

Kinesics

Kinesics is the study and interpretation of human body movements that can be taken as symbolic or metaphorical in social interaction. According to anthropologist Ray Birdwhistell, who coined this term in 1952, kinesics encompasses facial expression, gestures, posture and gait, and visible arm and body movements. Expressive movements taken as symbolic actions display or emphasize thoughts, feelings, moods, intentions, and/or attitudes and may be used in combination with, or instead of, verbal communication. In order to have a shared communicative value, bodily activity must become conventionalized, or widely understood. Theories on kinesics have been included consistently in the canon of communication theory, especially within the study of nonverbal communication, since the 1950s.

The study of gesture started in ancient times. The Greeks and Romans considered gestures to be a persuasive accompaniment to rhetorical discourses, where the use of gesturing was studied intensively at drama schools in order to improve acting. In the Middle Ages, since most people could not read or write, documents were often ratified through the use of specific gestures: The illuminations of a medieval manuscript, the *Sachsenspiegel*, illustrate the conventional gestures used at that time in legal and political spheres. The use of gesture in dance and the theatre was studied by Natya Shastra in India about 200 BCE. This work addressed how emotions can be performed and inspired in the audience through appropriate kinesic movements.

In 1644 John Bulwer analyzed a great number of hand gestures and offered a guide for their effective use in public speaking, and in 1872 Charles Darwin wrote *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*, posing for the first time the nature-nurture question. In 1882 Garrick Mallery made a comparison among North American Plains Indian sign language gestures and those of other people, including the deaf, offering detailed structural descriptions and modern theoretical insights.

In 1921 the German psychologist Wilhelm Wundt conceived gestural communication as a kind of universal language, asserting that universal meanings enable people to understand one another when they use gestures. Paul Ekman later supported this opinion, but Birdwhistell rejected it. More recent cross-cultural research indicates that perhaps eight emotions can be universally communicated through facial expressions: happiness, surprise, fear, anger, sadness, disgust, contempt, and interest.

In 1941 David Efron investigated the influence of race and environment on behavior, using systematic sociolinguistic methods. He showed that race has no influence on the repertory and use of gestures, whereas sociological processes could have. Other comparisons between different cultures were made by the ethologists Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt and Desmond Morris in the 1970s.

The research of anthropologist Ray Birdwhistell conceived of kinesics as a complex structure of body movements, which can be seen as a formalized language code. Birdwhistell conducted his study using the methods and concepts of American descriptive linguistics of the late 1940s; indeed the influence of linguistics in his study can clearly be seen in the process and method he used and the terms he coined. For instance, Birdwhistell considered kinesics to be as systemic and socially learned as verbal language: There are no universals in kinesics, he stated, because the information conveyed by gesture and movement is coded differently in various cultures. Moreover, he affirmed that the rules of nonverbal signs and language are learned, although people may be only partially aware of the process. Finally, he claimed that the structure of

kinesics is very similar to that of verbal language. For this reason, he asserted that body motion, as well as verbal language, could be broken down into an ordered system of elements that can be isolated and are comparable to those of verbal language.

Therefore, since the basic units of verbal language were called phones, phonemes, and morphemes, Birdwhistell called the basic units of body movements *kines*, *kinemes*, and *kinemorphs*. Although he sometimes used the terms *kine* and *kineme* interchangeably, usually he identified a *kine* as the smallest identifiable unit found in a stream of body movements. A *kineme* is a group of movements that, though not identical, may be used interchangeably without affecting social meaning. A simple *kinemorph* is an assemblage of *kines* that functions like a word part, and a complex *kinemorph* is a group of *kines* that function like a word.

In 1969 Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen shifted the emphasis to the psychological basis of gesture and facial expression. They singled out five categories of nonverbal behavior:

1. *Affect displays* (called *emotional expressions* in Ekman's later work) occur mainly on the face and unconsciously display and represent feelings and emotions.
2. *Regulators* maintain and organize the flow interaction between communication partners. For instance, approval can be expressed through head nods, disbelief through leaning back.
3. *Adaptors* help to manage tension or stress. *Object adaptors* involve fiddling with objects such as a pencil, *alter-adaptors* are used in interpersonal contacts such as touching others, and *self-adaptors* can include such behavior as nail biting, rubbing the eyes, scratching an itch, and so forth.
4. *Illustrators* accompany verbal language and show visually what is being described. Illustrators include batons (which are used for emphasis), pictographs (which resemble their referents), kinetographs (which resemble bodily actions), ideographs (which portray the course of thought), deictics (pointing gestures), and spatial (which depict spatial relationships). In 1999 Ekman added the category of rhythmic movements, which depict the rhythm of an event.
5. *Emblems* substitute for words and therefore have conventionalized meaning. Different from other categories of nonverbal behavior, emblems have a direct verbal translation such as the OK sign or the V for victory gesture.

Since 1981, Adam Kendon investigated many aspects of gestures, including conventionalization, integration between gestures and speech, and the role of gesture in communication.

Birdwhistell's research was continued in the United States by Adam Kendon, among others. Christine Kühn did similar work in Germany. In Japan Toshiki Shioiri, Toshiyuki Someya, Daiga Helmeste, and Siu Wa Tang conducted such research. In the 1990s this Japanese group supported the concept that there are significant cultural differences in the judgment of emotions. At the beginning of the 21st century, Kühn added oculusics (eye behavior), haptics (touch), and proxemics (use of space) into a system constituted by the following displays:

1. motorics (movement)
 - mimics: movements of the face
 - pantomimics: movements and positions of the whole body
 - gesture: movements of the arms and hands
2. orientation reaction
 - orientation of the gaze
 - orientation of the head
 - orientation of the torso
3. haptics (touch)

- self-tactile contact (tactile contact with oneself)
- sociotactile contact (tactile contact with others)
- objecttactile contact (tactile contact with objects)
- fictivetactile contact (imaginative contact with others and/or objects)

4. locomotion (place change)

- proxemics

—Alessandra Padula

Further Readings

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Entry Citation:

Padula, Alessandra. "Kinesics." *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*. Ed. . Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2009. 582-84. *SAGE Reference Online*. Web. 29 Jun. 2012.



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