

McNeill Reading Response

In this reading response, I will share about the ways I use **3** (not 4) of the different gestures.

Gesticulation

Out of all 4 types of gestures, gesticulation is the one I use the least. Personally, I feel the use of gestures and facial expressions is often ambiguous. For gesticulation, where the meaning of gesture depends on context, it is usually difficult for me to clearly express myself without making it tedious. There is an exception in engineering design, which I will elaborate on. Other than that, in many cases, it turns out I could have easily used words instead, or even drawings.

I am most tempted to use gesticulation when communicating in the context of engineering design, such as design courses or design teams. In Praxis III, I am part of a team designing a high fidelity prototype, while in UTWind, I am in the aerodynamics subteam for the design of a small scale wind turbine, with a focus on the blades. In both cases, team members would need to indicate physical operations, such as assembly or operations. Gesticulation is mostly used to clear up ambiguities. For example, when talking about wind turbine blades, the phrase “it rotates” can refer to the blades rotating in normal operation, the entire turbine rotating to better face the wind, or loosely speaking, the angle at which the blades “cut” the air. Understandably, anyone reading this text might even be confused as to what kinds of rotations are described in the above example. In this case, this also serves as an example of how gesticulation is important. Possible alternatives include the use of engineering terms such as “pitch” and “yaw”, but these terms may not be familiar even to those in other engineering fields. Moreover, there are cases where a pair of terms have switched definitions according to different conventions. What a mathematician would call ϕ would be recognised as a θ by a physicist, and vice versa. These potentially expensive mistakes are the reason why gestures are preferred.

In other cases, I avoid gestures because they are either unneeded, or the information provided is unnecessary. Using the example provided in the book, where one uses gestures to describe a tree bending back (p6), I personally believe one does not need gestures to explain how a tree bends back. Even if the tree were to bend in an unexpected way, I personally doubt if this is something that has to be communicated. Note that these are just my personal opinions and beliefs, and I believe that there are many others who would disagree.

Speech-linked gestures

I usually use speech-linked gestures when I do not wish to speak, for any reason. It is sometimes a choice, where I have viable alternatives. In most cases, it is also in the context of engineering design, but unlike in the previous section, I neglect to accompany my gestures with verbal explanation. Outside of design, there are two main scenarios where I would use speech-linked gestures.

There are settings where speech is discouraged. For example, when talking with friends in the library or a quiet space, I would opt to use gestures to replace speech whenever I can. In loud settings, I would use gestures so I would not have to raise my voice, and when there is active conversation elsewhere, or when I am communicating with someone engaged in communication with another, I prefer to use gestures to avoid speaking over others.

Sometimes, the subject phenomenon cannot be easily explained using words, especially when I am using English. For example, to someone who does not play the piano, it is difficult for me to explain playing the instrument without the use of gestures. It is difficult to put into words the positioning of the body, hands and fingers. Moreover, I cannot rely on the use of any technical terms. Another example is the description of physical phenomena. Without using words specifically defined in engineering, it is arguably impossible, or at least very difficult, to describe to a friend how my CIV bridge ended up failing. At the very least, I personally cannot find the words that could express the nuances.

Emblems

Emblems are my most commonly used gestures. I often use them to set the tone, or when speech is discouraged, similar to how I use speech-linked gestures. As people close to me may have observed, I often use the thumbs-up gesture. I would use it after a friend gives a speech, after exams or quizzes, or any other scenario where I would prefer not to speak. I would also use emblems when I wish to convey a specific message. In a multitude of different contexts, I can use a thumbs-up or OK sign as a response, whereas a verbal response involves explanations and choices that imply nuances. More “meaning” is supplied. A thumbs-up is universally understood, but a verbal response such as “I think it was good because...” may provoke different reactions. Finally, I use emblems with people close to me, using our unique gestures. For example, two thumbs-down gestures put together forms a heart (Try it!). This communicates closeness and friendliness, which is simple to express with gestures but difficult using words.

As a side note, it is interesting to see how emblems are used when the signs are not conventionalised. Recently, I discovered the hand sign for the number 6 is only really understood among Chinese circles following some miscommunication. This leads into the topic of how gestures are interpreted. When using hand gestures, I focus only on how I want to express myself, and not on how others might understand the gesture.