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Imagery That Enriches Our Speech

We all gesture as we talk, albeit mostly unconsciously. The gestures we produce support and supplement what we are saying. In different cultures, however, the very same gestures may carry very different meanings.

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Anyone who takes an interest in communication likely recognizes the importance of non-verbal signals used in conversation. Guides available online eagerly strive to teach us how to read the intentions of others from their body language and what postures and gestures we should use to appear more confident. Setting aside the issue of how reliable such tips actually are, we should note that the term "body language" itself is very capacious: it comprises facial expressions, postures, eye movements, as well as spontaneous and conventional gestures, such as "thumbs up" and the insulting "middle finger" gesture. Body language even encompasses pantomime – the acting out of elaborate stories using body movements; however, it excludes sign languages, given their own full-fledged grammars and lexicons. Among different kinds of gestures, cognitive linguists have been turning their attention to co-speech gestures – the gesticulations we perform as we talk. In this article, I will delve deeper into the topic in an effort to demonstrate how co-speech gestures help create imagery in linguistic communication.

Types of gestures

Since a vast majority of our co-speech gestures are spontaneous, trying to remain completely still throughout a conversation requires a great deal of determination. An extended hand may serve to point to an object being discussed, or to signify the direction in which we are headed. Spreading our thumb and index finger apart, in turn, may help show the size of the thing being discussed. But we can also use movements of our hands or other body parts to mark out the rhythm of speech and emphasize its most important elements. Overall, gestures can be divided into three fundamental categories: deictic gestures, iconic gestures, and beats. *Deictic gestures* are ones that involve some kind of pointing, enabling us to refer to the space we share with others. Interestingly, these gestures do not necessarily have to point to real people, objects, or directions. They can also function within the more abstract space of discourse, which

I will discuss later in this article. *Iconic gestures* have forms that resemble the objects they refer to. This may mean using our whole body to mimic a specific person, or just our hands to interact with imaginary objects. Iconic gestures may also depict only a specific characteristic of an object, such as its size, shape, or speed. *Beats*, in turn, are rhythmic body movements directly linked to the pace of speech. They are often combined with deictic or iconic gestures. For example, nothing prevents us from using our index finger to point *rhythmically* in a certain direction or at some object. For this reason, these categories need not be treated as separate. Gesture analysis views deictic, iconic, and beat gestures as various aspects of the construction of meaning.

Nevertheless, this breakdown suggests some of the different functions that gestures perform in language communication. Let us now take a closer look at these functions. The average language user may not realize that words are in fact rather vague as a medium. To indicate a location, we may use such words as "north," "south," "left," "in front of," and so on. In day-to-day communication, however, nothing can replace the immediacy of a gesture, which can point to any direction in space. Gestures enrich our messages with additional elements that are more difficult to express in language. The visual form not only conveys dimensions and shapes in a much better way, but also allows us to anchor meaning in the body, thus providing both a physical point of reference and an external image of the emotions being experienced. In his book *The Emoji Code,* the linguist Vyvyan Evans argues that the popularity of emoji in instant messages stems precisely from the need to quickly express emotional content, such as could be conveyed using gestures, facial expressions, and the tone of voice in a face-to-face conversation. A chat without emoticons appears cold, serious, and monotonous, like flat, dull speech.

The question arises, is this additional layer of meaning truly necessary? If the meaning expressed by words is the same as that of images in gestures, shouldn't the words alone be enough? To understand why human communication occurs across several channels at once, we should think of gestures as a kind of safety mechanism. We sometimes talk in places where our listeners are distracted by noise and by what is happening around them. With the help of gestures, we can steer their attention to what we want to emphasize in our speech. In addition, shapes drawn in the air help us guess what has been said if

A gesture pointing to an event as occurring earlier on a timeline

we have not heard all the sounds well. This process is partially unconscious. Just like with the physiological blind spot in our eyes, the brain can "fill in" the sounds missing from the noisy signals that reach our ears. The more mutually-reinforcing signals people engaged in a conversation share, the less likely misunderstandings will be.

Synchrony

The images we create by moving parts of our bodies are not just for our audience. If they were, we would not resort to gestures when no one can see us, for example during phone conversations. Gesturing and speech are so closely linked that keeping our hands still can take a major toll on the fluency of speech; vice versa, stammering usually disrupts the flow of gestures as well. Researchers such as David McNeill and Cornelia Müller argue that gestures are a form of externalized thinking. In the process of interpretation, the stream of words and gestures is divided up into roughly two-second units that express a complete thought through both channels. Such a breakdown is backed up not only by research on the structure of speech, but also by the "perceptual moment hypothesis" – which holds that our attention is divided up into time intervals in which stimuli are recorded as a complete experience.

In a vast majority of situations, gestures are produced slightly ahead of the spoken words, but the structure of their meaning depends on speech. The images created through gestures express what is called "thinking-for-speaking," or a way of thinking adapted to the categories used by a specific language. Examples of grammatical attributes that influence thinking-for-speaking include the different structures used in descriptions of movement. The Polish language uses what is known as satellite-framing: verbs expressing motion, such as *chodzić* (to walk), are supplemented

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with elements expressing the direction of the movement or the path, such as the prefixes *s-* in *schodzić* (to walk down) or *w-* in *wchodzić* (to walk up), and optionally additional words such as *po schodach* (the stairs). Spanish, which uses verb-framing, has two different verbs – *bajar* and *subir* – to express the meanings of "going down" and "going up," respectively. These verbs do not tell us anything about the manner of motion, unlike the Polish verbs *chodzić* (to walk), *biegać* (to run), and *latać* (to fly). Although it is possible to add this piece of information in a sentence (*subo la escalera corriendo* – "I go up the stairs running"), it does not have to be expressed, especially the manner of motion can be inferred from context.

These two types of framing impact on gestures in several ways. First, when speakers of Spanish describe the movement of an object, they may express the path as part of the verb, but omit the word(s) expressing the manner of the movement and instead show it with the shape or speed of their hand gestures. This allows them to characterize the whole movement while remaining verbally concise. The opposite holds true for speakers of such languages as English and Polish. Satellite-framing forces users of these languages to include the manner of movement in the verb itself, even when the nature of the movement itself is not very relevant. For example, the rotational motion for the English verb "roll" is more relevant in the sentence "The car rolled down the hill" than in "Let's roll!" As such, we can expect that a gesture suggesting rotation will be more likely to appear in the first sentence, in which the image of rotating wheels appears crucially important.

Satellite-framing in spoken English allows us to describe the path of motion quite freely by adding more prepositions, for example in the sentence "He went out, down, onto the street." Each fragment of the movement may be accompanied by a separate gesture, dividing the path of motion into fragments. Although

A gesture showing a small rotating object

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it is possible to express all these details in Spanish, a more natural spoken form would probably be *Bajó a la calle*, accompanied by a single smooth motion expressing the entire path.

Metaphors in gestures

So far, we have discussed gestures depicting or pointing to specific objects, but we should also consider thoughts that pertain to more elusive concepts. When we talk about justice, love, or politics, the concepts we are invoking do not have dimension, shape, or location, and yet such conversations are nevertheless filled with gestures. The key to interpreting such gestures in abstract contexts lies in the human ability to understand concepts metaphorically. Let's get back to the example of a person pointing a finger towards an empty space while speaking. This gesture is justified by the conceptual metaphor whereby thoughts and ideas are viewed as if they were material objects. It is expressed in language by phrases such as "to brush a thought aside" or "to toss around some ideas," in which the verbs suggest that thoughts can be touched, physically acted upon and moved.

Interestingly, gestures and words often co-express certain metaphors. When we talk about "the flip side of a problem," we may turn our hand over, thus encouraging our conversation partner to actually look at it from a different angle. We can emphasize similarities or differences between two ideas by holding out open hands with palms upwards. An open palm suggests the presentation of thoughts as matter – spatial proximity can be understood as similarity and distance as difference.

Other examples of metaphorical images of abstract notions include the concept of time. In recent decades, linguists have studied the prevalence of spatial metaphors of time in the world's languages. In both Polish and English, we speak of the future as being *przed nami* ("ahead of us") and the past as *za nami* ("left behind"). When we talk about what will happen tomorrow or what happened yesterday, we may add gestures pointing ahead of or behind us, respectively. However, the Aymara, an indigenous people of Bolivia, have a different perception of the spatial image of time. They understand the past as what they have seen with their own eyes. So when they talk about what happened in the past, they make hand gestures pointing forward. The future, on the other hand, is unknown and invisible, so when the Aymara discuss it, they produce gestures pointing backwards.

Spatial metaphors of time are quite prevalent. When we draw a timeline, for example, on charts and in calendars, we do so from left to right. While this image is not reflected in language in phrases like "the day to the left/right" (putatively meaning "yesterday/tomorrow"), it does have psychological significance.

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A gesture "placing" the topic of the conversation on a blank sheet of paper

While conducting research into gestures, I observed how one study participant grouped events together on a mental axis: when she wanted to indicate that something had happened earlier, she would use a finger to draw an arc in the air from right to left.

The future of research

In this article, I have outlined only a few of the problems that have been explored in contemporary gesture analysis. Although this branch of linguistics has been developing for decades, it continues to face new questions and problems. For instance, although gestures are a common form of communication in various cultures, it can be challenging to distinguish between those aspects of the structure of gestures that are universal to all people and those that are unique to a specific community. Globalization has led to the disappearance of many languages, and thousands more are at risk of extinction for reasons related to the dwindling number of their speakers. Another field of study focuses on individual gesture styles of people within the same culture. Ever-more advanced devices recording the spatial movement and position of our limbs are making it possible to measure gestures with a high degree of accuracy. If gestures externalize thoughts, can we also use them to infer people's individual thinking styles? The growing databases of systematically described recordings enable us to identify both the general aspects of the use of gestures, and the idiosyncratic characteristics of individual people. ■

Further reading:

Evans V., *The Emoji Code*, 2017.

Hammond C., *Time Warped*, 2012.

McNeill D., *Why We Gesture: The Surprising Role of Hand Movements in Communication*, 2016.