
As every serious student of language knows, gesture is trivial. We’ve all noticed that speakers tend to flail their hands around a bit, but being clever scholars, we have not allowed this to distract us from The Real Thing, which is obviously speech.

And yet, there have been those moments, when despite its relative absence from the research tradition, we wondered if there wasn’t perhaps more to gesture than meets the eye (so to speak).

Why do people gesture? (We found ourselves wondering.) Does it help communication? Does it help speech production? Could we add gesture to our models of language, or would it demand new models? Do people gesture in sign language?

In the past decade, a group of innovative researchers has undertaken to answer these questions. The result is a collection of theoretically broad, methodologically diverse studies whose results will sometimes surprise you.

The book is divided into four parts. Part I focuses on gesture as a communicative resource, particularly in the collaborative establishment of reference: between an aphasic speaker and his interlocutors (Goodwin); between an origami teacher and student (Furuyama); and workshops, classrooms, and car accident narratives (Le Baron and Streeck).

A second theme of this section is that gesture production varies with the social context of speech. Thus, Haviland finds that gestures indicating cardinal direction are sometimes based on a ‘compass’ created in the present context of discourse rather than actual geographical surroundings; Ozurek finds that changes in the number and location of addressees cause changes in the form of gestures produced; Kendon shows how interlocutors in a southern Italian village employ gesture as a complimentary medium with speech.

Part II of the volume explores cognitive aspects of gesture, with recurring emphasis on the unconscious integration of speech and gesture production. Mayberry and Jacques show that gesture production is halted during dysfluent (stuttered) speech; Butcher and Goldin-Meadow find that the ontogenetic appearance
of speech-and-gesture integration coincides with the appearance of two-word utterances; Kita argues that gestures facilitate the integration of spatio-motoric and analytic thought; Nobe examines the coordination of gesture onset with speech articulation.

Finally, Levy and Fowler correlate peaks in speaker energy level with the production of meta-narrative statements, and McNeill and Duncan introduce the “growth point” as a basic unit for language-and-gesture analyses.

The third section of the book contains proposals for modeling gesture performance. Krauss and de Ruiter each present ways of adding a gesture component to existing information-processing models of speech, while McNeill argues for an alternative, “dynamic systems” approach incorporating the growth point as a unit.

The fourth and final section of the book deals with the relationship between sign languages and gesture. Liddell looks at the use of deictic gestures as part of signed discourse; Morford and Kegl investigate the emergence of a new Nicaraguan sign language from its precursors in the “hOMESIGN contact form” found in schools for the deaf; and William Stokoe explores gestural communication as a possible key to understanding the evolutionary origins of language.

The overall impression of the book is one of rigorous and creative scholarship, presented in a readable form. Most chapters emphasize the reporting of findings over abstract speculation, although readers unfamiliar with theoretical framework of Chicago semiotics may find it hard going in places.

The best thing about the book, and about the study of gesture itself, is its integrated view of human language — moving beyond the tiresome habit of treating language either as a cognitive or as a communicative phenomenon — and paving the way toward a better understanding of this, most amazing of human capacities, in all its psychological and social complexity.

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