

## GESTURE AS CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC PRACTICE

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### Summary

Gesture is a ubiquitous, though often overlooked part of human language, often supposed to be more "natural" and "expressive" than speech, but clearly linked, both in form and meaning, to the words it usually accompanies. Recent work, relying on video recording, proposes different typologies of gesture, based on its semiotic properties or links with spoken language. Gestures, which range from "emblems" or conventional gestural holophrases to less regimented "gesticulation" accompanying talk, are often conventionalized and linked not only to linguistic structure but also to other social and cultural aspects of utterances. Using space directly, gesture is a further link between utterances and the social and spatiotemporal contexts in which they occur, as well as with other ongoing practical activities. The same semiotic properties associated with verbal signs inhere in gesture, both with respect to form and meaning, and gesture can incorporate different perspectives and stances in a way paralleling the rest of language. Moreover, gesture contributes to ideological; attitudes and beliefs about language and communication more generally and is central in attributions of linguistic style and mastery.

### 1. Introduction

Gesture is so much a part of human interaction that it is sometimes easy for analysts to ignore. Perhaps because it seems obvious, unremarkable, and even *natural*, it often slips through the nets of linguistic science. Unlike the arbitrary, conventional, highly structured digital codes of spoken language—socially learned, highly structured on multiple overlapping levels, sociopolitically regimented, and often endowed with ideological, even mystical character—gesture seems mundane, direct, spontaneous, and perhaps too prosaically corporeal to be of much interest to the study of human minds.

And although both words and gestures are ephemeral, vanishing almost as soon as they appear, there is no widespread technology of inscription for gestures, and no tradition of writing that— before the advent of sound film and video— could render gestures as liable to repeated scrutiny and analysis as words.

Nonetheless, gesture has occasionally attracted analytical attention. Roman and medieval rhetoric linked oratorical success to expert deployment of gesture as an aid to persuasion. Graphic art from all parts of the world has always relied heavily on stylized gestures—from depicted movements of the hands to bodily postures and facial expression—in representing emotional states and human relationships. Despite speculative theories in the 18<sup>th</sup> century linking “natural” systems of gesture to presumed universals in the genesis of language and expression, it has also been a commonplace among careful observers of gesture—especially the conventional and culturally specific manual holophrases known as “emblems”—(1) that apparently identical gestural forms, involving handshapes and movements, may have radically different meanings from one society to another, or even within a single communicative tradition, and conversely (2).that different cultures use different ways of expressing similar ‘meanings’ in gesture. Classic studies of highly conventionalized and geographically widespread emblems, especially by Morris and his colleagues, amply illustrate the former point—that what is apparently the very same gestural form (an “OK” hand, for example, or the two index fingers held upwards in a “V” shape, perhaps with different orientations of the palm, or the purse hand—see below Figure. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**) may convey entirely different messages from one communicative context to another.



Figure. 1: “Telephone” in Italian

For an example of the second point—that the “same meaning” can be conveyed by different conventional gestures—consider two interestingly different ways to signal “telephone” (or “talk on the telephone”)—both iconic, that is, both indicating by “resemblance” aspects of the act of talking on the telephone, but depicting, in the Italian case (Figure 1), the form of the telephone apparatus itself, but in the American version

(Figure. 2), the way of holding it in the hand instead—a difference of viewpoint and perspective, and a difference in whether the hand stands for (part of) the protagonist’s body or for an inanimate object. The semiotic means by which a gesture “stands for” something, as well as aspects of the conjured “scene” from which a gestural depiction takes its effects, will be themes of the discussion that follows. The difference illustrates how cultural practices provide the matrix in which gesture forms part of utterance.



Figure. 2: “Telephone” in American.

## 2. Recent approaches to gesture

In recent years, iconic recording techniques have enabled detailed studies of the morphology and interactive delicacy of gesture, spawning what must be considered a whole new branch of enquiry, or at least a qualitatively new aspect of what has been an ancient preoccupation of students of human communication. In addition to allowing detailed and careful studies of gestural movements themselves and their temporal organization, both with respect to speech and otherwise, new representational techniques inspire a series of research questions about how an individual’s bodily movement contribute to communicative practices more generally, as well as how they enter into interaction between individuals and with their environment.

Considerable research tries to relate gesture to psychological processes, including psycholinguistic aspects of speech production and reception, usually considered as phenomena located in individual cognition, and with varying degrees of sensitivity to the interaction between speech and context (for example, in deixis). The influential work of David McNeill bases an entire theory of speech production on the close coordination in the utterance between imagistic gesture and spoken language. Considerable psycholinguistic debate surrounds the extent to which gesture might be important, too, in speech comprehension. This article will not try to review such

research, nor will it consider important topics like the acquisition of gestural competence in children, or the consequences and results for gesture of different sorts of aphasia or apraxia, both areas which deserve more research than they have received thus far. We shall also not be concerned with popular theories about gestural “leakage” and the ways “body language” is purported to reveal inner states and dispositions despite verbal and other attempts by speakers to conceal them.

This short article will review recent approaches to gesture to question its simplicity and presumed *naturalness*, and to explore the role of *convention* in gestural practice. We assume that gesture is an integral part of utterance and, although perhaps complementary to other aspects of linguistic structure, an essential element of normally situated linguistic interaction. We aim throughout to relate gesture to wider linguistic and cultural practices. With respect to the former, we will discuss how gesture is both inherently linked to speech, and shares its semiotic modalities, and yet differs from verbalizations in terms of its dimensionality and to some extent its expressive virtues. In particular, most typologies of gesture are based on its relationships to speech, and just as spoken language is plurifunctional, operating simultaneously on different planes of action, so, too, is gesture. Similarly, gesture displays the hallmarks of all cultural practice: based on culturally specific standards of form and use and organized around coordination between individuals. Like other cultural behaviors, it involves both action and ideology—that is, it expresses, in meaning and form, systems of belief, both explicit and implicit, about how things are and ought to be. Finally, like all cultural practices, it raises in a problematic way the contrast between sociocultural particulars and human universals.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**John B. Haviland** is an anthropological linguist, with interests in the social life of language. His major research has been on Tzotzil (Mayan) in highland Chiapas, Mexico, and its neighbors, as well as on languages from the area north of Cooktown, in far north Queensland, Australia. He is Professor of Anthropology at the University of California at San Diego and concurrently Investigador Titular C at the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, Mexico. His most recent book is *Old Man Fog and the Last Aborigines of Barrow Point* (1998, Smithsonian Institution Press) about the last speaker of the Barrow Point language.