GESTURE is a new journal for the emerging field of ‘gesture studies’. The phenomena that this encompasses cannot easily be defined (‘gesture’ is a concept with fuzzy boundaries), but they include the wide variety of ways in which humans give what is usually regarded as wilful expression to their thoughts and feelings through visible bodily action. Thus the movements of the body, especially the hands and arms, that are so often integrated with spoken expression, the use of manual actions to convey something without speech, or the manual and facial actions of sign languages, are all recognized as a part of ‘gesture’, broadly conceived, whereas expressions such as laughing and crying, blushing, and the like are less likely to be so considered, unless they are feigned or enacted.

Visible bodily action generally included under the term ‘gesture’ has long been recognized as an important and powerful component of how people express themselves and communicate with one another. Today the study of it is seen as having importance for the understanding of such issues as the relationship between language and thought, the cognitive and social processes involved in the development of human semiosis, and the origin and nature of the human capacity for language. ‘Gesture’ as a topic, thus, is studied within the frameworks of a number of different disciplines, including linguistics, anthropology, cognitive psychology, sociology, communication studies and semiotics as well as, more recently, informatics.

Yet just because of this, any one wishing to keep abreast of developments in the study of gesture can have difficulty. There is no one place to which someone interested in gesture can turn to find out what is going on, and there is no one place where the debates and discussions in this area can readily be followed. It is the purpose of GESTURE to provide a space where scholarly work on gesture from all the different disciplines can be published together. It is our hope that this will help advance the field and make it easier for scholars who are otherwise
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separated from one another by reason of different disciplinary allegiances, to relate to and to profit from each other’s work. Accordingly, we invite submissions from authors in any discipline, following any approach, which seek to throw light on the phenomena of gesture.

In the Western tradition, in the earliest attempts at the systematic formulation of expressive action, as in both the Greek and, later, the Roman writings on rhetoric, ‘gesture’ was, in one way or another, seen as of great importance. When and how it should be used in the creation of artful and persuasive speeches was something that required careful discussion. The beginnings of a recognizably modern scholarly interest in gesture, however, are to be found in the first decades of the seventeenth century. It is in that period, at least in Europe, that the first treatises on gesture were published. Thus Giovanni Bonifacio, in Venice, published his *Arte de’ Cenni* in 1616 and John Bulwer, in London, published his twin treatises *Chirologia* and *Chironomia* in 1644. Other works followed and by the middle of the eighteenth century gesture had become a topic of serious interest for those who sought to explain the origins of language, for those who sought a perfect and universal language, as so many did in that century, and for those who saw the implications for our understanding of the language faculty and the relationship between language and thought in the gesturing and signing of the deaf and of ‘savages’. The impact of the discovery of the peoples of America, in particular, on European attitudes to language and expression was profound, and it appears that one of the reasons for the development of the idea that gesture might, in fact, be a form of universal language derived from this. It was this idea that justified the naturalistic study of gesture, as may be seen from the works of Bonifacio and Bulwer which initiated such studies. By the end of the nineteenth century, indeed, the study of gesture had come to be quite well recognized, and it received attention from such important figures as Edward Tylor, Charles Darwin, Wilhelm Wundt and Garrick Mallory, among others. However, partly as a consequence of the push to set up the study of language as a separate, autonomous discipline, partly as a consequence of the sharp division that came to be established between the historical study of social phenomena and the study of the structural and functional characteristics of social systems (including language), and partly, too, as a consequence of the triumph of oralist methods for the education of the deaf, the study of gesture came to be neglected. Serious interest in it did not revive before the beginning of the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Let us here elaborate a little on some of the main themes of concern raised
in this revival. First of all, studies beginning in the late 1970s which took full advantage of synchronized sound film and, later, video technology, that made possible a precise analysis of the way in which the activities of speaking and gesturing are coordinated, have led to the widespread recognition that gesture and spoken expression are intimately connected. The precise nature of this relationship and just how it is to be accounted for theoretically is still a matter of debate, but as certain recent publications have made clear (Messing & Campbell, 1999; McNeill, 2000) a new approach to an understanding of the psychology of language is being developed.

Recent work on gesture has also begun to throw light on the role played by our corporeal engagement with the world through basic practical actions in providing the framework of human cognition and conceptual development. For example, since it seems clear that many forms of gestural expression are elaborated as modulations of practical actions, but since, nevertheless, such gestural expressions may be part and parcel of utterances that express even the most abstract ideas, this seems to give support to the view that the ‘tools of thought’ — conceptual metaphor — are grounded in bodily action in the physical world. It is becoming clear that the analysis of gestural expression can tell us much about the way in which human cognition is anchored in how humans experience and deal with the physical environment in which they all live.

Studies of the development of language in children have also begun to take gesture into consideration. Interesting observations have been made on the use of gesture in very young children which indicate that gestural expression may, at first, be a kind of equal alternative to speech. In hearing children, however, gesture is not selected for, so that the balance soon tips away from it. However, there appear to be shifting relationships between the use of gesture and speech in the course of early language development. The understanding of these will have important implications for how the emergence of the capacity for symbolic expression in children is to be accounted for.

It is also possible that such work could have implications for theories about language origins, a topic once virtually taboo, but now much in discussion and to which the study of gesture is thought of as making a very important contribution. The idea that gesture was the medium of expression in which the capacity for language first emerged has a venerable history, and from 1972 onwards, after it was revived by Gordon Hewes, it has been much discussed. To many it is an attractive idea because observations on the communicative behavior of our closest biological relatives, the great apes, suggest continuities with human gestural expression which are much less apparent if one only takes
vocal communication into consideration. In addition, the various experiments which have, with some success, shown that it is possible for great apes to be taught to use gestures symbolically, seem to give further support to the idea that it could well have been the gestural medium in which language-like expressions first emerged.

Of great interest, too, are the studies that show that gesture is shaped by cultural differences. These suggest that the place gestural expression may have within what Dell Hymes (1974) once referred to as the ‘communication economy’ of a community can differ from one culture to another. It seems that cultures may differ in the kinds of use and the degree of importance that this form of expression may have. At the same time, of course, it is widely assumed that the use of gesture as a part of utterance is a universal feature of human expression. Just how and in what ways cultural differences in the use and elaboration of gesture modify the universal character of gestural expression remains a topic that has been very little studied but which, nevertheless, is of very great interest since, if we had a better understanding of it, we might better understand just how individually improvised forms of expression may nevertheless be modified and shaped by the requirements of socially shared communication systems. A number of recent studies have attempted to explore the extent to which there may be differences in gesture use that are tied to lexical and grammatical differences in spoken languages. It is thought that such differences, if they could be established, could suggest differences in the way in which thought and conceptualization may be shaped by language differences. This work is still in a quite early stage of development but it promises to be an aspect of gesture studies that may have very important implications for theories about the relationship between language and thought.

One issue that needs much more attention than it has received hitherto is the question of how speakers differ from one kind of discourse situation to another in how they use gesture. Casual observation readily suggests, for instance, that a person who has a recent interesting experience to talk about, in some circumstances may do so with a great deal of gestural elaboration, as when the telling is being done at a dinner party for the entertainment of others, but in other circumstances the telling may be done almost without gesture. It seems that when people shift from one ‘register’ to another they shift in gesture as well as in speech. Sometimes, however, a person may shift entirely into gesture. This can happen when circumstances make speech impossible, and there are a number of well-documented cases of gesture coming to be elaborated into a form of gesture language or sign language in situations where, as in certain
factories or sawmills (see, especially, Meissner & Philpott 1975) people are
routinely in one another’s view, but too far away to talk, even though they
must, as part of their job, communicate with one another.

The emergence of communication systems which depend on gesture alone
indeed will come about whenever people are otherwise unable to use speech,
whether for environmental reasons, as just mentioned, ritual reasons (as in the
case of certain tribes in central Australia, for example, or in certain Christian
monastic orders where speech is prohibited on religious grounds — see Kendon
1988; Umiker-Sebeok & Sebeok 1987), or physiological reasons. Here, of
course, we refer to the elaboration of gesture into language systems by the deaf
and in Deaf communities. The study of this has been of great interest to many
scholars since at least the eighteenth century, but today the linguistic study of
such sign languages has now become a well-established part of the linguistic
enterprise. GESTURE does not seek to compete with journals such as Sign
Language Studies or Sign Language and Linguistics for we do not expect to
publish papers on sign language of a purely linguistic sort. However, there is no
doubt that there is an intimate connection between the general human faculty
of gestural expression and sign languages and the whole question of the
relationship between gestures used by speaker-hearers and signs in sign
languages, and also the question of whether, and how, a distinction may be
drawn between ‘gesture’ and ‘sign’ within the context of Deaf signing, are
matters of great interest for gesture studies and reports of work that deal with
issues like these will be very welcome indeed in the pages of GESTURE.

Despite the intimate relationship between spoken expression and gestural
expression, gesture remains an activity that exploits the visual medium for the
creation of meaningful forms. As such, although it may fulfill language-like
functions and collaborate in an intimate way with spoken language, it also has
an important role in all kinds of visual expressive forms that are not linguistic.
Thus gesture is of central importance in the visual arts. Not surprisingly, there
is a long tradition of interest in gesture by art historians, and the study of
gestures in paintings, photographs, drawings, cartoons, and the like has also
begun to attract the interest of cultural historians for it seems that these can be
a source for our understanding of historical differences in conventions of bodily
expression and how these are related to historical change in cultures. Very little
of this work is known, however, to students of gesture from psychology,
linguistics or cognitive studies. We hope that GESTURE will have the opportu-
nity to serve as a mediator between these different approaches to the subject.

Likewise, the practitioners of the dramatic arts — in theatre, in ballet,
opera, and cinema — have long known the importance of gesture. Rather little appears to have been done in terms of a systematic analysis of this branch of the arts, but there are some scholars actively interested in this and we hope that GESTURE will attract their interest as a place for publication. At the same time, we believe that systematic studies of gesture in the dramatic arts would be of immense importance for furthering our understanding of how gesture works as part of the arsenal of human expressive instruments.

Finally, and most recently, the phenomenon of gesture has attracted the interest of designers of human-computer interfaces. The possibility that we might, one day, interact with computers gesturally, has intrigued many computer engineers and a large amount of work is now going forward on problems of computer recognition of gestures. While a great deal of this work is of a highly specialized and technical nature, and GESTURE does not seek papers of this sort, some of it is of considerable relevance to gesture studies. We refer here to the issue of the criteria employed to effect gesture recognition (for example, if a computer is to be built that recognizes gestures this implies that criteria have been developed for deciding what a gesture may be as opposed to some other kind of human movement) and to the work that is being done on animation. If animation is to be done in an algorithmic way this means that some general principles of how gestures are coordinated with speech and other aspects of human action must be formulated. Such general principals are obviously of interest to students in the field of gesture studies of any persuasion. Thus we certainly hope that people in informatics who are working on gesture and who would like to discuss issues that are not of a purely technical nature will seek to submit articles to GESTURE.

This brief (and necessarily selective) review of recent developments in the study of gesture shows, we hope, what a rich field gesture studies promises to be. We think it exciting that there should now be the opportunity, offered by the journal GESTURE, to bring together into a single forum the diverse contributions to this field that we are confidently expecting. We believe that the cross-fertilization between disciplines that this forum will provide help in promoting a rapid and sturdy growth to the study of gesture which, as we have tried to point out, although it has sometimes been treated as if it occupies a rather peripheral place in human expression, it nevertheless demands serious attention. Indeed, if gesture is ignored our understanding of human expression will only ever be partial, at best.

The Editors
References


