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CHAPTER

6 Reasons for Documenting Gestures and Suggestions for How to Go About It

Mandana Seyfeddinipur

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Abstract

The reasons for documenting gestures and suggestions for how to go about it, are enumerated in this article. Using gestures, the hand and arm movements speakers make when talking, seems to be a universal feature of human communication. So far there has been no report of a culture that does not gesture. But our knowledge about the cultural diversity of gesture use within linguistic practices is limited, even though gestures are an integral part of those practices. In order to describe linguistic patterns and regularities of language use, understanding gesture is indispensable. This article is intended as an introduction to the *whys* and *hows* of gesture documentation for linguistic fieldworkers. It provides an overview of the multifaceted phenomenon of gesture, and an insight into how gesture interacts with language, cognition, and culture. Different aspects of gestures — like their semiotic properties, their multiple functions in conversation, and the cognitive linkage between gesture and speech — are introduced. The term ‘gesture’ has been used for many different phenomena, from facial expressions to making a verbal compliment. This article uses the term ‘gesture’ to refer only to the hand and arm movements speakers make when they communicate. This excludes other non-verbal behaviours like gaze, head movements, and eyebrow flashes. Note that this is an arbitrary decision, which reduces the breadth of bodily expression to one set of articulators. The study provides an overview of some basic aspects of gesture, demonstrating how crucial it is to consider gestures as an integral part of language documentation.

Keywords: [gesture documentation](#), [human communication](#), [cognitive linkage](#), [facial expression](#), [verbal compliment](#)

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