

GESTURES: THEIR ORIGINS AND DISTRIBUTIONS. Desmond Morris, Peter Collett, Peter Marsh, and Mary O'Shaughnessy. 1979. Stein & Day, New York. xxvi, 296 pp., Illustrations, maps and photographs. \$12.95 (cloth), paperback edition now available.

The fact that human beings use gestures to communicate has long been of interest to travel writers, dance scholars, art historians, linguists, anthropologists, psychologists, and others. The very bibliography of Gestures demonstrates the many ways in which gestures have been tabulated and studied - as self-contained semiotic systems, in the context of 'symbolism' in painting and iconography, as elements of different idioms of classical mime, as aspects of courtly etiquette, and also as aids in the identification of human emotions.

Nevertheless, as is rightly pointed out by the authors of this book, "the gesture specialist is a rare bird indeed ... (and) the scientific study of gesture ... (lags) far behind the science of linguistics". The authors mention two reasons for this state of affairs: that gestures have long been wrongly considered a trivial, second-class form of human communications (in comparison with spoken language) and that gestures resist verbal analysis. However, they seem unaware of a more fundamental problem, which is related to the very linguistic analogy that they use.

Although many students of gesture (and human movement) see parallels between the symbolic use of gesture, and spoken language, very few indeed carry the comparison to any sophisticated level of discourse (such as Stokoe, 1972). Rather, many writers exhibit (i) a naïveté about spoken language and (ii) an unfamiliarity with even the basic principles of linguistics; thus they are led into unquestioned assumptions and misguided methodologies which preclude serious advances in our understanding of human gestural use. Whereas the layman might be forgiven such naïveté about language, the same naïveté is extremely worrying when exhibited by a Fellow of Wolfson College, two members of the Department of Experimental Psychology at Oxford University, and "a language graduate of Cambridge University" who embark on an extensive study of the human use of gestures to make meanings.

The four authors attempt to trace "the geographical range and antiquity" of some 20 key gestures, partly in order to lead the way for future compilers of gestural dictionaries and encyclopaedias (the equivalent in gesture of multi-lingual phrase-books prepared by touring clubs for the international traveller?). Much of the research is 'lexicological', or 'etymological' and, as such, is a fount of information on the various usages of these gestures over time. Theirs is also perhaps the first study that undertakes to record the use of 20 gestures in 40 locations over an area so vast and culturally diverse as Western Europe and the Mediterranean.

In a disarming manner the authors hope that the book will not be criticised for what it does not do but "be accepted for the new ground that it does cover" (p. xii). Unfortunately, it is precisely the question of what ground it does cover (other than, literally, the forty chosen

locations) that leads one to note some disturbing resemblances between their aims, methods and assumptions, and those of many 'pre-scientific' studies of the last century. The very decision to deal with twenty gestures over such a wide area has much in common with the outmoded comparative method that wrenched social facts "from the social contexts which alone gave them meaning" (Evans-Pritchard, 1962:39). Similarly, the unquestioned assumptions that each 'symbolic' gesture has a single origin from which it 'flows' is reminiscent of diffusionist theories now held to be untenable by most modern linguists and social anthropologists. Because of these assumptions, the four authors regard gestures more as isolated phenomena in that they do not (as do linguists with words) consider them as elements in rule-governed systems¹ of gestures, and so are led to some rather unsatisfactory conclusions.

For instance, we are told that once invented, what stops "...a useful symbolic gesture of this kind from flowing with equal speed in all directions till it covers the whole area of human habitation around the globe" (p. 263) are certain "gesture flow" barriers, for example: (i) culture prejudice barriers that exist where gestures associated with a particular national group are 'shunned' by a neighbouring rival state; (ii) linguistic barriers, that reduce the "penetration rate" of a gesture that is 'language-tied' to an untranslatable slang expression; (iii) ideological or religious barriers that impede, say, a gesture tied to Christian symbolism from 'flowing' into Muslim countries (pp. 264-5).

Also evidently in operation here is a biological model in which gestures are likened to viruses. Had the authors regarded symbolic gestures as social facts, such cultural and linguistic barriers would have been self-evident. A simple linguistic analogy could have led to a consideration of the arbitrary nature of the relationship between 'signifiers' and 'signifieds' (cf. Saussure, 1966:65-8) in the gestural signs of a specific community of gesture users, which would have removed the necessity to explain why most gestures (like words) do not spread.

We are also told that the study demonstrates that a single gesture has (i) many meanings, (ii) many derivations, (iii) varies in form, and that users of a gesture are often unaware of its origin. Semanticists (like Ullmann, Leech, and Lyons) have for years been aware that words have characteristics of polysemy, homonymy (including homophony and homography), and moreover that language-users need not know the etymology of a word in order to use it. Had some of the basic principles of linguistics been the starting point of a study of gestures "that have replaced speech", the authors may not have had to spend three years and the efforts of 29 researchers and interpreters in order to come to these kinds of conclusions.

In particular they betray a fundamental misunderstanding of both linguistic and gestural form when they conclude that "...symbolic gestures, unlike words (my italics) work singly as isolated units. They may be strung together...but they seldom appear simultaneously" (p.267). To begin with, one marvels at the idea that (in defiance of all logical and physical constraints) spoken words can be perceived to appear simultaneously. Second, as one who has studied Bharata Natyam and its accompanying 'mudra' system of symbolic gestures for over 25 years, it is clear to me that gestures not only can but often do appear simultaneously.²

Although much of the data presented may be fascinating to the lay reader, the treatment of it lacks analytic rigour and is largely speculative. As explanation for the fact that Southern Italy shares the usage of a particular gesture with modern Greece (but not with North Italy) the authors resort to a colonial connection between Greece and South Italy that dates back to the 4th century B.C. They seem totally to ignore the subsequent two and a half millenia of social and linguistic change, and the fact that Italy shares this gesture and no other with modern Greece. They also fail to explain why English gestural usage is so different from Italian, given that (after the Roman conquest) the English happily assimilated not only Roman roads and baths, but also Latin into their culture.

My excuse for belabouring such points is an inability to understand how such studies are conducted or even sanctioned given the lack of linguistic and anthropological rigour and the paucity of theoretical, methodological and general scientific concerns: considerations that one wishes to assume are involved in decisions made by foundations to underwrite specific research projects. While it is true that those who embarked on this project are extremely thorough in the documentation of their efforts, it should also be evident that profusions of maps, graphs and the coining of specialised terminology ('gestural niche', 'gesture blurring', 'gestural distance' and so on) do not in themselves a scientific study make.

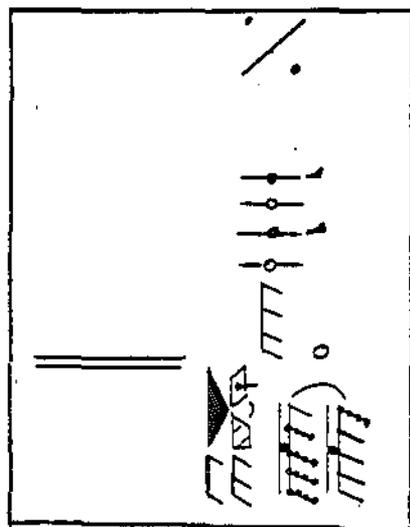
Although the authors take pains to underline the 'scholarly' genesis of the book, the American edition is clearly meant for popular consumption. This raises the issue of the place and purpose of such popularizations both with reference to authors and publishers. One wonders if they realise that books like this serve as informal recruitment systems for future students attracted by the possibilities of new areas of research, with the result that they also serve as models for future research. In this particular case one is led to believe that the sheer expenditure of time and the participation of a host of research assistants in itself merits an 'A' for 'effort'. Studies like this therefore contribute to the popular (or should one say 'unpopular') belief that most academics, having spent good time and money, do little more than obfuscate simple ideas with complex terminology and end with conclusions that tell us what we knew all along.

For a student of human movement, aware of the many complex issues involved in such an enterprise, one who sees in the information itself many avenues for potential research, such a limited view as is presented in Gestures of what research should accomplish is disquieting, particularly as once 'it has been done' (however 'done') foundations and publishers too often assume that no more need be done. I therefore feel it necessary to point to some of the issues raised by the study that, though treated in a cursory manner by Morris et al., must be addressed before we can hope to have a twentieth century science of gesture.

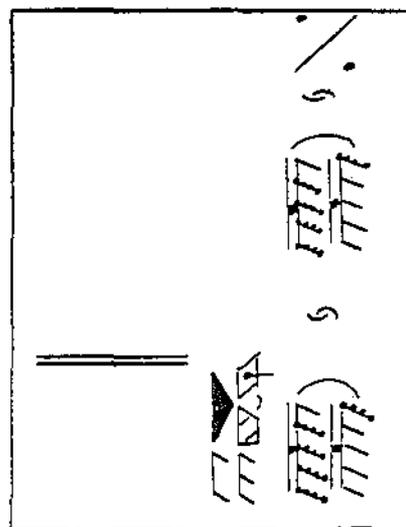
The problem of defining 'the same' gesture: it is not clear whether some of the variations of the gestures dealt with can in fact be considered the same gesture. For instance, 'the hand purse' seems to refer to two distinct movements, in both of which "the fingers and thumb of one hand are straightened and brought together in a point facing upwards". In one,

however, "the hand can be moved slightly" and in the other 'the bunched finger tips open and close slightly'. The first we are told is used to emphasise precision, whence it can mean 'query' and 'excellence'; the second suggests opening and closing, which according to some of their informants refers to the anal sphincter muscle, and signifies 'fear'. It is very possible that, like the vertical and horizontal 'horn signs', these two movements should be classified as two distinct gestures. In the classical Indian hasta-mudra system, two similar variations on the hand purse position are distinguished as samdamsa and mukula, and also convey very different sets of concepts (none of which, by the way, involve defecation).

This leads to the issue of the literacy of movement: an essential aid to the proper analysis of movements, since movement notation allows one not only to see the differences between gestures, but to do so without having to resort to words³. With a system of writing it is possible to see the difference in the above mentioned 'hand-purse' variations. The first would read as in Example A, and the second as in Example B.⁴



Example A



Example B

(See Williams, 1977, 1979 and 1980 for a more detailed treatment of the whole notion of the literacy of movement.)

The importance of studying gestures in the context of language-like rule-governed systems shared by specific communities: as long as we study gestures as autonomous phenomena and do not investigate the systematic and inter-related nature of their usage to make meanings, we cannot hope to have a sophisticated understanding of them. It is quite possible that the meaning of 'the same gesture' say the 'vertical horn sign' would depend on whether it was used by a group of bull-fight aficionados, by a classical mime or by a café-haunting group of Mediterranean men. There is still much work of this kind to be done before we attempt to compare meanings across cultural or 'gestural' boundaries.

The lack of a meta-language in which to talk of gestures and movement: whereas linguists have terms like 'semantic transference', 'polysemy', 'homography' and 'synonymy' to deal with some of the analytical distinctions they make about word-meaning relationships, students of gesture and human movement have yet to develop a similar meta-language.⁵ I am intrigued as to how one would describe the set of semantic transfers (transformations?) involved in the use, for example, of 'the ring' gesture, where in one case it goes from an iconic resemblance to 'a circular shape', to 'body orifice' - to suggest 'obscenity'; and in the other from a visual resemblance to the letter 'o', to the sound 'o', to 'O.K.' - to signify 'good' (pp. 100-105).⁶

Given the present state of the study of gestures (other than Stokoe, Kendon and Cicourel on deaf-mute signing and Williams in semasiology) it is perhaps unfair to raise these issues in the context of a book that purports to trace the origins and distributions of 'some' gestures. The authors' reference to a 'science of gestures' does, however, lead one to wonder whether that science would not be better served by a systematic consideration of such fundamental issues before we embark on naive, though well-meaning, plunges into the deep waters of cross-cultural comparison. As Saussure said in the first decade of this century, "the comparative school ... did not succeed in setting up the true science of linguistics. It failed to seek out the nature of its object of study. Obviously, without this elementary step, no science can develop a method" (1959:3).

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NOTES

1. For a discussion of the notion of rules and the social sciences, see Winch (1958) and Harré and Secord (1973).
2. In fact some of the problems with the translation of gestures into spoken language arise from the fact that a particular hand gesture may be accompanied (simultaneously) by, say, a gesture of the head that may add an element of negation to the concept signified by the hand gesture. This might cause the combined actions to mean the opposite of what the hand gesture on its own might convey. See Puri (1981) for further discussion of the simultaneity of gestures.
3. As mentioned earlier, the authors very rightly note that gestures resist verbal analysis. My point is that movement notation goes a long way to help redress this problem.
4. I am very grateful to Dixie Durr for the suggestions as to how one could notate the two movements I wish to distinguish. Although there are alternative ways of notating the two hand gestures, the present example allows one to see the difference between a movement of the hand at the wrist, and one in which the fingertips alternatively release contact and then touch.

5. I do not propose that we first develop a meta-language and then proceed with the study of gestures, but that we might take a cue from semanticists and try to analyse the different types of gesture-meaning relationships. A good starting point could be with distinctions analogous to those made by linguists with regard to word-meaning relationships, adapted to the specific medium of movement that we study.
6. cf. Saussure's associative relations (1966:123-126), which as he points out unite terms in absentia. One could substitute 'gesture' for 'word' in the following passage to say that "A particular word [gesture] is like the center of a constellation; it is the point of convergence of an indefinite number of co-ordinated terms" (p.126).

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