

6.2 Gesture basics

p. 149 Following the definition above, gestures, just like words, communicate information. With gestures, speakers may indicate a location, depict the shape or the size of an object, or show how an object moves. A speaker might enact how someone threw a ball and then point to where the ball was thrown. Speakers also do interactive work with their gestures like rejecting, denying, negating, offering, giving, and comparing. Speakers can use gesture to mark discourse structure and to regulate the coordination between speakers in conversation. Communities have repertoires of gestures that are like words and that are used with and without speech (for classifications of gestures see Bavelas et al. 1992; Efron 1941/1972; Ekman and Friesen 1969; McNeill 1992; Müller 1998, Wundt 1973[1921]; and see Kendon 2004a for a comparative discussion).

Conventionalized gestures, like ‘thumbs up’, have been termed ‘symbolic gestures’ (Efron 1941/1972), ‘emblems’ (Ekman and Friesen 1969) or ‘quotable gestures’ (Kendon 1988a; 1992). They can be used independently of speech and can have different meanings in different cultures (Morris et al. 1979). Members of a community can quote them and provide verbal glosses for them. Their form–meaning relationship is stable and subject to standards of well-formedness. Changing one feature of the gesture's form changes the meaning. In Britain, the ‘victory’ gesture is made with the index and middle finger extended and spread to form a ‘V’ shape, with the palm turned outwards. If the orientation of the palm is changed by turning it so that the back of the hand faces the recipients, it loses this meaning. It may become an insult when combined with motion component of moving the V up rapidly.

Several dictionary-like lists have been published documenting the meanings expressed by gestures for different cultures (see Kendon 1981; 1984b for a discussion, and for methodological problems see Collett 2004). Context-of-use studies have shown how certain quotable gestures make reference to central cultural concepts of special importance in a given culture (Sherzer 1991; Brookes 2004; 2005; Kendon 2004a).

6.2.1 Semantic interaction

Gestures are coordinated semantically and temporally, and this close coordination has, among other features, led to the view that the two forms of expression are guided under a single aim (Kendon 2004a; McNeill 1992). The following exemplifies how speech and gesture interact at different linguistic levels in the creation of meaning. The relationship between gesture and speech is complex, and speakers have a variety of ways to combine the information expressed in the modalities. Gesture can be the main carrier of information, or it can add and further specify aspects of the referent that is being talked about (Kendon 2004a; Lascaridis and Stone 2009).

p. 150 Speakers combine words and gestures into gesture–speech ensembles (Kendon 2004a) or composite signals (Clark 1996). The components of the ensemble differ in their core semiotic properties. Consider someone describing how she threw a ball and smashed a window. While she says *and then I threw this ball*, she lifts her hand next to her head as if holding a ball the size of tennis ball or baseball in her hand and then moves the hand fast forward, extending her arm. With her hand shape she shows the size of the ball and with the movement she enacts how she threw the ball and the direction in which she threw the ball. The information displayed in gesture specifies aspects of the event that are underspecified in the speech portion of her utterance.

Gestures are also used to depict abstract concepts. Imagine someone talking about an argument he had with a friend. He says *and the argument went on and on and on*. The gesture co-occurring with *went on and on and on* depicts the abstract concept of an ongoing duration visually in multiple circular motions. These gestures are representational in that they depict an abstract entity. In this metaphoric process, an abstract domain