WHY WE GESTURE

The surprising role of hand movements in communication

David McNeill

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University of Chicago

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Why We Gesture

Gestures are fundamental to the way we communicate, yet our understanding of this communicative impulse is clouded by a number of ingrained assumptions. Are gestures merely ornamentation to speech? Are they simply an "add-on" to spoken language? Why *do* we gesture? These and other questions are addressed in this fascinating book. McNeill explains that the common view of language and gesture as separate entities is misinformed: language is inseparable from gesture. There is gesture–speech unity.

Containing more than 100 illustrations, *Why We Gesture* provides visual evidence to support the book's central argument that gestures orchestrate speech. This compelling book will be welcomed by students and researchers working in linguistics, psychology and communication.

DAVID MCNEILL has taught at the University of Michigan, Harvard University, Duke University and the University of Chicago, where he is now an Emeritus Professor.

To my dear family, Nobuko, Cheryl and Randall

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Preface

Why We Gesture capstones three previous books—an inadvertent trilogy spanning 20 years—*How Language Began* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), *Gesture and Thought* (Chicago University Press, 2005) and *Hand and Mind* (Chicago University Press, 1992). In *Why We Gesture* the three merge into a single multifaceted hypothesis.[1] It has many facets but is one hypothesis. To present it in its fullness is the purpose of the book. The integration itself—that it is possible—is part of the hypothesis. Integration occurs because of a central idea—implicit in the trilogy, explicit here—that gestures orchestrate speech. In simplest terms, this answers the implicit question of our title: *to orchestrate speech is why we gesture*. We gesture because we speak—not that speech triggers gesture but that gesture orchestrates speech; we can speak because we gesture, rather than we gesture because we speak. To present such a package takes time and an ordering of parts but the whole is the important thing, to be grasped as such, considered all at once and all together. To this end, brevity is a virtue, and I have held the book to the main points. My impression is that many readers know one book of the trilogy or the other, but few have read them all, let alone have worked out the conceptual framework they collectively create. This is hardly surprising: it has nowhere been spelled out as such. *Why We Gesture* does it for the reader. The hypothesis in all its facets is here in one place, rendered as briefly as I can manage without losing intelligibility and completeness. Moreover, *Why We Gesture* has uncovered connections that had earlier escaped notice —the integrative role of gesture-orchestrated speech is one (mentioned in passing in *Gesture and Thought* but now on center stage). Equal

[1] With additions from a blog (Linguist List, Cambridge extras, Gesture–Speech Unity at the Origin, in 6 parts, Fall 2012), McNeill (2014b) and Levy and McNeill (2015). When I speak of "hypothesis." I use the word in a broader and more traditional sense than its statistical understanding by many psychologists and social scientists. The *Oxford English Dictionary* captures this sense—a supposition made as a starting point for further investigation from known facts.

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in importance and pervasiveness is the idea of "new" gesture-actions and how they differ from "old" action-actions, these last assumed widely as the core of gesture but that, if admitted, would decisively roadblock gesture-orchestrated speech. The principal new finding of the book is that much material coalesces naturally around these concepts.

Acknowledgments

I thank Elena Levy for her insights and gratefully followed advice on presentation as I strove to unpack the first forms of this book and equally for our collaboration on children's gesture and narrative coherence (Levy and McNeill 2015), which plays such an important part at several points in this book. Her understanding of the arguments of the book reassures me that the ideas are in what Merleau-Ponty called the world of shared meanings. Renia Lopez-Ozieblo, in a nearly year-long email exchange, raised questions and counterarguments that have done much to shape and clarify the chapter on phylogenesis. Susan Duncan has been a participant in all the "trilogy." Her insights and methods have been so thoroughly absorbed it is impossible to sort them all out. I have acknowledged her contributions wherever I can.

Maya Hickmann and Marianne Gullberg have played more of a role in the origin of this book than they perhaps realize. They kindly invited me to write a paper for their journal, *Language, Interaction, and Acquisition*, which I did (McNeill 2014b). I thank them for offering this excellent venue. In writing the paper, I saw suddenly how this book could be mutated into the form now before you. From *LIA* to the book was one step.

Without artwork, a book with gesture in a center place would hardly be possible. I thank three artists, first in time Laura Pedelty who made all the illustrations in *Hand and Mind* and is now a professor of neurology at the University of Illinois Medical School; Fey Parrill whose computer art filled *Gesture and Thought* (and much of the current book), now a professor of cognitive science at Case Western Reserve University; and for this book, Dusty Hope, a professional designer who rendered ancient videos into elegant line drawings.

The National Science Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, and the University of Chicago Beck Fund at different times supported the research from which the observations reported herein derive.

Finally, above all I thank my precious family. This book is dedicated to them. They have always been at my side. It is impossible to overstate how

important their support, intellectual as well as lovingly personal, has been. Without them this book and the three earlier books it capstones would never have begun, let alone finished. I thank them for everything they bring—joy, humor, wisdom, history, stability, motivation, beauty, music, inspiration and a wonderful shining intelligence that brightens everything.

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Part I

Gesture-orchestrated speech

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