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Hands-on language: Gestures speak volumes

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People talk with their hands.

Few realize how much they are saying.

"We use spontaneous hand movements to accompany speech," says Susan Goldin-Meadow, professor of psychology at the University of Chicago and author of "Hearing Gesture: How Our Hands Help Us Think" (Harvard University Press, \$29.95), which explains how gesture is essential to conversation.

"[Gestures] participate in communication, yet they are not part of a codified system," she writes. "As such, they are free to take on forms that speech cannot assume and are consequently free to reveal meanings that speech cannot accommodate." Gestures are important to the listener as well.

"We respond to [gestures]," Goldin-Meadow says. "We get visual input that adds to what is being said."

Pat Leo, a sign language interpreter and actor who considers hand movements when developing a character, says gesture is part of human exchange. "It helps with emphasis, with clarification," he says. "It seems to keep the conversation going." Universally known hand movements, such as the thumbs-up or the OK sign, are beside the point, Goldin-Meadow says. These are called emblems.

A quiet understanding

"[They] differ from gesture in that they don't depend on speech," she says. "Their meaning is well understood without a word being uttered." Body language might be more implicit, revealing emotions at times, but it, too, does not communicate the substance of a speaker's thoughts, Goldin-Meadow says.

Think instead of the way hands form a fist for emphasis; spread out in confusion; sweep across to signal a transition; pump to show sequence or to count; roll around each other when seeking to clarify; point out a person's height, a direction to take or the size of a fish.

Why we talk with our hands is one of several questions explored by Goldin-Meadow, who has been studying gesturing for about 30 years.

"I think it eases the cognitive load, makes it easier to think," she says.

Gesture is a natural response. Attempts to think about it risk the requisite spontaneity that makes gesture honest and natural for the speaker.

"It should appear as natural as possible," says Leo, who says that his interpreting work makes him more conscientious about what his hands convey. "It gives an extra dimension of reality. Seeing an actor that doesn't gesture at all is unnatural." Goldin-Meadow says awareness of gestures can be raised but are ineffective as part of her studies. "You can't notice it for too long," she says. "It's like breathing. After a while, it gets boring and it affects your breathing. If you notice you're gesturing too much, it affects your talking." Its instinctive nature, adds Goldin-Meadow, makes gesture easily recognizable but not something that can be learned.

The same goes for a listener, who regularly understands the context presented by spontaneous gesture but is rarely consciously aware of understanding the same gesture. To become entangled in what the hands are doing risks tuning out what is said out loud.

"I remember one time, a long time ago, a director kept telling me to raise my hands in the air more often," Leo says. "I remember, we were going for a certain attitude that somehow conveyed a different personality for this character. More of a Woody Allen-type thing.

"It's crazy that we understand these to convey these meanings but we don't understand where they come from."

Gesture cannot be ignored.

"The hand movements we produce as we talk are tightly intertwined with that talk in timing, meaning and function," Goldin-Meadow writes.

Gesture also plays an important role in education, says Debbie Weaton, a 3rd-grade teacher at Stamford, Conn.'s, Northeast School.

"On a subconscious level, I read what [my students] are telling me with their hands," she says. "And gesture doubles what you're saying."

Visual learners

Weaton also grasps her students' understanding of a particular point or lesson. "Some children are visual learners and gesturing helps them," she says.

"I do it naturally," Weaton says. "I want to make sure they are paying attention to me." Everybody gestures.

"The evidence is up in the air about whether a culture gestures more or less," Goldin-Meadow says.

"Spanish and Italian are cultures that seem to gesture big, away from their body. But the rate of gesturing may not diverge so much. The Italian culture has more emblems. Chinese culture has more emblems too. Whether there are more spontaneous gestures is an open question."

Goldin-Meadow also studies whether native languages influence gesture. "To gesture like a native speaker you might need to see [gestures], or maybe the music of the language teaches gesture," she says.

"I just finished a part at the Square One Theater [in Stratford, Conn.] in February," Leo says. "I played Richard Feynman, a physicist, who happened to be from New York somewhere. So he was of that world, used his hands a lot. I watched some of his videos and listened to his recordings."

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