

Gesture and Movement*

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Human beings everywhere engage in complex structured systems of bodily actions that are socially acquired and laden with cultural significance. Some structured movement systems, such as the martial arts, sporting activities, idioms of dancing, dramatic arts, ceremonials, and ritual events, involve highly deliberated choreographed movement. Other uses of body movement remain out of the focal awareness of their actors due to habit and skill. Examples include ways of eating, dressing, walking, and sitting as well as modes of physical labor such as digging, planting, bricklaying and fishing, all of which vary according to cultural and subcultural conventions. Also out of focal awareness most of the time are the hand gestures, postures, facial expressions, and spatial orientations that accompany speech in social interaction. There are also signed languages as well as gestures of the mouth, lips, and tongue that produce speech. All these manifestations of human actions in their cultural context comprise the anthropology of human movement.

Despite the obvious fact that this kind of handling of space and the handling of one's body are an intimate part of one's being, one's language, and one's ability to exist in a complex world of social action, the detailed study of human movement constitutes a relatively minor tradition in sociocultural anthropology; albeit a long-standing one. The reasons for this relative neglect are cultural and stem from a long-standing bias against the body in Western philosophical and religious traditions, which, in turn, has led few social theorists to include physical being and bodily actions in their definitions of social action. The Platonic legacy, together with Descartes's radical separation of mind and body during the rise of science in the seventeenth century, provided a set of unexamined assumptions that has permeated all the social sciences. Generally the Western model of "person" provides a conception of mind as the non-material locus of rationality, thought, language, and knowledge. In opposition to this the body is regarded as the mechanical, sensate, material locus for the physical expression of irrationality, feeling, and emotion. After Darwin, such physicality has been most often understood as "natural" rather than "cultural," a survival of our animal past. In the Western Christian tradition, the body as flesh has been viewed as the location of sinful desire, corrupting appetites, and irrational passions, frequently subjected to disciplinary and ascetic practices with the goal of achieving transcendence.

In spite of this legacy it is not surprising to find that expressions of curiosity and disgust over alien bodily practices, unfamiliar domestic activities, "excesses" of gesticulations, "exotic" rituals, and "wild" dancing frequent the accounts of early explorers, missionaries, and nineteenth-century amateur ethnologists. Such accounts provided a rationale for labeling non-Western peoples "primitive" and distancing them as "other." On the whole, the greater

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the variation from acceptable European norms of physical behavior the more primitive a society was judged to be. This line of reasoning provided justification for widespread colonial efforts to "civilize the savages" through the radical control of bodily practices (clothing, hairstyles, eating habits, sexual liaisons, social manners, work ethic, and ritual activities). For example, in North America the U.S. Office of Indian Affairs book of regulations for 1904 listed participation in Native American religious rituals and dancing as a punishable offense because they stirred the passions of the blood and hindered progress toward "civilization" (that is, assimilation).

Although this radical separation of mind and body in Western culture remained constant at a metatheoretical level until poststructuralist and postmodern challenges in the late twentieth century, theoretical perspectives arose in U.S. cultural anthropology and British social anthropology that viewed human movement and gesture in contrasting ways. In the mid-nineteenth century, for example, the work of British anthropologist Edward B. Tylor (1878) on gesture and sign languages reflected upper-class Victorian English attitudes towards gesticulation as "natural" and therefore "rude," meaning raw and unformed. Tylor regarded sign languages and gesture as "a natural language" and therefore as more primitive than speech or writing, and he expected the elements of gesture to be universally recognizable. This was the source of his interest in what he called "the gesture language." Tylor collected data from the sign systems of German and English deaf communities and compared them with data from North American sources. He believed he was close to discovering the original sign-making faculty in humans that once led to the emergence of spoken language. He did not, however, go as far as to suggest that "the gesture language" represented a separate stage of evolution through which humankind had passed before speech had developed. These interests in gesture and language origins were shared by the nineteenth-century German psychologist Wilhelm Wundt, who thought that human language could have originated in innate expressive actions characteristic of emotional states.

In the United States, Tylor's work provided theoretical support for Garrick A. Mallery's extensive collection of data on signing and gesture. Mallery (1881) compared Native North American signing systems with deaf sign languages, accounts of the use of gesture in classical times, in Naples, and among contemporary actors.

In contrast to the universalist theories of gesture expounded by these evolutionists, American anthropologist Franz Boas stressed the learned, culture-specific nature of body movement. He recognized that artistic form and cultural patterning were present not only in Native American dances but also in the complex hand gestures and other body movements that accompanied song, oratory, and the performance of oral literature. He nevertheless chose to exclude "gesture-language" from his influential writings (Boas 1911), limiting his consideration to "communication by groups of sounds produced by the articulating organs [of mouth and tongue]." Boas thus inadvertently set the pattern for the exclusion of body movement from

future research in U.S. linguistic anthropology. Subsequent research became focused on a rather narrow conception of spoken language structure.

Boas's student Edward Sapir also recognized that manual gestures interplay constantly with speech in communicative situations, but the communicative and social significance of what he referred to as an "elaborate and secret code" was left unexplored. Although Sapir, like other Boasians, regarded culture as symbolic patterns of behavior, investigation of the symbolic patterning of human body movement in space as constitutive of that behavior remained absent from investigations. Consistent with the high status of U.S. psychology, interest in the psychological (mental) took precedence over the body, as witnessed by the rise of interest in culture and personality. Alfred L. Kroeber (1958) did write on Plains Indian sign language and supported La Mont West's pioneering descriptive linguistic research on that sign system (1960), but this was a departure from Kroeber's major works, and West's dissertation had little impact on anthropological linguistics.

Other students of Boas contributed to a functionalist view of human movement systems. According to this theoretical framework a culture was a functioning, integrated, patterned whole, and ritual events, dances, and gestures were to be understood insofar as they fulfilled some kind of social need or function. For example, Margaret Mead (1928) regarded the dances of Samoan adolescents as a vehicle for psychological adjustment; for Ruth Benedict (1934) the function of the entire Kwakiutl Winter Ceremonial (a series of religious rites) was to rehabilitate the individual back in the secular society. Actual body movement is epiphenomenal in such descriptions, as ritual actions and dancing are described in terms of adaptive responses to either the social or the physical environment. Similar descriptions appear in the work of many British functionalist anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski, Raymond Firth, and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown.

French anthropologist Marcel Mauss (1935) prefigured the interests of Benedict, Mead, and others in noting how each society imposes a rigorously determined use of the body upon the individual in the training of the child's bodily needs and activities. Mauss's essay clearly illustrated how seemingly "natural" bodily activities were (Durkheimian) social facts, simultaneously sociological, historical, and physio-psychological.

In the 1940s and 1950s the potential importance to anthropologists of recording and analyzing body movements was demonstrated by Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead's photographic analysis of Balinese character (1942), David Efron's contrastive analysis of the gestures of Italian and Southeastern European Jewish immigrants in New York (1942), Weston La Barre's essay on the cultural basis of emotions and gestures (1947), and Gordon Hewes's cross-cultural comparison of postural habits (1955). However, the outstanding early pioneer in anthropological research on bodily communication was Ray Birdwhistell (1970), who coined the term "kinesics" to describe his approach. Inspired by what he viewed as Sapir's anticipation of the interdependence of linguistic and kinesic research and by H.L. Smith and G.L. Trager's attempts to apply the methods of structural linguistics to other

aspects of vocalization ("paralinguistics"), Birdwhistell suggested a discipline that would parallel linguistics but deal with the analysis of visible bodily motion. Influenced also by the work of Bateson and the sociologist Erving Goffman, Birdwhistell's research centered on body movements in social interaction, usually in clinical settings. Using filmed data Birdwhistell applied a linguistic model, identifying movement units based on contrastive analysis in a manner similar to that established by structural linguistics for establishing the phonemes and morphemes of a spoken language. His descriptions frequently lapse into functional anatomical language, however, and the status of movements as meaningful actions becomes lost in the endeavor to divide up the "kinesic stream."

Birdwhistell limited kinesics to interaction contexts. Indeed, he stressed that writings about formalized systems of gesture such as those found in dancing, drama, mime, and religious ritual were beyond the interests of kinesics. This was unfortunate as it narrowed the scope of the potential field and separated kinesics from much that was of interest to mainstream anthropology. A truly inclusive anthropology of human movement systems as a subfield similar in scope to linguistic anthropology had to await the work of Drid Williams and Adrienne Kaeppler.

Adam Kendon has suggested that the program of work Birdwhistell proposed might have gotten underway had the interest of many people in linguistics and related disciplines not been redirected in the 1960s by the work of Noam Chomsky. Chomsky's generative linguistics was exclusively concerned with the formal analysis of linguistic competence and proposed "structures of the mind" that generate language *per se*. Actual acts of speaking were consigned to what Kendon called the "wastebasket of 'performance'" (1982). Only when linguistic anthropology embraced an "ethnography of speaking" in explicit contract to the Chomskian agenda did attention return to pragmatics, ethnopoetics, and verbal art as performance. This provided a theoretical climate for the 1980s and 1990s in which gesture, spatial orientation, deixis (the spoken and gestural organization of space/time), and indexicality (connections to the communicative context) became interest to some linguistic anthropologists (Farnell 1995).

Birdwhistell (1970) also recognized the need for a notation system for recording and analyzing body movement. He devised a system specific to his particular communication analysis even though by his own admission the results were crude and static with relatively little capacity for recording movement. The development of an adequate writing system already had emerged as a formidable problem for the study of movement, earlier attempts having been made by French dancing masters Pierre Beauchamps, Raoul Feuillet, and others, as well as the Englishman Gilbert Austin in his research into gesture and rhetoric (1806).

Anthropologists Williams, Kaeppler, Farnell and others use a movement script called Labanotation to create ethnographic records of movement events. Although originally used in the United States and Europe in choreographic contexts, Labanotation (invented by Rudolph Laban circa 1928) was designed

from the outset as a generalized system that could notate any kind of human movement. Two other generalized systems also exist: Benesh notation (1956) and Eshkol-Wachman notation (1958). The idea of movement literacy is a central component of Williams's semasiology, not simply as a method of recording for specialists but as a means by which any anthropologist can arrive at post-Cartesian ontological and epistemological insights on embodiment and social action (Farnell 1994).

While Birdwhistell's "kinesics" focused on body motion, Edward T. Hall's "proxemics" drew attention to the role that space plays in human relations. Hall (1959) postulated that there are socially or culturally established zones of space surrounding individuals that are generally out of awareness but that influence and may even determine daily interactions. Hall's writings include many excellent ethnographic observations about spatial usages in different contexts as well as in situations of culture contact. He has been criticized, however, for failing to clarify his theoretical position on the relationship between proxemics and ethological notions of territoriality in other animals. His own data would suggest that the rich diversity of culturally defined human spaces make trivial any comparison with notions of programmed responses to critical distancing and territoriality in animals. However, many ethologists as well as psychologists who specialize in nonverbal communication continue this behaviorist, Darwinian universalist agenda. Objectivist views of movement as "behavior" — as raw physical data of some kind, the result of biologically triggered impulses or survivals of an animal past — have been of little interest to sociocultural anthropologists because cultural and symbolic dimensions are excluded.

Birdwhistell's kinesics and Hall's proxemics provided important sensitizing constructs in the 1960s and 1970s. They raised important questions and provided a framework that could be advanced by later investigators like Kaeppeler, Williams, and Kendon. Moving in an interdisciplinary sphere between anthropology, linguistics, nonverbal communication, and semiotics, Kendon has been a most active researcher of gesture and signed languages. While his earliest work on face-to-face interaction was behaviorist, he shifted his orientation to a view more compatible with that of semiotics and symbolic anthropology, which sees human actions as connected to sociolinguistic contexts, intentions, and belief systems. Kendon has produced a definitive work on Australian Aboriginal sign languages (1988) and written extensively on gesture and its connections to speech, insisting that "... the gestural modality is as fundamental as the verbal modality as an instrument for the representation of meaning" (1983).

Kaeppeler and Williams, like Birdwhistell, turned to structural linguistics for conceptions on which to base rigorous analyses of structured movement. Kaeppeler (1972) took on an ethnoscientific approach, applying Kenneth Pike's emic/etic distinction to an analysis of the structure of Tongan dance and Hawaiian dance and song texts. Williams's "semasiology" is grounded in British poststructural semantic anthropology and Saussurian semiology (Williams 1991). Neither Kaeppeler nor Williams fell into the trap of applying a linguistic *model* to the medium of movement as Birdwhistell had done in his

attempt to match “kinemorphs” directly with spoken language morphemes. Instead they used linguistic *analogies*, that is, they took insights from linguistics insofar as such insights facilitated theory building specific to understanding human movement systems. Part of their post-Cartesian thrust is not to separate theories of the body and human action from spoken language meanings because, as their work clearly illustrates, semiotic systems integrate: the mind that uses spoken language does not somehow switch off when it comes to moving.

Central to Williams’s semasiology are fundamental post-Cartesian shifts that replace the body-mind split (and old notions of “objectivity”) with a conception of persons as embodied meaning-making agents. She advocates use of the term “action” instead of “behavior” in order to emphasize this theoretical commitment. Her work on entirely different action sign systems — the Post-Tridentine Catholic Mass, the ballet *Checkmate* (choreographed by Dame Ninette de Valois of the Royal Ballet, England), the exercise technique t’ai chi ch’uan, and Cape York (Australian Aboriginal) dances — demonstrates the comprehensive power of her approach.

A generation of students trained in semasiology have produced work on systems as varied as the classical Indian dance form Bharata Natyam (Rajika Puri); Plains Indian sign language and Assiniboine storytelling performance (Brenda Farnell); Martha Graham dance technique and American Sign Language (Diana Hart-Johnson); classical ballet (Dixie Durr); the liturgical use of space and action in the United Church of Australia (Jennifer Farrell); and Dalcroze Eurythmics (Gillian Fisher); (see *JASHM*; Williams 1982; Farnell 1995).

The possibility of a new “paradigm of embodiment” (Csordas 1990) in socio-cultural anthropology in the 1990s may provide further post-Cartesian metatheoretical shifts that enable the anthropology of human movement systems to flourish.

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