

1 The domain of gesture

Willingly or not, humans, when in co-presence, continuously inform one another about their intentions, interests, feelings and ideas by means of visible bodily action. For example, it is through the orientation of the body and, especially, through the orientation of the eyes, that information is provided about the direction and nature of a person's attention. How people arrange their bodies and how they orient them and place them in relation to each other or to features in the environment, provides important information about how they are engaged with one another and about the nature of their intentions and attitudes. Activities in which objects in the environment are being manipulated, modified or rearranged, are indispensable for grasping a person's aims and goals and interests. Of equal importance, however, are actions that are seen to be purely expressive. Here we find those configurations of action in the face and body that appear as displays of feeling and emotion, as well as actions that often play a central role in the accomplishment of important moments in social interaction. Greeting, showing gratitude or affection, challenge, threat, submission, compliance, all are accomplished through a range of different expressive actions.

Beyond this, however, are those actions that are employed as a part of the process of discourse, as a part of uttering something to another in an explicit manner. Thus, people may refer to something by pointing at it, they may employ the hands in complex actions organized to show what something looks like, to indicate its size or its shape, to suggest a form, object or process by which an abstract idea is illustrated, or they may show, through visible bodily actions, that they are asking a question, making a plea, proposing an hypothesis, doubting the word of another, denying something or indicating agreement about it, and many other things. There are also visible actions that can serve as alternatives to spoken words and socially shared vocabularies of such actions are commonly established. In some circumstances, indeed, entire languages that function as autonomous systems in their own right have been fashioned from visible action. In other words, there is a wide range of ways in which visible bodily actions are employed in the accomplishment of expressions that, from a functional point of view, are similar to, or even the same as expressions in spoken language. At times they are used in conjunction with spoken expressions, at other times as complements, supplements, substitutes or as alternatives to them. These are the *utterance uses* of visible

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Adam Kendon

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action and it is these uses that constitute the domain of 'gesture', the domain to be explored in this book.

In the Western tradition an interest in visible action as utterance, or gesture, is of very long standing. There are systematic discussions of it from Classical Antiquity and scholarly attention of a recognizably modern kind becomes evident toward the end of the sixteenth century. In the seventeenth century interest in the possibility that gesture could form the basis for a universal language was discussed and, in the eighteenth century, when the possibility for a natural, rather than a divine explanation for the origins of language first came under serious consideration, the idea that gesture might have been the medium in which language first was formed was often suggested. Partly as a consequence of this, gesture languages, and especially sign languages in use among the deaf, were seriously studied for the first time in this period. These interests continued into the nineteenth century, and several important figures in what was to become anthropology and psychology made valuable contributions to the study of gesture. From the end of the nineteenth century, however, interest in gesture declined rather markedly and it did not begin to revive until about the seventh decade of the next century. From then on there has been a steady multiplication in studies of gesture and certain developments suggest that 'gesture studies' is emerging as a recognized field of study. In 1996 the first international conference devoted entirely to gesture studies was held in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Annually, from 1998 onwards, there have been further conferences on gesture studies in Germany, France and Portugal, and in 2002 the first meeting was held of the International Society for Gesture Studies in Austin, Texas. Papers from these meetings have been published in Santi et al. (1998), McNeill (2000a), Cavé et al. (2001), Posner and Müller (2004), and Rector, Poggi and Trigo (2003). *Gesture*, a journal devoted to gesture studies, was launched in 2001.

There are several reasons for this recent growth of interest in gesture. First, detailed studies of how gesture and speech are interrelated (which take advantage of audio-visual recording technology) have shown that these two activities are so intimately connected that they appear to be governed by a single process. Yet, as a little reflection shows, the way in which gesture and speech serve as modes of expression is quite different. Speech uses an established vocabulary of lexical forms organized in structures that unfold as a temporal succession, according to rules of syntax. Gesture, on the other hand, especially when used in conjunction with speech, tends not to have these features and is often regarded as expressive because it is depictive or pantomimic. Yet, how can a person, in creating an utterance, *at one and the same time*, use both a language system and depictive and pantomimic actions? As a close examination of the coordination of gesture with speech suggests,

these two forms of expression are integrated, produced together under the guidance of a single aim. Is this because they are expressions of two different forms of thought that originate jointly in a single, 'deeper' process? Or are they integrated as a consequence of how a person, engaged in producing an utterance, adapts two separate modes of expression and conjoins them in a single rhetorical aim? Do the gestural expressions that so often are integrated with spoken expressions provide insight into the processes of thought that lead up to the organization and pronunciation of sequences of words? Or do they, rather, contribute in their own right to what is being said, and so enrich an expression that would otherwise be poorer if constructed out of words alone? Taking gesture into consideration has raised anew some important issues regarding the relationship between verbal language, imagery and thought and has challenged theorists who would try to build a model of the speech production process. It now seems clear that such models cannot be derived from a consideration of speech alone, but how gesture is to be incorporated still remains a matter to be resolved.

Second, micro-analyses of communication conduct in face-to-face interaction (also taking advantage of audio-visual recording technology) have shown that visible bodily action, including gesture, can play a crucial role in the processes of interaction and communication. It has become clear that visible bodily action is often integrated with speech in such a way as to appear as if it is its partner and cannot be disregarded, if we are to have a full understanding of how utterances within the context of an interaction are intelligible for the participants. Close study of communication conduct in interaction has also shown that gesture is often used, from moment to moment in everyday encounters, as a form of expression in alternation with speech, as well as in conjunction with it. What governs the choice of its use? When do speakers bring in the use of gesture and when do they not employ it? What does this imply about speaker understanding of the contrasting properties of speech and gesture as modalities of expression? How do we incorporate such observations into accounts of 'recipient design' – how speakers adjust their utterances for the benefit of their interlocutors?

Gesture has long attracted interest because it seems to be a 'universal' and 'natural' form of expression. Although it seems to be something that is spontaneous and created through the whim of the individual, at the same time it can be shown to be regulated and subject to social convention. In some circumstances, indeed, when speech is unavailable whether for environmental, ritual or physiological reasons, gesture can become a form of language all by itself. The study of gesture, thus, seems to promise us special insights into the way in which individual forms of expression are transformed by social processes into socially shared communicative codes. These questions have

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become especially acute in recent years with the growth of interest in sign languages, and this is a third reason why gesture has attracted interest in recent years. What is the relationship between 'sign' and 'gesture'? Are sign languages an extreme form of specialization of gesture or is there a radical difference between gesturing in everyday life among speakers and the signing of sign-language users?

Yet a fourth development has rekindled interest in gesture. This is the mid-twentieth-century revival of interest in the question of the evolutionary origins of language. This question, much debated in the eighteenth century, was largely dropped as a matter for serious discussion by the end of the nineteenth century, in part because of the paucity of evidence in terms of which the various theories about language origins could be evaluated. Mainly as a result of the enormous expansion of knowledge in palaeoanthropology, archaeology, neurology, and primate communication, a discussion of the question of language origins again seems possible and the relevance of gesture to this issue has again been raised. The idea that gestures might have constituted the first form of language was first seriously put forward in the eighteenth century, but by the beginning of the twentieth century it had become just one among a number of different speculative ideas on language origins. In the light of recent work on gesture and sign languages, and some rather spectacular studies that suggest that apes have a capacity to learn language if it is presented to them in the gesture modality, the gesture theory of language origins has been refurbished and has once again become attractive to many.

In this book we take up several of these issues, but not all of them. After a discussion, in Chapter 2, of the question as to how visible actions are recognized as 'gesture', the history of the study of gesture is surveyed. In Chapter 3 we begin in Roman Antiquity, with a discussion of the work of Quintilian, whose treatment of gesture in his treatise on rhetoric (published about AD 100) acquired great influence by the end of the sixteenth century, when an interest in gesture in something like a modern sense began. We discuss some of the contributions of this century and the one that followed, and continue with a consideration of the philosophical importance that came to be attributed to gesture in the eighteenth century. Chapter 4 is devoted to four nineteenth-century figures who are very important for the study of gesture: Andrea de Jorio of Naples, Edward Tylor of Oxford, Garrick Mallery in the USA and Wilhelm Wundt of Leipzig. Chapter 5 tells of how interest in gesture declined at the beginning of the twentieth century, how it re-grew, and how it has developed from the 1950s until the year 2000. In Chapter 6 we survey some of the classification schemes that have been proposed for gestures. This serves as an introduction to the different functions attributed to them from the eighteenth century until the present.

These historical chapters give background for what follows. Chapters 7 to 13 present series of studies of gesture use in everyday interaction. Notwithstanding the long history of reflection on gesture, it is only within recent decades that a technology has been available that permits detailed examination of just how participants in interaction employ gesture in relation to speech. Although we still lack an adequate conceptual apparatus, transcription system and terminology for dealing with the phenomena of gesture, sound-synchronized visual recordings make it possible to turn moments of gesture use into *objects of inspection*. We can gather together, classify and compare as specimens utterances in all their multi-modal complexity, we can dissect them and show how they are constructed.

In the studies presented we explore some of the ways in which gesture is organized in relation to speech, as this may be observed in a wide variety of discourse settings. A large number of examples are described, all taken from video recordings of naturally occasioned interactions. We show, through these descriptions, how gesture is organized as an activity, how it is organized in relation to speaking and how it contributes to the total meaning of the utterance of which it is a part. We discuss representational gesture, gestures of pointing, and a number of different kinds of so-called pragmatic gestures which serve in a variety of ways as markers of the illocutionary force of an utterance, as grammatical and semantic operators or as punctuators or parsers of the spoken discourse.

From the examples presented we argue that when speakers use gesture they do so as an integral part of the act of producing an utterance. An utterance is looked upon as an 'object' constructed for others from components fashioned from both spoken language and gesture. It is maintained that the gestures used by speakers as they speak are partnered with speech as a part of the speaker's *final product* and are as much a part of the utterance's design as the speaker's words. Since, semiotically, gestures are often quite different from words, the question of how they collaborate with words in producing the meaning-complex of the utterance of which they are a part seems to be particularly interesting. We hope that our descriptions and discussions in these chapters will illuminate this.

In Chapters 14 and 15 we discuss gesture when it is used without speech. Chapter 14 describes various *kinesic codes*, including sign languages, both as these have developed among the deaf and also as they have developed in speaking communities, as in factories, monasteries or certain tribal societies. In Chapter 15 strategies of expression common among speakers when using gesture are compared to some of those found in sign languages. The two chapters together argue that there is a continuity between 'gesture' and 'sign'. This implies that there is a continuity between all kinds of systems of symbolic

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expression, from the simplest to the most complex. 'Language' when thought of in the narrowest 'linguistic' terms, whether spoken, written or signed, is thus an end point on a continuum of systems of symbolic expression.

In Chapter 16 we return to a consideration of gesture use in conjunction with speech and discuss the impact of culture. We look at studies of historical change in gestural expression, examine codified gestures and their geographical distribution, consider their origins and functions, and review recent studies that consider how the relation between gesture and speech may be affected by the grammatical and semantic structure of the language spoken. The chapter closes with a discussion of the idea of the 'communication economy' (or 'communicative economy' as Hymes 1974 called it) and suggests that the place of gesture in such an economy may vary according to how the whole range of expressive modalities is adapted to the ecological requirements for interaction within a given culture. The city of Naples is used as an example for exploring these ideas.

In a final chapter we briefly assess the status of gesture, both in history and as it appears in the light of the investigations of it presented in this book, and conclude with a suggestion about what it may teach us about the character of human language.

There are a number of important topics not treated in this book. Nothing is said about the neurological foundations of gesture, notwithstanding recent exciting developments. Gesture from a developmental point of view is not discussed and we do not review what has been done on gesture in infants and very small children. Also excluded is a discussion of gesture from a biologically comparative point of view. There is now much available on communicative behaviour among non-human primates and other animals which could usefully be considered in relation to human gesture, but this is beyond our scope. The emphasis in this book is semiotic, linguistic and cultural. Issues in neurology, psychology, human development and biological comparisons must be left for others to deal with.

2 Visible action as gesture

'Gesture', we have suggested, is a name for visible action when it is used as an utterance or as a part of an utterance. But what is 'utterance', and how are actions in this domain recognized as playing a part in it?

In this book we shall use the term 'utterance' to refer to any ensemble of action that counts for others as an attempt by the actor to 'give' information of some sort. We draw here upon a formulation of Goffman (1963, pp. 13-14) in which he pointed out that although, whenever people are co-present to one another they cannot avoid providing information to one another about their intentions and involvements, about their status as social beings and about their own individual character, and so may be said to 'give off' information, people also engage in action that is regarded as explicitly designed for the provision of information and for which they are normally held responsible. Through these kinds of actions, to use Goffman's expression, people are said to 'give' information. Here 'utterance' will refer to any action or complex of actions that is treated by the participants within the interactional occasion, whatever this might be, as 'giving information' in this sense. That is, an 'utterance' is any unit of activity that is treated by those co-present as a communicative 'move', 'turn' or 'contribution'. Such units of activity may be constructed from speech or from visible bodily action or from combinations of these two modalities (see also Goffman 1981). 'Gesture' is the visible bodily action that has a role in such units of action.

Speech is a highly specialized activity and it seems always to be recognized, whether or not the language employed is understood. The features that determine whether or not visible bodily action is recognized as a part of 'utterance', on the other hand, deserve some examination. When, as a student of 'gesture', one sets about the task of observing and analysing this domain of action one does not observe and analyse *all* kinds of visible bodily action, or at least one does not deal with all kinds of visible bodily action in the same way. Some aspects of visible bodily action are singled out and treated as 'gesture' while other aspects are left on one side or are treated differently. What are the criteria that are followed in making these differentiations? Can the characteristics of actions that come to be dealt with as 'gesture' be described? These are the questions investigated in this chapter.

'Gesture' as the word is currently used is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd edition, 1989) as "a movement of the body, or any part of it,

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that is expressive of thought or feeling". In earlier uses the word also referred to deportment or to how a person carried the body. However, throughout the evolution of its meaning it is the manner of action and the expressive significance of this that is referred to. Furthermore, there is always the implication that the actor is deemed to exercise at least some degree of voluntary control over any movement regarded as 'gesture' and what it expresses. Usually 'gesture' is not used to refer to those visible bodily expressions of thoughts or feelings that are deemed inadvertent or are regarded as something a person cannot 'help'.

Thus, actions such as waving goodbye, the pointings and pantomimes that people sometimes engage in when communication by talk is impossible or the head waggings and arm wavings that accompany talk are usually referred to as 'gesture'. Laughter, smiling or weeping, on the other hand are not usually referred to in this way. When, occasionally, they are, this tends to imply that the expression was 'put on' or that it was a show or a performance, and not 'genuine' as an expression of emotion (Ekman and Friesen 1982). The word 'gesture' is also not usually employed to refer to the movements that people make when they are nervous, such as hair-pattings, self-groomings, clothing adjustments and the repetitive manipulation of rings or necklaces or other personal accoutrements. In ordinary interaction such movements tend to be disregarded, or they are treated as habitual or involuntary, and although they are often revealing and may sometimes be read by others as symptoms of the individual's moods or feelings, they are not, as a rule, referred to as 'gestures'.

Further, there are many actions that a person must engage in if they are to participate in interaction with others, which, again, though they may be revealing of the person's attitudes and feelings, are not usually regarded as 'gestures' because they are treated as being done for the practical necessities of interaction rather than for the sake of conveying meaning. Thus, although the distance a person may establish in relation to an interlocutor in interaction may be taken as an indication of their attitude toward the other or of their understanding of the nature of the interaction that is taking place (Mehrabian 1969), the movements that are involved in setting up or establishing the spatial orientational organization of an encounter are not usually considered 'gestures', perhaps because they are treated as being done, not for their own sake, but for the sake of creating a convenient and appropriate setting for the interaction. As a rule, participants tend not to notice them, unless they somehow violate the expectations that, within a given culture, people maintain about how occasions of interaction are structured spatially (Hall 1966). For example, when someone seems to edge closer to another than the other expects, or when they sit far off and do not move up, such actions may be taken as expressing interpersonal attitudes, feelings or intentions, but are

not generally regarded as 'gestures' if, as is usually the case, they are done in a way that subordinates them to actions that must be done merely to maintain whatever spatial and orientational arrangement the participants of a given conversation may be using (Kendon, 1973, 1990a: Chapters 7 and 8).

Likewise, practical actions carried out within the context of face-to-face interaction, such as eating or smoking or knitting, though sometimes integrated within the organization of interaction so as to serve expressive purposes, are nevertheless not usually considered gestures. The actions required in eating, drinking or smoking may sometimes be used as devices to regulate the interaction. People who meet to talk over coffee, for instance, may vary the rate at which they drink up their coffee and, as a result, can regulate the amount of time spent in the interaction. Lighting a cigarette or relighting a pipe can often be elaborated as a way of 'buying time', as when a person needs to think a little before replying. Yet, despite the communicative significance such activities undoubtedly have, participants do not usually treat such activity as if it is intended to communicate anything. To spend time getting one's pipe ready to light up may be a way of taking 'time out' of a conversation; it is not to engage in a conversational move or turn, even though it may play a part in structuring the moves or turns of which the conversation is composed.

The movements necessary for any practical action may, however, in their performance, be embellished in such a way as to render them more than 'merely practical'. In pouring a wine at table, for example, it is possible for the person pouring the wine to 'merely' pour the wine. But it is also possible that all the actions involved - raising the bottle to display it, adjusting the angle for the pour, twisting the bottle at the end of the pour to stop a drop of wine from running down the side of the bottle, moving on to the next guest - may be performed so that they are so elaborated with flourishes that they come to be openly recognized as having an expressive aspect. As this happens, they may come to take on the qualities of gesture.

On the other hand, gestures may sometimes be disguised so that they no longer appear as such. For example, Morris, Collett, Marsh and O'Shaughnessy (1979) have reported that in Germany there is a gesture in which the forefinger touches the side of the head and is rotated back and forth. It is used to mean 'he's crazy' and it is regarded as a grave insult. Its use has been the cause of fights and one may be prosecuted for performing it in public. A surreptitious version of it has appeared, however, in which the forefinger is pressed against the cheek. In this version the gesture can be performed in such a way that it could be mistaken for scratching the cheek or for pressing a tooth that was giving discomfort. Likewise, Morris and colleagues also report that in Malta the gesture known as the Italian Salute or *bras d'honneur* is regarded as so offensive that one can be prosecuted for performing it in public. According to

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Morris the Maltese have evolved a way of performing this gesture so that it could be mistaken for a mere rubbing of the arm, and not a gesture at all. In this version the left arm is held straight with the hand clenched in a fist, while the right hand gently rubs the inside of the left elbow.¹

Such examples are of interest because they show that participants in interaction are able to recognize, simply from the way in which an action is performed, whether it is intended as communicative or not. For an action to be treated as 'gesture' it must have features that make it stand out as such. Such features may be grafted on to other actions, turning practical actions or emotional displays into gestures as we have just described. Such features may also be suppressed, turning movements from gestures into incidental mannerisms or passing comfort movements.

Characteristics of gestural action

What are the features that an action must have for it to be treated as a gesture? In a study designed to pursue this question (partially reported in Kendon 1978) twenty people were each shown, individually, a film of a man giving a speech to a fairly large gathering. The film had been made at a *Te*, or pig prestation ceremony among the Enga, who live in the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea.² The people who watched the film were all English-speaking Australians of European background. Furthermore, none of them were students of psychology or any other behavioural science and were therefore free of any preconceptions such studies might have provided. The film shown was about four minutes long and it was shown without sound. Each person was asked to describe, in their own words, what movements they had seen the man make. Each subject was allowed to see the film as many times as they liked. The account of the movements observed was given in a 'non-directive' interview with the experimenter in which care was taken to use only the descriptive vocabulary that the subject employed. The aim was to find out what movements the subjects picked out in their descriptions and to find out what different sorts of movements they identified.

In the course of the film the man who was speaking engaged in elaborate movements of his arms and head, he walked forward, he manipulated the handle of an axe he was holding, he tugged at his jacket, he touched his face

¹ De Jorio (2000) describes many examples that illustrate how people can disguise a gesture as a mere action. See, for example, pp. 179–180, p.185, p.188, pp. 260–261.

² 16 mm film made by the author in the Enga Province, Papua New Guinea, 1976. Human Ethology Laboratory, Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.