6.1 Introduction[1]

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.

Kendon (1986a) shows how gesture is relevant for many areas of study (see also Kendon 2007). This chapter is intended as an introduction to the whys and hows of gesture documentation for linguistic fieldworkers. It will provide 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 —will be introduced. This introduction is far from a comprehensive account of the complex phenomenon, but should heighten attention and awareness of a central aspect of human communicative behaviour.

The term 'gesture' has been used for many different phenomena, from facial expressions to making a verbal compliment. For the purpose of this chapter we will use 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 gaze, the face, the head, the body, and the hands form an orchestrated whole together with speech, and manual actions are not necessarily the dominant component of visual bodily action in utterance.

We also exclude behaviours like blushing, self-grooming, straightening clothing, or actions like smoking or giving something to someone. The rationale behind this second class of exclusions follows Kendon (2004a: 15), who defines gestures among other features based on how observers treat gestural actions since they are 'directly perceived as being under the guidance of the observed person's voluntary control and being done for the purpose of expression rather than in the service of some practical aim' (see Wilkins 2006 for a critical review of this analytical position).

The interest in gesture reaches back to the ancient Greeks (for an overview of the history of gesture studies see Bremmer and Roodenburg 1991; Kendon 1982; 2004a). And although in recent years the study of gesture has become more and more prominent, gestures have been mostly studied in western societies (for exceptions see e.g. Barakat 1976; Brookes 2005; Creider 1977; Enfield 2009; Green 2009; Haviland 1993; Kita and Essegbey 2001; Le Guen 2011; Sherzer 1991; 1993; Sparhawk 1981; Streeck 1993; 1994; Wilkins 2003).

This chapter provides an overview of some basic aspects of gesture, demonstrating how crucial it is to consider gestures as an integral part of language documentation. Section 6.4 provides some practical advice on how to go about including gestures in language documentation.