Gesture

Gesture usually starts with a dubious, if not downright bad, reputation. No matter how "dramatic" someone's occasional long gaze may be, it nevertheless remains "just a gesture," and thus liable to the suspicion of being only "token," or, worse, "empty." Often the bodily movements or gestures that naturally accompany speech just as routinely pass unmarked or dismissed as irrelevant in studies of language. When gesture has risen to analytical consciousness, the result has too often been a constraining or "subtractive" account, in which gesture is what is left over after other phenomena that fall under some principled description are subtracted. Not surprisingly, such treatments frequently produce mutually contradictory views of the gestural residue. One family of approaches treats gesture as involuntary bodily leakage (whether subtly systematic, or merely accidental) that "betray[s]" inner states and attitudes that intentionally communicative channels may be trying to hide. Here gesture is reduced to a kind of nervous tick, a petty pal, that, unlike the threatening tongue, cannot lie. Another family of approaches considers gesture to be scattered and easily perceived bodily accompaniments to true language (whether spoken or otherwise), largely involuntary expressions of the speaking person and its struggle to render intangible or insubstantial thought into the digit. (Naivety of language.) Here the emphasis is on gesture as "for the speaker," and any communicative function it may have (except for the observing psychologists) is analytically irrelevant. For another class of theorists, gesture is primitive "stemmed" language, grounded in presumed universal saliency, and thus the first resort of would-be communicators who do not share a linguistic code. Some theorists detect in this sort of imagined pantomime a credible basis for a kind of subculture for language, assuming that a gestural language frame can draw on a set of mimetic actions ("acting," perhaps) plus some transparent indexical referential devices (pointing is a popular candidate) to launch a basic system of extra-linguistic communication. Other gesture theorists place an almost diametrically opposite emphasis on ostensible and culture-specific gestural substitutes for spoken language: compound, gestural hokum known as "emblems." Examples include the "OK" sign formed by a ring made by the thumb and forefinger (a handshake which can have quite different meanings to one community to another), various gestures for "(s)he's crazy," or the gesture in American English simply known as "the linger." All are signs which interlocutors must learn both to produce and to interpret. Because the manner encodes often have negative connotation, on such a view, the silent and even furtive corporeal modality of gesture may be particularly appropriate for their transmission.

Contrasting with these subtractive approaches is a view that integrates attitudes and movements of the body (including gaze), first, into the full repertoire of interactive human communicative resources and, second, into the expressive idiosyncrasies of language itself. One influential typology of gesture distinguishes different varieties according to their "language like" properties on the one hand and their relative integration with or emancipation from speech on the other. At one end of the spectrum are "gesturalizations," movements especially of the hands that occur only in coordination with verbalization and are relatively uninterpretable in isolation from speech. At the other are full-bodied sign languages, in which the gestural channel serves as the vehicle for language itself. Ranging between are such phenomena as some proper names (meant to signal) on their own, but conventionally named; culture-specific emblems that function as complete, quotable utterances in their own right, independent of or substitutable for speech; or "substitute" sign languages that supplement speech in whole or in part under circumstances that require silence. Studies of gesture as part of language produce such observations as the following:

a. Verbal and gestural performances are mutually synchronized when a gesture appears to be linked in meaning to a word or phrase (sometimes called the gesture's "lexical affiliate"); the gesture either coincides with or just precedes the relevant speech fragment. Some researchers have used this fact to motivate a theory in which both speech and gesture originate in a single conceptual source, whose joint "expression" in the different modalities produces the observed synchronicity.

b. Gesture lends itself to "morphological" analysis, in which gestural gestalten are decomposed into distinct articulations (fing shapes, for example, or certain patterns of movement which are also among the formal primitives attributed to developed sign languages). Aspects of this morphology may be systematically deployed to express semantic inflections overlaid on the meaning of the gesture. (In some communities, for example, a high pointing gesture suggests relative distance.)

c. There is complete semantic parallelism between gestures and other linguistic signs. For example, links between gestural forms and their meaning may be classified according to the familiar Peircean trichotomy of icon (a "hologram" motion to suggest a particular human body shape), index
d. In acquisition, it appears that universally gesture and spoken or other linguistic forms emerge together (whether shared or parallel processes are at work). Gestural routines in which stylized movements play central communicative roles appear before the first recognizable words. Moreover, the so-called “one word stage” is ordinarily characterized by the production not of “words” alone but of combined gestural and verbalized holophrases at the earliest stages of language learning. Phenomena such as gestural “babbling,” or the spontaneous language-like “Iowa sign” systems that arise in contexts where deaf children are not exposed to a hearing sign language attest to the existence of manual and other bodily “expressions” in human communication, waiting in the cognitive wings to be summoned on stage by appropriate social and interactive contexts.

(See also: coda, def, ceremony, deixis, participation, sign, vision)

Bibliography


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