



The Visible and the Vocal: Speech and Gesture on a Continuum of Communicative Actions

Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance by Adam Kendon
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 400 pp.
Hardcover, £50. ISBN 0521835259; paperback, £22.99,
ISBN 0521542936).

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IT SO HAPPENED that the time set aside for reading Adam Kendon's *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance* coincided with a period that required me to sit around on a beach all day. While this work would not perhaps be considered a classic "beach book," I must say that I did not have occasion to wish for anything else. *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance* is both extremely informative and highly engaging. The book will have broad appeal for scholars from numerous fields, ranging from psychology to art, and will serve as a valuable resource for anyone interested in a survey of the study of gesture.

Before addressing the content of the book, I would like to provide a very global sketch of Kendon's position on the nature and function of gesture. This outlook is made admirably clear throughout the book but is worthy of special attention because the sorts of gesture and speech-gesture integration in which he is most interested are shaped by his perspective. To some extent, the various themes of the book can be framed as an attempt to advance the thesis that the

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manual and vocal modalities represent a continuum of communicative behavior and that the ways in which they combine vary as a function of the resources available to a user. Similar claims can be found in the work of other gesture and sign researchers (Goldin-Meadow, McNeill, and Singleton 1996; Liddell 2003; McNeill 1992), and a continuum-based model still permits plenty of flexibility in terms of how “linguistic” certain gestural phenomena are perceived. *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance* represents a relatively “linguistic” approach to gesture.

Kendon views gesture as a “partner” to speech—a gesture joins with the verbal component of an utterance to convey additional information (which may be parallel to, complementary to, or an elaboration of the meaning present in speech). Gesture can take on this kind of communicative value in part because Kendon restricts his definition of gesture to actions that are intentionally produced and overtly communicative. This definition may seem at odds with the research that indicates that speakers are not always aware of their gestures (McNeill 1985, 1992), but, as Kendon points out, these “unwitting” gestures may occupy a place on a continuum of manual behavior.

Kendon’s focus, however, is elsewhere. The reader should thus bear in mind the scope of this definition, but, more important, be mindful of the degree to which the examples offered are appropriately categorized. That is, is it equally clear for all cases that the speaker produced the gesture with full conscious awareness? Based on the topics covered in the volume and also on the fact that Kendon does not devote any effort to demonstrating that a particular gesture really was “intentional,” it appears evident that he does not think this distinction of much consequence. If the reader does, however, Kendon’s approach may prove disconcerting. Setting aside this particular detail, Kendon is undoubtedly correct that gesture contributes to comprehension in different ways at different times, and he argues very effectively that gesture is one kind of behavior occupying a place on a postulated cline of communicative actions, encompassing both the manual and the vocal.

Given the assumption that gesture has a communicative value that contributes to the overall meaning of an utterance, it is not surprising

that the discussion throughout *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance* displays a general orientation toward exploiting the terminology and analytic methods of linguistics. For example, Kendon describes certain gestural phenomena in terms of spatial inflection, or morpho-semantics, borrowing from analyses of sign languages. Gestures are also described as having referential or pragmatic functions, or functioning as operators, performatives, evidentials, or discourse markers (109). It is unclear whether these terms are to be taken as convenient analogies or as gestural equivalents of their linguistic counterparts, but on the whole, the latter seems more probable. If this is the case, the terminology is perhaps not sufficiently justified. The application of certain linguistic constructs has, according to some analysts (e.g., Liddell 2003), proven inappropriate for sign languages, as Kendon himself notes. Thus, it may prove equally unwise to attempt to extend them to gestures produced in conjunction with speech. It must be said, however, that the use of these terms does reflect an apparent truth about the manual modality: The extent to which it has the properties of language appears to depend on the extent to which it carries the burden of communication. One of Kendon's goals is to explore this relationship and particularly the degree to which gestures used in conjunction with speech possess linguistic properties.

Defining Gesture

The book begins with two introductory chapters that set the stage for the discussion to follow. The second of these chapters is primarily concerned with defining the sorts of behaviors to be explored. In distinguishing "gesture" from other kinds of movement, Kendon exploits the fact that observers recognize some actions as part of a person's communicative behavior, while others are perceived as devoid of communicative significance (here he draws on work described in part in Kendon 1978). Given this capacity, the enterprise becomes an effort to uncover the features that unify expressive actions; for example, a sharp onset and offset of motion is claimed to be functional in distinguishing between gesture and nongesture (12). Gestures, then, are those actions that possess some preponderance of these features,

and it is this property that results in their being perceived as both intentional and communicative.

The enterprise of identifying features that account for our intuitive perceptions is fairly well motivated, but Kendon also stresses that it is not possible to devise a context-independent definition of gesture: “What may be ‘gesture’ in one circumstance may be ‘incidental movement’ in another. ‘Gesture,’ thus, cannot be given a definition that is independent of how the participants in any situation are treating each other’s flow of actions” (16). To illustrate this principle, Kendon notes that when an offensive gesture is produced covertly, the producer can avoid retribution by claiming it was only an incidental action, while the recipient may or may not recognize the underlying intention, presumably with different consequences for the interaction. In other words, what is considered gesture will ultimately depend on the perceiver’s interpretation as well as the producer’s intentions.

Historical Review

Chapters 3 through 5 review the history of the study of gesture, beginning with Aristotle and ending with some brief comments on current research in neuroimaging (work done on “mirror neurons” by Rizzolatti and Arbib 1998). Chapter 3 covers rhetorical gestures described by classical authors and treatments of gesture up to the eighteenth century; chapter 4 covers the nineteenth century; and chapter 5, the twentieth century. This discussion, obviously quite broad in scope, is organized through reference to developments in other fields that, to some extent, controlled scholarly opinion of gesture as an appropriate object of study. Kendon attributes the waxing and waning of interest in gesture to three lines of inquiry recurring in philosophy and linguistics: the belief that gesture is more natural than spoken language and can therefore reflect more primitive meanings, interest in the origins of language, and interest in signed languages and the education of deaf people. Of course, as Kendon points out, these are not independent threads—interest in signed languages was closely tied to interest in the origins of language, and the potential of

the manual modality to express more natural meanings is implicated in both.

That three chapters are devoted to the history of the study of gesture may strike readers primarily interested in recent developments in the field, or those who want a only quick primer on gesture, as excessively meticulous. This review, however, is particularly helpful in situating the study of gesture with respect to other disciplines and is therefore essential to anyone who wishes to develop a firmly grounded understanding of the field. Chapter 5, “Gesture Studies in the Twentieth Century,” ends with a summary of current research questions. This summary successfully frames current research as being continuous with, or at least emerging from, the themes discussed in the earlier chapters.

Classifying and Deconstructing Gesture

Chapter 6 surveys a number of taxonomies of gesture. The first half of the chapter returns to classical and eighteenth-century systems (Quintilian, Engel, Austin), some of which are touched upon in chapter 3 as well. In the second half of the chapter, four more modern taxonomies are compared, those of Wundt, Efron, Ekman and Friesen, and McNeill. The conclusion that Kendon reaches after this comparison—that the taxonomy one uses must serve as a tool selected to suit one’s particular research aims rather than a basic truth about the nature of gesture—is perhaps more satisfying to fellow analysts of gesture than to the greater scientific community. Nevertheless, it reflects the gradient and context-dependent nature of the speech-gesture combination and should be taken seriously.

Chapter 7 describes in detail Kendon’s division of a gesture into several components, a system that has been adopted by many researchers. The largest component is the gesture *unit* (the action as a whole). This component contains the gesture *phase*, or that part of the action when the hands are farthest from their resting positions. The phase component consists of the *preparation*, in which the hand assumes a shape and moves into position to perform the gesture; the *stroke*, or the effortful portion of the gesture; and the *recovery*, in which the hands move back to their resting position. Finally, the gesture *phrase* includes preparation, the stroke, and any poststroke

holds a speaker may execute but excludes the recovery. Kendon then applies this system to three examples in order to illustrate the ways in which it reveals interesting facts about the fine-grained coordination between speech and gesture. About this system little needs to be said except that it is gesture analysis at this level that has provided the kinds of insights that have made the field of gesture study so exciting, as Kendon's detailed examples make clear.

Gesture and Speech in Partnership

The next three chapters expand on the theme of the relationship of gesture to speech. In chapter 8, a number of examples are marshaled in support of the claim that gesture production is carefully controlled. Three basic strategies are discussed, by means of which gesture and speech are deliberately synchronized: Gesture may be delayed (via holds) while speech is produced, speech may be delayed while a gesture is being prepared, or the particular combination of elements in speech and gesture may change in telling ways during the reformulation of an utterance. All of these phenomena reflect the speaker's intentions: Kendon describes this careful coordination as being "achieved" (127). Given his aims, it is not surprising that Kendon does not discuss the possibility that conscious control is not necessary—and may in fact be prohibitive—in executing these carefully timed actions, but this is nonetheless a real psychological question.

In chapter 9, Kendon elaborates on the distinction between the "referential" and "pragmatic" functions of gesture. Chapters 9, 10, and 11 deal with the referential uses, wherein gesture is used either to represent some feature of the accompanying utterance (by, say, tracing the shape of an object) or to refer to something (concrete or abstract) with a deictic point. Chapter 9 is a first pass at pinning down the ways in which gesture contributes to the total communicative content of the utterance: Kendon provides illustrations of cases in which the meaning of gesture is parallel to the meaning of speech, in which it elaborates on or specifies the meaning of speech, and in which gesture provides meaning not found in speech.

Chapter 10 is a more in-depth exploration of these combinatorial strategies. Kendon sets out a list of six different ways that gesture contributes to an utterance, then devotes some discussion to each of

them. He begins with “narrow gloss” gestures, which represent a subset of what are often referred to as “emblems” (Ekman and Friesen 1969). Such gestures are basically equivalent to verbal expressions and can usually be glossed with a particular lexical item. One of Kendon’s examples involves a comparison between a common Neapolitan gesture for “thief” (a hook-shaped hand) and an example from a speaker of British English. In this latter case, the speaker is talking about her work and accompanies several phrases describing her duties (e.g., “typing,” “cleaning”) with gestures that illustrate the actions. She produces a gesture that depicts rubbing a surface with something while saying “cleaning” (178). It’s worth considering whether the Neapolitan and British gestures have the same relationship to speech, given the large difference in degree of conventionality and the corresponding difference in iconicity. Given that there are many ways to clean, the rubbing gesture might be more appropriately categorized as adding information to speech.

Kendon goes on to discuss situations in which narrow gloss gestures are not produced in conjunction with an equivalent lexical item, suggesting that the meaning of such gestures can be extended. The rest of the chapter is about gestures that do not have this tight relationship to speech and thus do not come under the heading of narrow gloss gesture. Further examples are given of gestures that extend or elaborate on the meaning of something in speech, and Kendon presents several different cases of gestures that bring representations of objects into being (allowing the addressee to visualize an object and allowing the speaker to refer to it with deictic terms).

Chapter 11 is devoted to pointing gestures. Much of the material in this section is also described in the recent collection of papers on pointing edited by Sotaro Kita (2003). Kendon makes some interesting comments about the use of the thumb for less precise reference, as compared to the index finger for more specific reference, suggesting that thumb points sometimes act as reduced, “anaphoric” forms. He also posits a distinction between the use of the open hand (palm flat) and the index finger in pointing—index points are typically accompanied by deictic terms, while these terms are less common with open hand points. Kendon suggests that the index point is used for an object of primary focus, while the open hand point is used for an

object that is related to the primary focus. For example, he compares an index point toward a store with an open hand point accompanying a metadiscursive comment about that store (210).

The link between form-meaning mappings—or the iconic properties of a gesture and its use in a context—may be insufficiently clear to some readers. For example, I maintain that the use of a palm point rather than an index point varies according to whether the speaker is referring to an object or a plane, not according to whether the use is referential (pointing to an object as an object) or metadiscursive (pointing at an object as an abstract entity). It may simply be the case that metaphorical “discourse objects” (in the sense of Lakoff and Johnson 1980, who discuss in detail the treatment of ideas and discourse structure as physical structure) are construed as occupying multidimensional space and therefore are referenced with plane gestures. Kendon discusses a number of cases of alternation of features in pointing gestures, such as the denial of a specific object as opposed to the denial of the transaction as a whole: These form-meaning mappings, he argues, point to an “emerging morphosemantics” of gesture (224). The two chapters that follow expand on this idea.

Pragmatic Functions of Gesture

Chapters 12 and 13 take up the so-called pragmatic function of gesture, whereby gestures can be used to accomplish interactional moves. Such functions include the use of gestures as “performatives,” which provide information about the classification of a speech act; “modals,” which provide some information about a speaker’s epistemic stance, perhaps as serving as an evaluation or an intensifier; and “parsing” gestures, which mark discourse structure. These two chapters also discuss how “families” of gestures that share certain formal and semantic features perform these pragmatic functions. In chapter 12, Kendon takes up families of gestures that employ several related hand configurations, all of which depict a precise grip on an object. Not surprisingly, the meaning shared by these gestures has to do with seizing or grasping. It is later made clear—although presumably the reader has already picked up on this—that these gestures are specific to speakers of Neapolitan Italian. That is, these particular examples are culture specific and are also highly conventionalized. The families

of gestures discussed in chapter 13, those made with an open hand in various orientations, are more widespread, but Kendon claims that these gestures are equally conventional (they are not “created” each time a person uses them).

Kendon also suggests that these families of gestures are ultimately derived from manipulatory actions (247), thereby motivating their iconic properties. It is unclear whether the same explanatory mechanisms are appropriate for both physical and abstract objects (gripping/offering an object, gripping/offering a discourse topic), without invoking something like conceptual metaphor. Nor does the claim that these gestures are not newly created with each use really make clear why they have the forms they do. And while it may explain why there is relatively little variation in their forms, this is not the *only* explanation. Finally, there is also something problematic about treating the classes of gesture described in these two chapters as equivalent, given the culture-specific nature of the first set.

A Continuum of Communicative Actions

Chapters 14, 15, and 16 cover somewhat different topics, but these subjects are discussed in terms of their underlying unity. Chapter 14 describes several contexts in which gesture is used without speech, as a “nonprimary” sign language. Kendon reviews work by Susan Goldin-Meadow and colleagues on home sign (see particularly Goldin-Meadow 2003), as well as more recent work on Nicaraguan Sign Language (Kegl, Senghas, and Coppola 1999). He also describes several systems that have arisen as a result of a relatively transient need for nonverbal communication, including his own work on Central Australian Aboriginal sign languages (Kendon 1988). The discussion centers on properties that such systems share with gesture and on ways in which they differ from primary signed languages. The larger themes that emerge from this discussion are, first of all, that properties appear in manual communicative systems that are specific to the manual modality. Second, the extent to which linguistic properties appear (creativity, for example) is a function of the extent to which the system is the sole means of communication for its users. While most readers are likely to be familiar with the ways in which this principle is illustrated by the case of home signers and Nicaraguan

Sign Language, Kendon's comparison of nonprimary sign languages fills in a different range of the continuum very nicely.

Chapter 16 discusses commonalities between gesture and sign, giving particular attention to spatial inflection of verb signs and the use of classifiers. Kendon notes that the treatment of signs that have components establishing spatial relations as being spatially inflected is not uncontroversial. Scott Liddell argues that these signs combine signs and deictic points (2003). In discussing parallels with gesture, however, Kendon continues to describe the phenomenon in terms of inflection. The chapter also takes up sign language classifiers and contrasts accounts offered by Emmory (2002) and Liddell (2003). Again, the difference in analysis has to do with whether the sign is claimed to display complex morphology or to be a combination of sign and gesture. Chapter 16 also examines cultural differences in the use of gesture with speech. Kendon offers some motivation for the particular communicative style of speakers of Neapolitan Italian, making the important point that these phenomena arise from historical patterns of daily interaction. The related themes of these chapters are well summed up by the following excerpt: "As we undertake more detailed and systematic studies of just how speakers employ gesture we may expect to find many parallels with what happens in sign language. This should be neither surprising nor embarrassing. Speakers' uses of kinesic actions and signers' uses of kinesic actions are cut from the same cloth. Where kinesic action cannot be or is not conjoined with speech then it will be put to additional uses—a lexicon will have to be created, for example—but we are still dealing with something that is in the same *family* of communication systems" (324; emphasis in the original).

Concluding Comments

Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance is without doubt an indispensable resource for detailed information about many aspects of gesture. The emphasis of the book, as Kendon notes in his introduction, is not on psychological processes, thus the lack of prominence of these topics should not be seen as a failing (although it must be said that there is a fair amount of speculation in the book within the domain of psychology). Valuable though it will be, the work may prove more

or less satisfying depending on the reader's perspective. Linguists who adhere to modular, context-independent models of language will be unlikely to embrace the claims made about gesture: Despite the heavy employment of linguistic terminology, gesture nonetheless remains a gradient aspect of language. This entails that gesture is vastly easier to handle with a distinct module (see, e.g., the information-processing model described in de Ruiter 2000), while Kendon claims that gesture and speech act in partnership. Cognitive and functional linguists may be disappointed that Kendon does not employ the apparatus of conceptual metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999) in motivating the iconicity of gestures occurring with abstract concepts but will appreciate his general approach to language as a multimodal system. Students of gesture will find the book essential but may or may not accept the idea that "gesture" should be restricted to only those actions produced at the level of conscious awareness. Linguists and other researchers who specialize in signed languages may be more or less convinced by Kendon's arguments, depending on their perspective on classifiers and spatial inflection of verbs, the two topics that are most amenable to a partly gestural treatment. Whatever the reader's reaction, it is bound to be in large part positive.

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