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Haviland J B (2006), Gesture: Sociocultural Analysis. In: Keith Brown, (Editor-in-Chief) *Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics, Second Edition*, volume 5, pp. 66-71. Oxford: Elsevier.

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Gesture: Sociocultural Analysis

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Gesture is Integrated with Utterance

When people come together to interact, they can exploit everything at hand (as we might say) to communicate with one another. They position their bodies in relation to both interlocutors and other copresent people; they manipulate objects in the surround; they orient their senses towards one another; they talk;

they look; they listen; and they gesture – they move their bodies (and sometimes other entities as well) as part of interaction. Although this short article concentrates on gestures, mostly those performed with the hands, that form part of spoken utterances, much of what it describes could be extended to a wider range of 'gestural expression,' whether or not linked directly to speech, and including a variety of body parts (head, eyes, face, torso) and corporal techniques.

The keenest observers of human communicative capacities have always been interested in gesture.

Consider the expressive postures of clay or stone figurines from Palenque to Phnom Penh, or the fingers, hands, arms, faces, and bodies of human figures depicted on vases, walls, textiles, shields, masks, and canvases from Auckland to Greenland, or captured in snapshots and sketches from New York to New Guinea. Quintilian, the 1st-century Roman rhetorician, offered a treatise on how to use gesture artfully as part of oratorical persuasion. Grand speculative programs in the 18th and 19th centuries – programs which continue in perhaps less ambitious and explicit forms to the present day – found in gesture evidence for presumed universals in thought and language. Conversely, explorations of human diversity – especially in the 20th century – also found in gesture a fertile empirical ground to demonstrate divergence and cultural specificity. Important here was the rise of iconic recording technologies which allowed observers to reduce fleeting gestural performances to representation which could be indefinitely replayed and scrutinized for analysis. There is a related tension, in both pretheoretical and analytic fascinations with gesture, between nature and culture: between speech-accompanying gesticulation cast as ‘pantomime,’ ‘protolanguage,’ or ‘natural pidgin’ somehow grounded in presumed panhuman iconicity and expressivity, vs. the unpredictable culturally specific repertoire of gestures that clearly must be conventionally learned, used, and understood, and that remain opaque to non-natives. (Some Los Angeles natives perform an L-shaped hand on their foreheads to mean ‘loser,’ i.e., to indicate that some third person is a poor excuse for a human being – a gestural convention perhaps no less exotic than the Neapolitan ‘hunger’ or ‘poor’ gesture performed with a slapping motion toward the hip – see Kendon, 1992. The ‘loser’ gesture exists as an animated emoticon on at least one Internet instant messenger service.)

Contrasting bodily movements with other aspects of the utterances of which they form part, the expressive virtues of gesture both complement and differ from those of the digital, segmentable, and structurally contrastive elements of spoken language. Since it uses as an expressive medium the very body that is involved in human action in the first place, gesture can model action both directly and analogically. Even highly stylized pantomimes can illustrate aspects of action not verbally expressed, nor indeed easily expressible: complex configurations of objects and actors, perspectives, details of mechanics and effort in action. Contrasting with the linear flow of speech units, gesture unfolds in four dimensions, and easily combines multiple simultaneous signing vehicles (gaze, facial expression, posture, as well as hands and other extremities) in a miniature and multifunctional orchestra of expression. Utilizing space as well

as time, gesture has a dimensionality, a potential persistence, and a spatial immediacy in the context of utterance not similarly available to sound. For example, a gesture can be held across a chain of utterances, thus providing a diagrammatic vehicle to anchor talk; or it can incorporate into a scene spatial elements – such as direction, distance, size, or shape – which receive no corresponding verbal expression.

Nonetheless, gesture and speech characteristically occur together, combining with still other expressive resources to coordinate interlocutors in the communicative process, and often with precise temporal and semantic coordination. Emblems – the culturally specific, learned gestural forms, with usually quite specific conventional readings, like an ‘OK hand’ or a locally defined obscene gestural imprecation – can cooccur with speech or, perhaps more often, simply replace it, even in the midst of conversational turns. They are thus a kind of language surrogate. Other sorts of gesture, however, seem to be inextricably linked to simultaneous speech. Researchers have repeatedly observed, for example, that depictive or representative iconic gestures – which seem to present images reminiscent of entities or events also receiving verbal mention – appear synchronized with, or temporally just antecedent to, apparently associated words, or ‘lexical affiliates’ as they are called. ‘Formless’ gestures, dubbed ‘batons’ or ‘beats,’ seem instead to track speech rhythm, falling at once on stressed syllables and points of presumed speaker emphasis. Furthermore, deictic gestures allow interlocutors to indicate referents spatially (although sometimes in virtual space), and thus provide a (sometimes seemingly indispensable) complement to roughly simultaneous spoken referential expressions, such as *this* or *that*.

Theorists adopt sometimes diametrically opposite positions, however, about the differences between gesture and speech as communicative resources. Some think gesture ‘leaks,’ betraying a speaker’s true feelings and thoughts, perhaps in opposition to more treacherous (because more conscious?) words which may try to conceal them. Or they may see gestures as largely involuntary somatic twitches, simply reflecting the speaker’s (or the mind’s) struggle to externalize inchoate inner images as a linear sequence of verbal elements. This article will largely ignore the putative ‘inner’ processes that underlie gestural production, to concentrate instead on the semiotic and functional properties of gestures. We take for granted the communicative potential of gesture in the process of utterance, and its connections with social and cultural formations more generally. For just as gesture is integrated with utterance, tying words directly to a spatiotemporal context, it is also part of wider

cultural routines of the body, susceptible both to the stylization and persistence of custom – patterns of gesture have evidently remained largely intact in Naples for several centuries, much longer, no doubt, than patterns of speech – and to the ideological productions of culture to which we turn at the end of the article.

Meanings and Interactions

Gestures function like other signs, verbal or otherwise. To expand on a gestural typology already alluded to, a commonly cited Peircean trichotomy can be applied to gestures. Conventionalized – thus symbolic, in the Peircean sense – emblems, with specifiable ‘citation’ forms (thus, in Kendon’s terms, ‘quotable’ – ‘and then she did **this** [quoting the gesture]’) and holophrastic as well as lexemelike meanings, except for their manual modality resemble certain spoken expressions. The conventionality can be seen partly in specific criteria of well-formedness (the circle of the ‘OK hand’ is made with the thumb and the index finger, with the others extended slightly upwards, not with just any fingers, and presumably not with other orientations of the hand, orientations which in other cultural settings can produce very different meanings). Conventionality is also evidenced by the families of use to which such culturally specific gestures are put. Indeed, emblems are in both form and function much like interjections, or ‘response cries’ (Goffman, 1976), which also may depart from the phonotactic canons of a language and which inhabit a characteristic expressive realm – often, for example, indexing various kinds of disapproval or designed for interpersonal social control – but which remain highly culture specific nonetheless.

There are symbolic and conventional aspects not just to a society’s repertoire of emblems but to nonce gestures as well. Hand shape in gesture, for example, is sometimes highly specific: how one points, with what digits or other body parts, and what sorts of thing one can refer to with a specific sort of pointing gesture, are matters carefully (and symbolically) regimented in many cultural contexts. In Tepoztlan, Mexico (Foster, 1948), one used different hand shapes to show the height of a table, a donkey, or a child, and using the wrong sort of hand remains a potential insult throughout Latin America. Recent investigation proposes that even in spontaneous gesticulation different hand shapes come in ‘families’ with highly schematic shared meanings: ‘precision’ or ‘offering,’ for example, associated with the ‘precision grip’ (the touching thumb and index figure of the ‘OK hand’) or ‘open palm’ hands, or ‘individuation’ associated with a lone extended finger. Presumably, however natural

the explanations for such groupings may seem, cultural tradition and transmission must be centrally involved in propagating such families of form.

Gestures are also heavily iconic, depicting aspects of objects and actions by selectively mirroring or diagramming shapes, movements, and configurations of entities or events that provide the vehicles for gestural interpretation. A Guugu Yimithirr man, for example, describes how his boat capsized in a storm. He gesturally evokes the rolling motion as the boat was picked up by the wind and tossed on its side (Figure 1), saying “like **this**.” Resemblance is, of course, a feeble principle for interpreting a sign, and interlocutors must always infer what aspects of a demonstration they are to attend to – one reason that words and gestures frequently complement one another semiotically, or that gesticulation uninformed by the accompanying words may remain obscure, until the soundtrack (or the subtitles) are turned back on. Because gestures iconically – if schematically – demonstrate actions and depict objects, they can also incorporate varying perspectives or viewpoints on such action, often more directly than can syntactic and lexical devices which imply voice or valence. A gesturing hand can represent now an object, now a tool for operating on it, now an actor manipulating it, and now an observer of the scene. Gesture can also suggest granularity or resolution (for example, in gestures accompanying directions or instructions), as well as specifics of the configuration and shapes of objects – a principle exploited in sign language nominal classifiers, and used to advantage in spontaneous gesticulation as well. A hand holding even an imaginary object adjusts itself to its shape and weight.

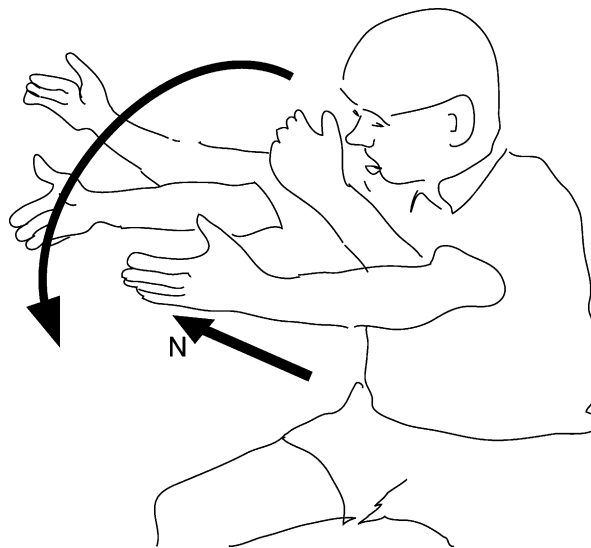


Figure 1 First shipwreck gesture.

Finally, gestures indexically project the contexts of their occurrence. The rhythmic gesticulations called beats, mentioned above, are almost pure indexes, tracking the speech stream much in the way a conductor tracks a score, and additionally parsing it into significant segments. Even the most wooden of gesturers – from Englishmen to presidential candidates – seem to punctuate their syllables gesturally. However, the observed synchrony between gestures in general and their apparently affiliated words is itself an indexical trace of the temporal unfolding of an utterance. A pointing movement, another classic indexical sign, may pick out a perceptually available referent, but it may also create an invisible one in thin air, leaving it available for later resumption by gestural (or spoken) anaphor. Clark (2003) describes a range of object manipulations, which he calls ‘placing,’ to achieve referential ends parallel to those of ‘pointing.’ Crucially, gestures of ‘placing’ depend for their success on the structure of space – and of particular culturally significant spaces (from store counter tops or queues, in Western society, to the hearth or the notorious witchcraft cave in, for example, indigenous Mexico).

Pointing gestures are of particular interest because they combine all the Peircean modalities and additionally require careful conceptual coordination between interlocutors to convey their meanings. Consider the case of Rosa, in [Figure 2](#), who makes a complex double pointing gesture, when she reaches the climax of a story about an elderly woman who



Figure 2 Double pointing gesture.

opened the downstairs door of her house to some threatening men. Afraid, she wanted to escape out the same door, but could not because she had left the upstairs door to the house itself unlocked. In Friulian, Rosa narrates the older woman’s dilemma in the present and in the first person: “*Nopos la vie parze che o ai lepuarte viarte* [I cannot leave because I have the door open].” She performs the double pointing gesture in two stages: her left hand reaches out with the fingers extended loosely to the right when she says “I cannot leave”; then her right hand – which has accompanied the other in the move to the right – forms a pointing hand and points up to her left as she says “the door open.” The gesture invokes diagrammatically the configuration of the house (an outside door to stairs which lead up to the main dwelling) which Rosa’s audience knows well. It indexes the relevant locations in that conjured space. Rosa uses conventional index finger pointing to signal the unlocked door, and a looser pointing hand to show the blocked escape route. And, interactionally, the double point captures perfectly the protagonist’s dilemma: a choice between two impossibilities.

Directional indexicality also infects gestures otherwise based on quite different semiotic principles. A gestural imprecation, for example, can be performed in a specific direction, indexing at once its target and its author. A depiction can combine the representation of a referent’s size with an indexical indication of its position. In the shipwreck example mentioned above, the gesture not only illustrates the boat’s rolling motion but also indexes the cardinal direction in which the boat flipped over, given prevailing storm winds. Contrast [Figure 1](#), where the speaker has north to his right, and shows the boat flipping in front of him, i.e., to the west, with another performance of the same story where the narrator is facing north, and depicts the boat flip with a very different motion, but in the same direction (see [Figure 3](#)). Indeed, the shipwreck gesture illustrates a perhaps unexpected sort of gestural convention, since it is a norm for speakers of Guugu Yimithirr (and in other communicative traditions, too) that gestures depicting motion, real or hypothetical, remain faithful to cardinal orientation (Haviland, 1993).

Though most research has concentrated on gestural ‘meaning,’ gestures (along with attitudes of the body more generally) are clearly central in coordinating (inter)action. The preconditions of face-to-face communication involve positioning bodies to allow, restrict, or prevent mutual access. Moreover, states of talk can be restructured and reorganized in part by the talk itself, and in part by reorientations of interlocutors brought about by gesture, shifts in gaze, and adjustments of posture. Theories of the ontogenesis



Figure 3 Second shipwreck gesture.

of gesture often link children's manipulation of objects as the source for later gestural 'ritualization.' Pointing, for example, appears to grow out of grasping and reaching. Even in adults, handling objects, moving them, and directing attention to them and to the spaces around them seem to give rise to gestural routines which, in turn, can become routinized or 'grammaticalized' through the course of an interaction. Gesture is thus embedded in bodily techniques, themselves notoriously shaped by cultural practices.

Ideologies of Gesture

Like other cultural practices, gesture when it rises to explicit consciousness inspires metatheory and ideology. The most astute early students of gesture, from de Jorio to Efron, comment with skepticism on theories which purport to link the proclivity to gesture, or gestural exuberance, to aspects of personality or temperament, if not to gentility and good breeding, or even to race and national character. The fact that such links have been advanced, nonetheless, suggests something about an ethnotheory of the

communicative economy which gesture and speech jointly inhabit. The fact that some populations – ranging from Warlpiri women in mourning, who must not blurt out certain tabooed words (Kendon, 1988), to members of monastic orders who abjure the worldliness of words – voluntarily substitute elaborated, conventionalized systems of gesture for speech, is a kind of reversal of the common injunction on children in other societies not to point or impolitely overuse their hands in talk.

Arguments about the communicative virtues of gesture seem always to involve subtle and perhaps contradictory ideological stances: Roman orators (like modern-day politicians) hoped to become more persuasive through calculated use of gestures; but pop psychologists argue that 'body language' is truer – precisely because deeper and less susceptible to conscious manipulation – than words. Some theories find gestures peculiarly appropriate to situations where words fail – over great distance, or in situations of too much (or too little) noise; others find virtue in their surreptitious and silent potentialities (as in the case of the Cuna lip point [Sherzer, 1972], which can be a vehicle for clandestine criticism or mockery). Finally, the analytical debates about whether gesture is a speaker's or a hearer's phenomenon (i.e., whether it is, in the psychologists' parlance, 'communicative') reflect pernicious dichotomies that surround such culturally specific notions as volition and intention, individual vs. community, or knowledge/mind vs. practice/body.

See also: Gesture and Communication; Gestures: Pragmatic Aspects; Sign Language: Overview.

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Gestures: Pragmatic Aspects

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(Hand-) gestures play many diverse roles in human life and do many different jobs in social interaction. Gesture – simple emblems like the thumbs-up sign as much as ongoing gesticulation that accompanies talk – is a most flexible resource that is utilized in a multitude of cultural practices, ranging from legal proceedings to work in mines to the making of music and intimate moments of talk, and it is always in play when people collaborate with their hands on common tasks. The practices of gesture are heterogeneous and difficult to subsume under a common denominator, other than that the activity involves communicative action of the hands. The view adopted here is focused by the question how gesture serves persons – *embodied actors* – who are acting in the world together, within specific ecological and cultural settings, and together making sense of it; gesture is conceived as a mode (or set of modes) of bodily action by which the world is structured, known and understood, not in the first place as a system of signs or a mode of expression.

Gesture serves human activities, including conversation, in a number of different capacities that can be conceived as *alignment-types*: ways of aligning people, gesturing hands, and the situated world within which they interact. Alignment types are distinguishable on the basis of the framework of participant orientation within which gestures are perceived and understood, i.e., in terms of their alignment and coordination with gaze, speech, action, and the setting or landscape within which the interaction takes place. Six alignment types are distinguished here, leaving open the possibility that there are others:

1. hand gestures can aid in the structuring and making sense of the **world-at-hand** (i.e. the world **within** reach of the hand);
2. they can serve for orientation within and understanding of the **world-within-sight** (but **beyond** reach of the hands);
3. gestures can represent or **depict** the world in its absence, within the 'gesture space' (McNeill, 1992) that is created by the participants' orientation to the gesturing hands;
4. hand gestures, often in combination with other bodily action, can **embody communicative action** and discourse structure;
5. they can **mediate and regulate transactions**; and
6. they can construe content that is conveyed by the verbal utterance that they accompany (**ceiving/ception**).

In the following, the features of each alignment type are described, and gestural practices that are characteristic of it are discussed. The last section of the article delineates aspects of the coordination of gesture and speech.

Making Sense of the World at Hand

A great deal of inconspicuous gesturing occurs while people and their hands are actively engaged with the world at hand. Gestures arise as a byproduct of and in the service of practical action, disclosing features of the immediate scene, or otherwise involving the touching, feeling, grasping, and handling of whatever is at hand, and maybe the making of something from it. Gestural practices that are coupled with the world at hand are often excluded from the study of gesture, which is treated as movement in the air by empty hands. However, wherever cooperation involves the handling or making of things (including the making of graphic marks on paper), one finds manifold