

Signifying Actions: Towards an Anthropology of Human Movement

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Williams directly links the unfolding of space and time to an unfolding of person. There is no such thing as space or time in a simple sense. Time and space are conceptual, moral, and ethical *before* they are physical. If the selection of time and space indexes is reduced to the utilitarian (as it usually is), the actor is essentially disembodied, at best one-dimensional, with no real motive, in Weber's sense of motive. The social dimensions that could come into being remain invisible, like the ten or eleven dimensions curled up inside molecule-sized universes in some recent cosmological theories. Williams makes it clear that cosmological space or metaphysical space or dramatic space all emerge performatively from the enactment of self, just as a promise or threat unfolds from the words, nuances, and intonations of the self in the moment of utterance, enclosing a world of action. The meaning of all subsequent action—the Mass, the T'ai chi, the ballet—flows from that moment.

Bonnie Urciuoli 'The Indexical Structure of Visibility' 1995.

Up to now, few have understood semasiological principles and practice better than a linguistic anthropologist, Dr. Bonnie Urciuoli (Hamilton College, Clinton, New York). For those unfamiliar with semasiology's theoretical resources, I recommend Urciuoli's discussion, 'The Indexical Structure of Visibility' (1995). In this work, she speaks cogently about many features of semasiology and action signs, making the initial point that spoken language is structurally distinct from complexes of gesture and movement, so that spoken and written language should not be taken as a "model by which to measure the meaning-making properties of all action sign systems" (1995: 189). Spoken language provides an excellent *analogy* for meaning-making in body languages,¹ but makes a poor *model* for the purpose, as the work of Birdwhistell and other behaviorists demonstrated:

[T]he defining properties of meaningful action are precisely those not visible in a grammatical-semantic model. . . . The creation of meaning is above all embedded in human relationships: people enact their selves to each other in words, movements and other modes of action. All selves are culturally defined, as time and space themselves are culturally defined. Time and space are never simply there; they are continually cut to fit the agenda of the moment . . . The indexical creation of the social person (and the terms of action) is the *performative* nature of action (*Ibid.* 189-190, italics added).

How can one recognize these properties of action sign systems in the papers presented here?

According to Shand (whose paper is not in this issue), the sign of the cross is essential to Greek Orthodox (as it is to Roman Catholic) enactments of self, which is easily understood. Signs of the cross are familiar gestures to nearly everyone, serving to identify the religious persuasion of their users and their commitment.² Less easy to understand is the concept of *orthopraxia* ("right,"

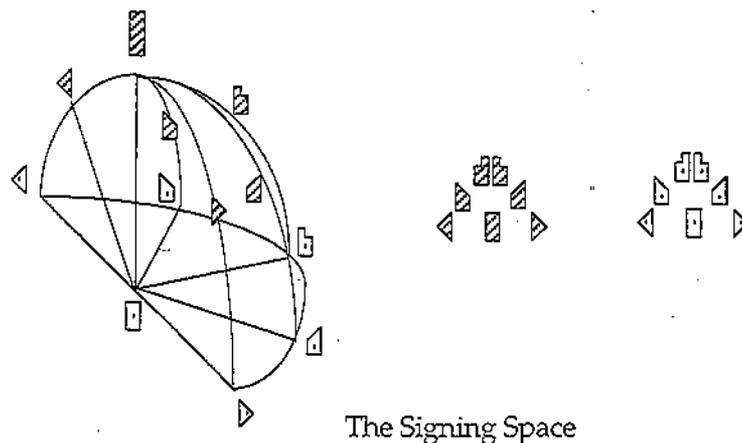
i.e. *correct* practice) which includes abundant and visually different manifestations of worship, fasting and prayer, including gestures as they are defined in "Kendon's continuum" (McNeill 2000: 1-2ff). However, *Orthopraxia* and the Roman Catholic gestural repertoire both include *whole bodily gestures and movements* not accounted for on the Kendon continuum.

Whole Body Moves or Body-part Gestures

Orthopraxia points to the entire role of bodily movement in Orthodox liturgical participation, where meaning is constantly revealed in ritual action signs. Rich in meanings, whole bodily gestures and sequences of movements in Orthodoxy, as well as details such as the specific handshape used by priests "operates from cultural ideas about what the body is, what interaction is, and what time and space are" (Urciuoli 1995: 191).

We thus arrive at problematic characteristics of the words 'gesture', 'gesticulation', 'pantomime', and 'emblem' as analytic categories in current research. These words focus on body parts: arms, hands and face. They focus upon specific sign systems, i.e. sign languages and gesture(s) accompanying everyday speech, perhaps manual counting systems and the like. In contrast, semasiologists conceive of sets of continua extending from least to most embodied, where speech acts are considered to be the least embodied of all human signifying actions.

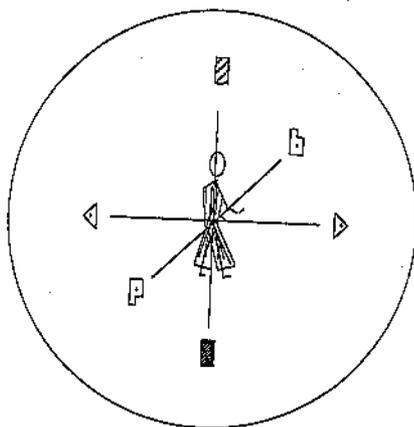
Dancing (Jackson's "voguing") and ordinary walking (Franken) are the most embodied of the systems that were presented by this panel. All the systems are indexically and spatially structured and they are performative. They use modes of indexing that create the who, what, when and where of the action. Semasiologists do not compromise broader understandings of the entire spectrum of human signifying actions by privileging sign systems that emphasize the verbal. Signed deixis in a wholly embodied system makes distinctions that are not coded in speech. In general, whole bodily gestures aren't important in sign languages. Spatially, this point is illustrated by the following figures (from Farnell 1995a: 228):



The action signs of a sign language are not dependent upon the whole body move/gesture for their meanings. The body may be sitting, standing, or lying

down without altering the meaning of specific hand signs. The analysis of sign language does not require the strict relationship between *kineseme* (a whole bodily gesture) and *kineme* (gestures of bodily parts) as, say, danced forms of movement do. However, this neither changes the importance of a sign-talker's actions, nor does it modify the meanings inherent in signed conversations.

On the whole, *kinesemes* require the concept of a space commonly referred to as a *kinesphere* of the whole body, thus:



The Kinesphere [Whole Body] (From Farnell 1995a: 228)

Semasiologists think with a scale of relationships³ that begins with "all theoretically possible human movement," progressing to the level of a *kineme*, which is the move/gesture of one body member or one part of a bodily member. Depending upon the *kind* of movement system under examination, units are assigned to various levels in between—or not—as the system dictates, and as the investigator chooses. The most important unit of the scale is the level of a single rite, dance, signed story or whatever. The scale is designed to encourage investigators to ask alternating questions: 1. What is the *whole* sign system under investigation about? and 2. What *units* are most important to indigenous actors in the system?

Finally, semasiology views structured systems of human movement as five-dimensional structures, the fifth dimension being Ardener's analogical program (1989[1971]: 64) consisting of the indigenous classifications and categories that are integral to the system, forming an indispensable part of it.

Indexicality in Movement Study

"Indexicality is anchored in central embodiment" (Urciuoli 1995: 191). It is expressed in many different ways: in writing (inscribed signs, see Farnell 1994) or talk (linguistic signs), hand signs (Farnell 1995b and Kendon 1995), the dance (Kaeppeler 1995 and Friedland 1995), the *ngoma* of a Muslim-African, Swahili-speaking society (Franken 1997), the Dominican Tridentine Mass (Williams 1995), and Aboriginal fighting (Macdonald 1995).

From Franken's analysis of the Egyptian Licorice-Seller Dance, we see moves that are "continually cut to fit the agenda of the moment," a feature of semasiological description amply illustrated in terms of four levels of movement and gesture and three levels of meaning (on the paradigmatic: syntagmatic scale) and the Reda Troupe's use of movements outside the indigenous Egyptian repertoire. All of these contrast with the stereotypical arm gestures current in modern American pop culture in the form of an "Egyptian walk" that simply exposes worn-out clichés about Egyptian people.

Although Jackson's paper explores referential signs—a primary characteristic of spoken language signs—in an embodied context where they might be least expected, we understand that referential action signs are primary to the creation of meaning in the context of "voguing." Jackson does not make the mistake of *reducing* the system of voguing to reference. He expands the concept so that it includes a voguer's way of being one's self. His approach is especially daring, in that he treats gender "as a process of structuring subjectivities" (Morris 1995: 568), aligning the social practices of voguing with newer forms of the anthropology of sex and gender (all of which fit very nicely with the semasiological principles of performativity, indexicality, deixis, reflexivity and the signifying body) with which he started.

Because of radical views about the construction of gender in the Ballroom Scene, voguing is not considered a satisfactory or authoritative expression of self in America. With regard to the total population, voguing's practitioners are relatively few, embodying highly disputed, emotionally charged ideas about human gender, not the least being the idea that gender is constructed: it is not an immutable 'given', as essentialists would have it. This puts Jackson's forms of contemporary American life outside the pale of acceptable constructions of self, but that is not the point. In voguing's case, semasiology provided Jackson with necessary theoretical resources enabling him to present the voguing community in non-stereotypical ways: he successfully avoids a rhetoric of oppression and hackneyed labels such as 'dysfunctional' and 'disadvantaged', thus providing a much-needed perspective of objectivity.

One of Farnell's graduate students, Kenneth McCandless, is presently writing an interesting Master's thesis on yogic practices, where he explores *vinayasa* as the practice of a series of movements that are linked through synchronizing breath and action, where construction of self is a major theme, although his work is not tied to issues of gender. Two features recommend McCandless's work: first, common conceptions of yogic practice see little or no movement or gesture (as commonly conceived) involved at all. Yogis maintain *asanas* (still postures) for relatively long periods of time that are nevertheless connected by moves from one to another. Second, in contrast to the other modes of movement examined here, the yogic system does not *enact* a self so much as it seeks to *integrate* the self, seeing the 'ordinary self' as an imperfect, incomplete (if not defective) vehicle for action.

Neither voguing nor yogic practices, or *orthopraxia* from the Greek tradition treats ritual practice solely as repetitive, reiterative or reproductive action. This work, together with Franken's work on Egyptian dancing links the unfolding

of space/time to the unfolding of person, as does Farnell's work on Plains Indian sign language (1995a).

Transliteration

Farnell's paper explains how Assiniboine selves emerge through indigenous concepts of space/time and action in Plains sign-talk during the process of transliterating from hand gestures to written actions. Nearly all movement-writers are concerned about where bodily parts "go" when they transcribe actions, but when Farnell asked her informants, for instance, "is your hand moving away from your chest, or is it just going forward?" she was told that *neither was the case*. The hand was moving "east." She recognized then (and in similar ethnographic moments), that concepts of personhood were being conveyed.

The hand moving toward 'east' was surrounded by concepts of power, spirituality, and a balanced sense of being in a wider, ordered world. As a result of such field experience, Farnell developed the notion of an "ethnograph,"⁴ i.e. a movement text where the movement-writer produces a performable script that encodes indigenous understandings of actions, rather than records of gross physical movement (Farnell 1995a: 152).

Ways of Being

In common with all systems of human action, the action sign systems discussed here have different potentials for enacting a self; for revealing the defining characteristics of public personhood of the community to which it belongs. Different modes of action, that is, vocal actions (speech), writing, dancing, fighting, walking and many others, facilitate ways of being social—in other words, ways of being or becoming a person. In fact, movement systems are the primary vehicles through which embodied forms of general human life appear. They are, in nearly all instances, "originating acts" (Morris 1995: 576). All action sign systems are performed by *persons*, but, in their zeal to identify and analyze gesture, some investigators tend to forget the object of the enterprise. Then, too, researchers are bound by prevailing theories and methodological practices within their chosen disciplines. In 1975, for example, semasiology was 'radical' in that it treated ritual, not as repetitive, reiterative or culturally reproductive action, but as *originating action*—a concept now seen by many as customary. It is no longer radical in that sense.

Visible forms of expression depend to a large extent upon what investigators look for. There are many epistemological problems involved: how much meaning, for example, would be found in a description of a baseball or football game and their players by someone who doesn't know the rules of these games? Any social ethnography works (when it does), partly because audiences know how to read the social originals. I wonder, for example, what younger generations watching the superb Canadian *Cirque de Soleil* see and understand? If youngsters have never experienced the social originals of circuses, how can they comprehend the depth and meaning of *Cirque de Soleil's reinvention* of the circus?

In how far is it possible for an Euro-American whose theories of a social person reside in reference, and meaning based on intention and truth value understand the Javanese theory of "Making the Self Smooth" (Geertz 1983: 62-64)? Given a centuries-long devaluation of a dramaturgical model of life and events, how is it possible for Westernized imaginations to appreciate Balinese modes of life based on a "theater of status" (Geertz 1983: 64-67)? Or, for that matter, how will they interact with concepts of *vinayasa* and an *imperfect self* embodied in yogic practices? How can they relinquish the notion that it is the material body alone that determines certain unities and continuities across time/space in the social world? These questions, important though they are, do not address more recondite problems. For example,

[Bourdieu's] . . . *habitus*, while certainly a sensitizing concept, in fact offers a somewhat blurred conception of the body and human agency and offers no systematic strategies for the inclusion of embodied action in cultural practices (Farnell 1995c: 8; and see also Farnell 2000: 397-418).

It is not my intention to oversimplify action sign systems into uncomplicated solutions of knowing the rules of the game, but I think that visible forms of action require a profound knowledge of and respect for other peoples' concepts of what can and cannot (or must not) be seen. Visible forms of human life (both formal or informal systems) always embody local theories of personhood. And, local theories of personhood are not always aberrations of an investigator's ingrained (often unexamined) categories and classifications, although they are often presented that way.

The Validity of Action Sign Systems

It is well-known that not all action sign systems are considered to be equally valid in all societies. Of the sign systems in this collection, voguing has the lowest status in contemporary America; religious practices have the highest. The Egyptian dance discussed by Franken has no status in the United States, for about the only Egyptian dance form with which the majority of Americans are acquainted is belly-dancing. The Reda Troupe (about which Franken has written extensively) worked very hard to keep signature moves from famous belly-dancers *out* of the repertoire of traditional *beladi* dances for which the troupe was renowned (see Franken 2002).

Politically, these kinds of thing have always been a problem with Euro-American movement study. Whole populations of people are judged to have invalid (as in the case of voguers) or trivial (as in the case of dancers) ways of being. Whole populations of people are thus "robbed of valid ways of being" (Urciuoli 1995: 192). And here, we arrive at the crux of the problem: how do the peoples of the world define themselves? For a start,

No indexical systems can be reduced to the merely physical, however "trivial" or "natural" an action may appear. . . . All physical embodiment is cultural embodiment, because it always involves a theory of the body. If all sign systems have in common that they are indexically structured, then all meaningful action is concerned with the interactive construction of a person. Each time an index occurs, its terms depend on who the actor is being; that in turn depends on the relationship between everyone involved and what they are doing together there at that moment (Urciuoli 1995: 192).

Other Selves—Other Persons

All signifying acts and actions are consignable to a shared frame of reference. How do we know, for example, that actions that look the same are, in reality, different? There are homonyms in movement and gesture, just as there are homonyms in speech, as my work on the Dominican Tridentine Mass, the ballet *Checkmate* and the exercise technique, T'ai Chi Ch'uan, illustrates (Williams 1995: 58-69). A human body, reduced to physicality alone, has no meaning in itself, but then, such 'pure' physical bodies do not exist in human social life. Analysts frequently make falsely iconic equations among visually similar movements (it is very easy to do so), but the result is less than desirable because the *person* in such cases is lost. Then, too, physical space is part of social space, and, as Urciuoli puts it, "A different world unfolds from the deictic act" (1995: 194).

The Primacy of Powerful Persons

Other selves (or local concepts of persons), will neither be discovered by researchers attending solely to the minutiae of gestures of bodily parts, nor by those who think that an investigator has to *be* an Egyptian, a Greek, an Assiniboine, a lesbian or a homosexual, to understand the concepts of selfhood and personhood that organize Egyptians, Assiniboines, voguing aspects of the American gay world or Christians into recognizable communities.

How can we assess the value of human signifying acts and actions without knowing the theories of the body, personhood and the theories of reality that are the hidden dimensions⁵ of the various performative spaces in which people act? And, how do we assess the value of ethnographic papers if their authors have not offered some insight into the subjectivities—the personhood—of the peoples about whom they write?

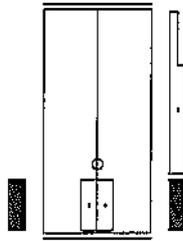
There are those who believe they write about human persons by writing about "lived bodies," "intentional bodies," or "experienced bodies," but they unfortunately labor under a Cartesian illusion. They have not managed to transcend Cartesianism because they have not sufficiently thought through the problems of human agency and causality. Farnell states the problem succinctly:

The new realist philosophy of science argues for a definition of agency that properly connects it to a conception of substance that is compatible with causation (as causal powers . . .). Without causation, there can be no agency, and for causation to be possible there must be substance for its grounding. A new conception of substance has been developed, which is neither the materialist nor the phenomenalist version, but a dynamical one: an immaterialist model of substance as a structure of powers and capacities in which the natural powers grounded in the human [body] make possible the realization of personal powers that are grounded in, and thus afforded by, social life. Powers thus belong to the person, not the organism, and the Cartesian material/immaterial dichotomy underlying the body/mind duality is no longer viable. The key is the primacy of the person, gesture (including vocal gestures) and social action, not the primacy of the body, experience, and individual perception (Farnell 1995c: 17).

Stated thus briefly, without further explanation, Farnell's expression of the problem appears dogmatic, but it is not. There is ample explanation available: Varela (1993, 1994 and 1995), Harré (1972) and Harré and Madden (1973 and 1975).

Semasiology is theoretically informed throughout by the concept of causal powers, that is, a generative view of 'cause' that "sees materials and individual things as having causal powers which can be evoked in suitable circumstances" (Harré 1972: 121). Adopting a semasiological point of view presupposes causal power theory because semasiology is grounded in a concept of dynamic embodiment, making explicit the idea that human movement is not only a fundamental mode of human meaning-making, it is composed of signifying acts called action signs.

Causal powers are rendered visible in the signifying acts and actions of embodied, causally productive agents (persons). They are fully explicit in such spoken statements as "I raise my [right] arm," for which the corresponding action sign is written thus:



Semasiologists also accept a generative view of cause⁶ that is fundamentally important because 1. it is radically different from models of causality redolent of Cartesian-based paradigms of action, and 2. it is completely different from phenomenological models of causality (see Farnell 1994: 934-935).

Semasiology is an enabling theory of human action because it begins with an alternative description of the body itself, replacing the Western medical body for the purpose of studying action signs, what they mean, and how they are generated. The signifying body was re-defined and specified (see Williams 1976) so that researchers can include human beings' potential for the characteristics of moving and agency. It is self-contradictory to appeal to (for example) a behaviorist method of identifying units of movement to explain meaning, person and agency because behavioristic theory excludes these concepts.

Speaking of the theoretical legacy of Robert Hertz, Evans-Pritchard pointed out long ago: "Method and theory are not the same, but it can be said that a method of analyses is of value only if it produces some advance in theory . . . an advance in theory is as important as an exemplification of method as it is in itself" (1960: 20).

We have worked long and hard to answer the question, 'Is the body *naturally* inferior to the mind'? Hertz's essay (1960[1909]) is still of theoretical

interest because his work challenged some of the naturalistic assumptions underlying socially constructed concepts of right and left. He set about showing us the revolutionary differences between the biological and visual symmetry of handedness and the asymmetry of the conventions, beliefs and practices surrounding the use of the hands in western societies.

His point, I think, was that social asymmetries of the body are elevated to 'ideals' to which everyone must conform. Women found conformity very difficult, but we have (as the saying goes) "come a long way," since Hertz wrote. However, male ('right', 'up' and 'forward') in contrast to female ('left', 'down' and 'backward') are still with us in a variety of ways, and we know very little about these ways, in spite of a proliferation of ethnographies of all kinds. We still know very little about the actual movements involved—the actions people perform daily, as well as their more formal rituals. The papers presented here go some way towards providing images of social practices in which hundreds of people engage daily. They are vastly different in political impact, in visual representation and in concepts of selfhood, gender and social praxis, but they all stress, as it were, the symmetry of biology in contrast to the asymmetry of social conceptions. They are all examples of an anthropology of human movement.

While it is well known that anatomical causes have been attempted for nearly everything in the world that is social and cultural, the question still remains: can we reasonably assign organic causes and explanation to everything social and cultural? While this collection of authors do not intend to resurrect worn out arguments between "nature" and "nurture:" we hope that semasiological approaches to human signifying acts points the way toward a new anthropology of human movement.

Endnotes:

¹ Kaeppler (1986) makes a strong distinction between the use of linguistic *analogies* in contrast to linguistic *models*, regarding movement, with which semasiologists would agree.

² One has occasion to wonder, however, when in many films about Roman Catholics, the actors make Orthodox signs of the cross and vice-versa.

³ This scale is the paradigmatic: syntagmatic scale of relations, which is connected with the nesting principle. Neither are explained in detail here See Williams (1975) for original exegesis and (1979) and (1999) for further information about semasiology.

⁴ See Farnell (1994) for further discussion.

⁵ Years ago, Hall (1966) characterized movement itself in relation to speech as the 'hidden dimension', but, upon reflection, it is not the *movement* that is hiding, but the complex of concepts that inform movement and create personhood that is hidden.

⁶ In contrast, there is a successionist causation: "On the successionist view things are passive and effects are what happen to them, brought about by influences from outside. . . . Causes are never, on the successionist view, acting from within a thing, but are rather stimuli from without (Harré 1972: 121).

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