

## The Impulse to Gesture

Gestures are central to the way people use language when they interact. This book places our impulse to gesture at the very heart of linguistic structure: grammar. Based on the phenomenon of negation – a linguistic universal with clear grammatical and gestural manifestations – Simon Harrison argues that linguistic concepts are fundamentally multimodal and shows how they lead to recurrent bindings between grammar and gesture when people speak. Studying how speakers express negation multimodally in a range of social and professional contexts, Harrison explores how and when people gesture, what people achieve linguistically and discursively with their gestures, and why we find similar uses of gesture in different languages (including spoken and signed language). Establishing the inseparability of grammar and gesture, this book is an important reference for any researcher interested in the relation between language, gesture, and cognition.

SIMON HARRISON is Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics in the School of English at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China. His research has played a vital role in bridging the divide between grammar and gesture.

# The Impulse to Gesture

*Where Language, Minds, and Bodies Intersect*

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Simon Harrison

*University of Nottingham Ningbo China*



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477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India  
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In loving memory of Christine Anne Harrison, devoted  
Mum and dedicated teacher. Thank you for the roots to call  
home and the wings to fly far.

**The Cloths of Heaven**

Had I the heaven's embroidered cloths,  
Enwrought with golden and silver light,  
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths  
Of night and light and the half-light;  
I would spread the cloths under your feet:  
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;  
I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

*W. B. Yeats*

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## Preface

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When we talk, how aware are we of our gestures, or indeed, whether we are gesturing at all? Sometimes gestures can be deliberate as with emblematic gestures like the well-known ‘thumbs up’ gesture. But sometimes we seem to be less aware of the gestures we use when we converse, argue, and collaborate with others in social and professional interaction. If you are unconvinced as to whether you or others gesture in these everyday settings, pause for a moment and watch people speaking. You will notice that they often repeat certain gestures as they put across or defend their point of view. This book explains what determines, shapes, and organises these gestures that keep recurring, what I refer to as *the impulse to gesture*.

Our impulse to gesture is intricately connected to what we say, what we mean, and what we aim to achieve with language in spoken interaction. Repeatedly viewing videos of people conversing and using methods to analyse different aspects of their gestures shows that the timing, form, and meaning of our gesturing hands coordinate systematically with the linguistic structures and pragmatic functions of speech. The type of gestures that are integral to the form and function of utterances can be grouped together and labelled ‘recurrent gestures’. These are gestures that we use conventionally but in diverse and intriguing ways.

One of the most fascinating gestures is the family of gestural forms associated with expressing negation. As all linguists will know, negation involves lexical and grammatical patterns that determine word order and operate on the semantics of an utterance, such as ‘not’ in English, ‘ne pas’ in French, and 不 (bù) in Chinese. What is perhaps less well known, but will soon become clear, is that speakers of these languages also express negation with gestures that exhibit an open hand shape either raised vertically with the palm oriented towards the addressee or turned palm down and swept along the horizontal axis. When speakers coordinate these linguistic and gestural resources in rejecting offers, refusing suggestions, denying assertions, and negating unwanted implications, they are expressing negation multimodally.

The multimodal expression of negation is what I have been studying for the past ten years and is the primary focus of this book. It leads us to discover the

‘grammar–gesture nexus’ – recurrent bindings of linguistic and gestural forms at the level of the utterance, with ramifications for discourse and interaction. This is an understudied but central feature of gesturing, and this book is designed to help show and understand its importance. Gestures are often viewed as free and spontaneous, but the nexus illustrates that even seemingly spontaneous gestures are constrained in ways that shed light on the relation between language, minds, and bodies.

Over eighty examples culled from hours of recorded spoken interactions in diverse contexts will show that when we gesture in relation to negation, we shape, orient, position, and move our hands in a reproducible way. How we prepare, release, and hold our gesture in space respects the ordering principles that negative forms and constructs impose on utterances. The form of these gestures is motivated by the thoughts, images, and actions that we associate with negation, such as removal, exclusion, and absence. On a discourse level, our gestures are constrained by the desire to maintain cohesion and coherence in relation to not only what we want to say but also what we want to do, our communicative aims in a particular interaction. Though inseparable within a given gestural impulse, the sequentiality of chapters in the book reflects the nesting of these different constraints.

The multimodality of a linguistic universal such as negation raises important questions about both gesture and ‘linguistic’ or ‘grammatical’ concepts. What is the relation between gesture and grammar? Why are some gestures shared within and across linguistic communities? Are these gestures similar to the signs we find in sign languages? In view of the centrality of gestures to linguistic structures, what then is the nature of language itself? This book on the ‘Impulse Theory’ of gesture brings us closer to answering some of these questions.

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## Notational Conventions

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Following Kendon (2004), the below conventions are adopted for gestural action unless otherwise specified.

Abc	speech is transcribed with conventional orthography
NOT	all capitals used to show stressed syllables (when relevant)
	start/end of gestural action
~~~~	preparation phase
***	stroke phase
.-.-.-	retraction phase
*****	gestural action underlined is held
***/**	a forward slash indicates a new stroke
(rh/lh)	right hand/left hand (if relevant, when two hands are being used)

Additionally, a number of other conventions have been adopted:

(...)	pauses in speech are indicated with series of full stops inside parentheses
(.)	micro-pause
(3)	lengthy pauses are given in seconds
[]	square parentheses indicate overlapping speech of different speakers
[1]	these numbers in the text and the transcripts refer to gestures being described

Code names provided with each example correspond to the video clips in my corpus. For example, ‘G\_K gm 11.40 no one around’ is an example of the expression ‘no one around’, which occurred eleven minutes forty seconds into a recording of a conversation between two speakers ‘GJ’ and ‘K’ playing a board game (‘gm’).