures of the world. The face can certainly be involved, in everything from "crazy" motions directed at the temple, to thumbing the nose, to pointing with the lips. One can "roll the eyes" and "nod the head," "shrug the shoulders," "slap the thighs" with laughter, and make various sorts of rude gesture (for example, "the moon") with lower extremities, such as the buttocks. Even emblems whose central sign vehicle is a specific handshape may be necessarily or characteristically performed at particular points on the body—a finger pointed at the temple, or at the mouth, a belly-slap, and so on..



Emblematic gestures, because they may mimic specific postures and dispositions of the body, may have explicit etymologies, whether real or imagined. Native exegesis suggests that an ancient Neapolitan gesture—slapping the hip to indicate "poverty" or "hunger"—represents a way of exposing one's empty pockets. The "loser" emblem evidently once popular with certain American teenagers (and enshrined in emoticons on Internet chat sites) appears to derive from the shape of the letter "L" (see Figure. 11), and it is often accompanied by a characteristic facial grimace as well.



Figure. 11: "Loser."

More striking, perhaps, as an example of a polysemous emblem whose etymology is deeply embedded in a "cultural practice," and whose interpretation requires certain flexible kinds of contextual sociocultural knowledge, is the recent Italian *tossico* or "drug addict" gesture, which also demonstrates an earlier point about the links between motions and postures from situated activity imported into the semiotically pregnant world of communicative gesture. This emblem is performed by placing the fingers of one hand on the inner elbow of the opposite arm, which is held out as if administering a hypodermic injection (see Figure. 12). The iconic etymology here is clear enough (once it has been explained, at least), but the situated message of the gesture requires other kinds of contextual information (perhaps supplemented by such signals as the accompanying facial expression). According to native testimony, the gesture can signal everything from "[someone in the immediate interactive context] is about as coherent as a drug addict" to "I'm so bored I need to shoot up with something." (The gesture somewhat resembles but is completely distinct from the better known obscene Italian gesture performed by slapping the upper arm just above the elbow and bending the forearm upwards, hand in a clenched fist.)



Figure. 12. "Drug addict"

Of course, the most active and versatile gestural articulator is the hand, capable of a large range of quite specific and complex configurations, which share significance in a range of different manual sign systems, from gestural emblems, to full-blown sign languages, to less regimented but nonetheless partially systematic nonce gesticulation. That this is true can be seen from the use in gesture studies of notational systems for sign language "phonology," developed for transcribing manual languages of deaf communities. Recognizable handshapes with standardized labels in sign language research recur in many emblematic and otherwise gestured signs, and recent research by Adam Kendon suggests that handshapes may come in "families" which carry systematic though schematic meanings, somewhat parallel to phonaesthetic or sound-symbolic



segments in phonology or to the "grammatical" meanings of such linguistic elements as "light verbs" He for example, distinguishes different handshapes involved in pointing, relating them to subtle differences in the meaning of the pointing gesture or the type of referent it picks out. The so-called "purse hand" formed by bunching the outstretched fingers of one hand together recurs in a wide range of emblems, and can be incorporated, if fleetingly, into less regimented gesticulation, perhaps with some constant schematic meaning in these different uses (although it is not immediately obvious at what level of generality to search for such a shared meaning). The same hand, for example, occurs in the Italian "it's perfect" or "delicious" emblem (Figure. 13), where the pursed fingers are kissed and then spread, and also in a very different Italian gesture (Figure. 14) in which the pursed hand is slightly waved in the interactional space between speaker and interlocutor, with the rough meaning "*ma che, sei scemo?*" i.e., you must be crazy? Or: what do you take me for?" Whether families of hand shapes convey constant schematic meanings across nonce gestures in communicative traditions without a large inventory of conventional emblems is a question awaiting further research.



Figure. 13. Purse hand in the first part of "*a bacio*," i.e., 'delicious (lit., kissable)'



Figure. 14. "Are you mad?" or "Do you think I'm an idiot?"

With respect to their meanings, gestures are inherently similar to other signaling devices. What is distinct is the sign vehicle itself, a possibly moving configuration of the body. However, the means of signaling something with moving body parts is essentially the same as for other sorts of signs, whether verbal or otherwise.

Consider one of the trichotomies of how signs can "stand for" or mean other things, due to C. S. Peirce. Peirce's three semiotic modes are based on distinct principles, although they generally co-mingle in most signs. Peirce pointed out that some signs stand for other things because of a resemblance between the sign vehicle and the thing signified—thus a photograph of a person can stand for that person (for example, in a printed community directory). Such a sign bears an "iconic" resemblance to what it signifies, although the nature of the "resemblance" can vary greatly (contrast photographs with drawings or silhouettes, for example, and consider diagrams and graphs as iconic representations of quantities and relationships). In verbal signs the standard example of iconicity is onomatopoeia, in which there is a presumed resemblance—tempered always by the phonological canons and conventions of the language—between the sound of the word and what it signifies. There can also be an "indexical" relationship between sign and signified, such that physical, spatial, or direct causal relationships exist between the sign vehicle and what it signifies. A footprint, for

example, does not "resemble" the person who made it (only his or her foot), but it stands as an 'index' of the person by virtue of the fact that the mark was made by the person's walking at a certain place. It can be "read" as a sign of the person. In language, 'ouch!' stands for some sort of sudden pain precisely because we imagine that the pain causes someone to produce the utterance. Similarly, we know who 'I' or 'you' refers to by observing the contextual relationship between the word and the person who utters it or to whom it is uttered. Such words, then, rely on an indexical or contextual relationship to convey their meanings. Finally, there are signs whose significance is essentially unmotivated by either resemblance or context: these are Peircean 'symbols' which rely on a conventional and 'arbitrary' relationship between signifier and signified. Thus a word like 'car' means car only because of a particular linguistic tradition or convention, not because of any motivated connection between this particular set of sounds or this word form and cars.

Figure 15 shows a sign which combines all three Peircean semiotic modalities: the iconic (though stylized) resemblance between the central part of the drawing and a smoking cigarette; the conventional meaning on road signs and elsewhere of the red circle with the diagonal bar, as a "prohibition"; and finally, the location of the sign itself, whose physical position signals indexically the *place* or location where smoking is prohibited.



Figure. (15). A semiotically trichotomous sign

An adequate description of the meaning of linguistic elements must capture all three modes of signification, although many standard semantic theories limit themselves to "conventional" or symbolic meaning, almost exclusively in referential terms.

Gestures garner meaning from the same Peircean semiotic modalities that can be applied to other signs, although the predominance of one modality over another may be different than for other linguistic signs. Iconicity is the central motivation for the form of many gestures, even conventionalized ones, as we have seen with several of the examples cited already. Thus the kiss gesture incorporates a simulated kiss; the "drug addict" gesture recalls a drug addict injecting something into a vein; the narrated horse "stands up" to the accompaniment of a hand that also schematically "stands up"; talking on the telephone is signaled by miming talking on the telephone; and so on. McNeill's influential classification of gesture identifies "iconic gestures" as one of the major types.

However, the exact dimensions of "resemblance" with gestural signs are variable, as they are with other signs. Because gestures are performed in four dimensions, in space and time, many aspects of gestural form may be the vehicle of "similarity" between sign and signified, from the shape or size of an object to the trajectory or speed of a movement. Similarly, insofar as some part of a gesture "resembles" some aspect of its meaning, the similarity projects a larger configuration which can also be part of gestural form. What McNeill calls "viewpoint" or perspective is just such a feature. We noted earlier that in the Italian telephone gesture the hand actually depicts the phone apparatus itself, whereas in the American version, the hand is a hand, and the phone is imagined to be held within it. In the drug addict gesture, and more graphically in the viola player's

bowing gestures, the gesturer him or herself adopts the perspective of the protagonist: the musician performing, the *tossico* shooting up, with gesturer's body corresponding to participant's body. In the Zinacantec speaker's representations of the dying horse, on the other hand, the gesturer adopts an external perspective, and his gesturing hands are observable proxies for the participants in the signaled events. A further semiotic remove is also possible in what McNeill calls "metaphorical" gestures, whose sign vehicle plainly represents some entity iconically, but where the relationship to what is meant is "metaphorical." (McNeill's example is gesturing "justice" by depicting scales. The "shooting up" gesture to mean 'boring' is perhaps a parallel case.)

Indexicality is also ubiquitous in gesture, perhaps most obviously in pointing. When one extends an outstretched digit in the direction of an object, nothing about the gesture "resembles" its referent (unless one is actually pointing towards a pointing hand). Rather, the gesture serves to call attention to the physical surround, inviting interlocutors to identify the "signified" from among the entities available so to be "pointed at." There are two further frequent complications to this scenario. First, the entities "pointed at" may frequently be absent, indeed, imaginary. One can point at a space in empty air in order to "locate" there some item—perhaps a protagonist, imaginary or real, in a narrative—thereby creating a "place" to which subsequent pointing gestures can return. In Figure. 16 a Zinacantec narrator points to an imaginary spot as he describes how a small black demon once appeared in his house compound, near a small cross. In subsequent talk the narrator places his character behind the cross he has just "located" in gestural space (Figure. 17), and then illustrates with another gesture how the creature crouched down to hide behind the cross (Figure. 18).



Figure 16. Locating the blackman.



Figure. 17. Locating the black demon behind the house cross.



Figure. 18. The demon crouches down

Second, and perhaps more interestingly, various sorts of transpositions are possible, as Buehler pointed out long ago in another context. One can point at an item which is not observable in the immediate or "local" space but rather in a different space conceptually

superimposed on the real one. The superimposed space can, for example, preserve the cardinal orientation of real space while being populated with different conceptual entities not immediately observable. In the following example, two Zinacantec men, standing on the edge of their forest land, are complaining about thieves who have stolen pine needles (used in Zinacantec ritual) as well as firewood. They locate a specific tract of forest, in absolute relation to where they are standing, with oriented gestures that point to spots and trace trajectories (Figure. 19). Once having mutually established the area in question, however, they are able to orient themselves virtually *within* the narrated space, allowing them to transpose their pointing gestures, in the "correct" direction but relative to the imagined origo. Thus, one of the men points (in Figure. 20) to a gate in the field just described, showing the direction it would lie calculating from the place where the thefts had taken place—not from where he actually stands.



Figure. 19. Locating an area with absolute deictic gestures.



Figure. 20. "Pointing" at the gate in virtual space.

Further narrative spaces can be distinguished, within which gestures can also point, and pointing can be both indirect and transposed. For example, one can point to a person's descendent to refer to him. The transposed contexts within which indexical gestures operate can thus depend on social or historical features not immediately or physically observable. For example, a Guugu Yimithirr narrator once used a pointing gesture to refer to a deceased man whose name he was reluctant to speak. He pointed in the direction of a now vacant lot where this old man's house had formerly stood (Figure. 21), relying on the socio-historical memories of his interlocutors and their powers of inference to supply the missing indexical links.



Figure. 21 "This old man here..."

Further, different aspects of a context may be picked up by indexical gestures. Not only a referent itself may be signaled by an indexical gesture. In some communicative traditions, all reference to place or orientation is calculated with respect to "absolute" cardinal directions. In such circumstances, a gesture to accompany the phrase "he went that way" may have as its salient meaning component only the *direction* to be calculated not by reference to what it points at but only to *which way* it points. My Zinacantec

compadre uses such a technique to tell me to travel to a certain distant location, then calculate which direction to walk by superimposing the *compass direction* he indicates with his pointing gesture in an entirely different location.

Another of McNeill's gesture categories, the "formless" rhythmic gestures he calls "beats," are frequently synchronized with the stream of speech. Herb Clark remarks that beats are "indexical signals *par excellence*" precisely because they often seem to do little more than track—i.e., index—the flow of the speaker's syllables. They serve as a kind of visual indicator of the ongoing talk, sometimes adding emphasis, sometimes merely tracking its rhythm.

As for "symbolic" gestures, in the Peircean sense, the conventionalized emblems we have considered are prototypical examples. Whatever elements of iconicity they may employ, and however much their use may be linked to the context of utterance, emblems rely for their full holophrastic effect on a fixed conventional "correct" form as well as on conventions of meaning and use. There are complexities to the "conventions" involved, however. As Clark argues, following Schiffer, conventions are one means by which a community of practice resolves a "coordination problem"—when interactants need to coordinate joint actions—and many such problems may be addressed by the gestural conventions incorporated in emblems. There is the problem of mutual recognition, solved conventionally by adopting strict standards of form so that one gesture cannot be mistaken for another. There is the problem of mutual access, solved by making gestures perceivable only in specific conditions (often different from those governing vocalizations, for example). There is the problem of "meaning," solved by conventions of semantic import and pragmatic appropriateness. The fact that many conventional gestures have sometimes quite marked affective character—that many are, for example, vulgar or appropriate only in special social circumstances—suggests that coordinating such highly affective action is a recurring problem for interactants, and that the problem requires a family of conventional solutions, for which gesture may be especially apt. Indeed, there are many parallels between emblematic gestures and spoken expletives or interjections. Aside from the "expressive" and holophrastic nature of both—indexing some sort of affective state in the speaker and evoking a response from her interlocutors, and the fact that both interjections and gestural emblems can stand as complete utterances in their own right—the two classes of signs also frequently index aspects of the mutual social statuses of interlocutors, or their relationships.

We conclude this discussion of forms and meanings in gesture with a well-known southern European emblem that illustrates the intermingling of Peirce's three semiotic modalities in a gestural sign. The extremely offensive "horned hand" gesture (Figure. 22), much like the no-smoking sign discussed above, incorporates symbolic, iconic, and indexical elements in a characteristic way. It is a grave insult to a man, amounting to calling him a cuckold. The conventions of form dictate not only the shape of the hand but also its manner of presentation (pointing the fingers toward the ground has a completely different meaning—in Italy, it is used to ward off the evil eye—and presenting the back of the hand instead of the palm with folded fingers is for most speakers incoherent). It is therefore symbolic, in Peirce's sense. Nonetheless, the very fact that the gesture can be called a "horned hand" suggests its iconic character, even if the exact etymology—the association between goats or devils, according to different traditions, and cuckoldry—remains somewhat obscure. Finally, the fact that the gesture is performed *at* someone (i.e., is oriented towards someone) suggests the same sort of indexical character—linked to the particular circumstances of its performance, the co-presence of certain interlocutors—for the gesture as for the no-smoking notice.



Figure. 22. The "horned hand" gesture as semiotically trichotomous.

One of the main interests in the study of gesture for anthropologists and linguists alike is the interaction between gesture and the other phenomena they investigate: cultural action on the one hand, and language on the other. Emblems like the "horned hand" just discussed illustrate how gestures can facilitate complex actions (insulting, mocking, criticizing, ...), actions that might be difficult or awkward to perform without the help of the compact gestural modality. In other cases, emblems embody classes of action that a particular communicative tradition has found it useful to conventionalize in this way.

In a parallel way, the relationship between speech and gesture is frequently complementary and co-expressive, so that linguistics cannot concentrate on just the words and ignore the rest. In cases like the Zinacantec narrative about a dead horse in (1) above, where the Tzotzil language displays considerable semantic hypertrophy in the class of positional verbs affording speakers great expressive power, further descriptive ammunition is provided by the specifics of accompanying gesture. Figure. 3 illustrated the narrator's gesticulation as he used the positional verb *xbalet* 'rolling.' The gesture seems further to specify the already detailed meaning of the verb: the horse was rolling from *side to side*. Psychological research indicates that the full utterance, including both words and gestures, is available to interactants as they interpret linguistic performances.

## 5. Ideologies

Despite the ubiquity of gesture, and its communicative virtues, it has a somewhat dubious reputation in many cultural traditions. We noted at the beginning of this essay that classical rhetoric recognized the potential persuasive power of gesture in the hands (and bodies) of political orators. Modern practitioners, from speech therapists to spin-doctors to drama coaches, routinely address the varied gestural deficiencies of their patients, trying to make them better speakers by tutoring them in gesture. Nonetheless, people are often quick to criticize their neighbors for gesturing either too much or too little, sometimes taken as a sign of national character, sometimes as an index of deficiencies in expressive abilities or even personality.

Ideologies of gesture sometimes link it to impoliteness, for reasons worth speculating about. Where some of us were taught as children that it was impolite to point—presumably in part because of the unmistakable visibility of a pointing gesture even to people otherwise out of earshot—it is also clear that the communicative power of some gestures comes from their *silence* and from the fact that they can be so performed as to be visible to only some interlocutors. Conversely, gestures also present communicative advantages because they can substitute for words precisely in circumstances—over long distances, when noise drowns out talk, or where talk is abjured (by monks or bereaved Warlpiri women, for example)—where words will not serve. The different perceptual affordances of gesture vs. speech—gesture as "visible utterance" and "silent communication"—as well as beliefs and opinions about the moral nature of speech and other communication influence ideas about the virtues and defects



of gesture itself. More specifically, the fact already noted that many conventionalized gestures are highly proscribed, or at least are considered to be appropriate to only limited social circumstances, suggests quite elaborate if implicit theorizing about the communicative properties of gesture as opposed to other means of expressing oneself.

Similarly illuminating is the belief, popular in the West and mentioned above, that gesture will reveal what words may be trying to conceal, that bodily expression "leaks" through even the deceptive mask of intention. Buried in this ideological stance is a characteristic Western theory of individual mind—intention, thought, emotion, and personality—as captured inside and in some ways in a struggle with the individual body. It encompasses a psychological model (or metaphor) of "expression" —also widespread in Western psycholinguistics—in which a communicative impulse originating inside a single mind emerges, perhaps differentially, in distinct though perhaps interacting expressive channels, to be decoded by other minds. Gesture, that is, is understood in a given cultural milieu only in relation to a wider ideology of communication, expression, and cognition.

That the peculiar Western theory is not the only possibility is made clear by comparing other traditions from the ethnographic literature. In Chiapas, Mexico, for example, Tzotzil speaking peasants talk about gesture exactly the same way they talk about speech: the same metapragmatic framing "verbs of speaking," for example, are used to characterize utterances involving speech, gesture, or a combination of both. Gestures—even those of tiny babies—are glossed, using the presentational *xi* 'she said this/she went this way,' used as well for spoken utterances. The notion of mind is also subtly different, with more emphasis on the interactive nature of consciousness. The metaphors for intelligence and cognitive development in children are highly social, mostly involving a specialized anti-passive suffix *-van* which added to a transitive verb 'do X' creates an intransitive verb meaning 'do X to people.' Thus, as they grow, children begin to *ilvan* 'see people,' *ojtikinvan* 'recognize people,' and sooner or later *k'oponvan* 'speak to people' or even *utvan* 'say things to, i.e., scold, people.'

## 6. Conclusion: masterful gesturing



The notion of the expressivity of gesture brings up a concluding point, one which originally brought this writer to the study of gesture. Why should people gesture at all, and what role does gesture have in the overall set of skills we might call "true linguistic competence"? I mean not the distilled abstract shared "code" of standard linguistics, but the more common understanding of "competence" in which speakers are differentially skilled, some better than others at expressing themselves effectively, beautifully, or persuasively, and generally differ in how well they accomplish things through speech. My question about what might be called linguistic or cultural *mastery* is fundamental to understanding the social life of language. At least two of the master speakers I have been privileged to meet in the course of anthropological fieldwork seem to me to owe much of their expressive power to their ability to gesture. Moreover, their gesture is 'expressive' not only in the sense that it conveys rich information. It is also interactively insistent and powerful, precisely because the visual modality of gesture and the semantic complementarity between word and gesture require interlocutors to pay close attention to the multiple channels in play.

An artfully constructed performance combining talk, bodily movement, and often the physical environment where interlocutors find themselves as well, induces participants



to apply the full range of inferential and interpretive tools available to them, to synchronize different modalities, and to coordinate their actions both interpretive and expressive.

Examples abound. One Zinacantec compadre described an elaborate *trapiche* or cane-crushing contraption he had seen as a child. He produced a virtual diagram of the machine, using his fingers to represent the two rollers between which the sugar cane was inserted (Figure. 23), but also employing as props the things around him (as in Figure. 24, where he showed how the horizontal bars were inserted in posts, using a nearby house column to represent the vertical posts). Having established gestural signs for the important parts of the machine, he was then able to assemble the whole diagrammatically (and with virtuoso style) in the "gesture" space that separates him from his interlocutor (Figure. 25).



Figure. 23. Modeling a can crushing contraption



Figure. 24. Incorporating a house post into a gesture.



Figure. 25. Placing the virtual machine in gesture space.

In Figure. 26 the two Zinacantecs complaining about thieves are acting out how they imagine the pine needles to have been wantonly and wastefully cut. They combine mimed gestures, manipulation of real things around them, with reported (or invented) speech, and critical metacommentary as they align themselves in outraged condemnation of the sorry state of the modern world. Master speakers exploit available multidimensional interactive processes to the full, and gesture is a primary tool in their expressive repertoires.



Figure. 26. "They bent the treetop back like this"

**Related Chapters** 

[Click Here To View The Related Chapters](#)

## Glossary



- Aphasia** :loss or reduction of linguistic abilities
- Beat** :a formless, rhythmic gesture, accompanying the rhythm of speech but without associated representational meaning
- Citation form** :a "canonical" or standard form which represents the conventional standard way to pronounce or site it (in the case of a word) or illustrate it (in the case of a conventionalized gesture)
- Emblem** :a conventionalized gesture, usually standing alone as its own utterance, with a "correct" form and culturally specific meaning.
- Gesticulation** :communicative movements which accompany speech, usually not formless, but not highly conventionalized.
- Holophrase** :a single or simple form which can stand as an entire utterance.
- Iconic recording** :technologies that capture images or sounds in a way that resembles the events recorded- here, audio or video recording
- Ideology** :a set of shared beliefs or attitudes towards some phenomenon, especially when institutionalized in practices
- Leakage** :a phenomenon by which something unconscious meant to be hidden "leaks" into view, as when a gesture "betrays" someone's real intention.
- Lexical affiliate** :a word or phrase thought to be directly associated with a particular sequence of gesticulation
- Paraxial** :loss or reduction of manipulative or motor abilities
- Phonaesthetic** :involving "sound symbolism" in which the sound of a word suggests its meaning
- Polysemous** :having more than one meaning

## Bibliography



- Clark, Herbert H. 1996 Using language. New York: Cambridge University Press. [A psycholinguist's view of language, including gesture, as conjoint action.]
- De Jorio, Andrea 2000. Gesture in Naples and Gesture in Classical Antiquity. (Translated by Adam Kendon.) Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press. [A classic treatise on Neapolitan gesture.]
- Goodwin, Charles 1994 Professional vision. *American Anthropologist* 96(3):606-633. {A study of the integration of words, gestures, and practical action in the "lived environment."}
- Haviland, John B. 1993 Anchoring, iconicity, and orientation in Guugu Yimithirr pointing gestures. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 3(1):3-45. [A study of oriented pointing in an Aboriginal speech tradition.]
- 1996 Projections, transpositions, and relativity. *In Rethinking linguistic relativity*. J.J. Gumperz and S.C. Levinson, eds. Pp. 271-323. Cambridge Univ. Press. [A study of semiotic properties of indexical systems, especially gesture.]
- Holler, Judith and Geoff Beattie 2003 How iconic gestures and speech interact in the representation of meaning: are both aspects really integral to the process?. *Semiotica* 146:81-116. [A psycholinguistic stuffy of what interactants "read" from gestures.]
- Kendon, Adam 1988 Sign Languages of Aboriginal Australia. Cambridge: CUP. [An exhaustive look at a "substitute sign language" for people who hear but abjure speech.]
- 2004 Gesture, Visible Action as Utterance. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [An important

integration of Kendon's groundbreaking work on gesture over the years.]

Kita, Sotaro 2003 *Pointing: Where Language, Culture, and Cognition Meet*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. [Comparative study of pointing from various intellectual perspectives.]

McNeill, David 1992 *Hand and Mind: What gestures reveal about thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

2000 *Language and gesture*. Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press. [The first integrated treatment of gesture as a central psychological phenomenon.]

Morris, D., P. Collett, P. Marsh, and Marie O'Shaughnessy 1979 *Gestures, their origin and distribution*. New York: Stein and Day. [The classic comparative study of emblems.]

Peirce, Charles Sanders, ed. 1932 *Collected papers of C. S. Peirce*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. [The foundations of modern semiotics.]

Quintillian, M.F. 1924 *Institutio Oratoria*. London: Heinemann. [A classic treatise on gesture in Roman oratory.]

### Biographical Sketch



**John B. Haviland** is an anthropological linguist, with interests in the social life of language. His major research has been on Tzotzil (Mayan) in highland Chiapas, Mexico, and its neighbors, as well as on languages from the area north of Cooktown, in far north Queensland, Australia. He is Professor of Anthropology at the University of California at San Diego and concurrently Investigador Titular C at the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, Mexico. His most recent book is *Old Man Fog and the Last Aborigines of Barrow Point* (1998, Smithsonian Institution Press) about the last speaker of the Barrow Point language.

### To cite this chapter

**John B. Haviland**, (2005), *GESTURE AS CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC PRACTICE*, in *Linguistic Anthropology*, [Ed. Anita Sujoldzic], in *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems (EOLSS)*, Developed under the Auspices of the UNESCO, Eolss Publishers, Oxford ,UK, [<http://www.eolss.net>] [Retrieved June 23, 2006]