

## Gesture

**G**esture usually starts with a dubious, if not downright bad, reputation. No matter how "dramatic" someone's occasional *beau geste* may be, it nonetheless remains "just a gesture," and thus liable to the suspicion of being only "token," or, worse, "empty." Often the bodily movements or gesticulations that routinely accompany speech just as routinely pass unremarked or dismissed as irrelevant in studies of language. When gesture *has* risen to analytical consciousness, the result has too often been a contrastive 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 mildly systematic, or largely anarchic) that "betrays" inner states and attitudes that intentionally communicative channels may be trying to hide. Here gesture is reduced to a kind of nervous tick, a sweaty palm that, unlike the treacherous tongue, cannot lie. Another family of approaches considers gesture to be scattered and only partly conscious bodily accompaniments to true language (whether spoken or otherwise), largely involuntary excrescences of the speaking process itself as it struggles to render inchoate or imagistic thought into the digital linearity of language. Here the emphasis is on gesture "for the speaker," and any communicative function it may have (except for the observing psychologist) is analytically irrelevant. For another class of theories, gesture is primitive "attempted" language, grounded in presumed universal iconicity, 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 substitute for language, assuming that a gestural lingua franca can draw on a set of mimicable actions ("eating" 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 *codified* and *culture-specific* gestural substitutes for spoken language: compacted, gestured holophrases known as "emblems." Examples include the "OK" sign formed with a ring made by the thumb and forefinger (a handshake which can have quite different meanings from one community to another), various gestures for "[s/he's] crazy," or the gesture in American English simply known as "the finger." All are signals which interlocutors must *learn* both to produce and to interpret. Because the messages encoded often have negative content, 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 inflections 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 "gesticulations," 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-fledged sign languages, in which the gestural channel serves as the vehicle for language itself. Ranging in between are such phenomena as nonce pantomimes (meant to signal on their own, but nonconventionalized); culture-specific emblems that function as complete, quotable utterances in their own right, independent of or substitutable for speech; or "substitute" sign languages that replace 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 *gestalts* are decomposed into distinct articulations (hand 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 *gestalt*. (In some communities, for example, a high pointing gesture suggests relative distance.)

c. There is complete semiotic 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 (an "hourglass" motion to suggest a particular human body shape), index

("pointing toward" a referent), and symbol (a purely conventional "thumbs up" gesture, for example). The semiotic parallel between gesture and the rest of language extends to the characteristic linguistic reflexivity (imagine "quoted" gestures, or, for example, meta-discursive negation via gesture), its "arbitrariness," and its indexical links to contexts of speaking, which display the characteristic range from relatively entailing to relatively creative. (A good example is the semiotic complexity of pointing, which identifies referents by often complex indexical links as well as by characterizing elements in handshapes or the form of other body parts. Pointing is typically susceptible to Bühlerian "transposition" in the same way as spoken deictics. Furthermore, pointing may acquire a cultural metapragmatic evaluation, as in the European injunction "It's not polite to point.")

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 "home sign" systems that arise in contexts where deaf children are not exposed to a preexisting sign language attest to the insistence 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 *codes, deaf, iconicity, indexicality, participation, signing, vision*)

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