



First published in 1941 this book has become a classic and retains all the interest it elicited in scientific circles three decades ago. Under the sponsorship of the late Franz Boas, its author, David Efron, an Argentine sociologist, put to an experimental test the theories of the Nazi anthropologists according to which expressive bodily movements are conditioned by racial descent and not by environmental factors. In a review published in the March, 1941 issue of the *Annals of the American Academy*, Professor Gardner Murphy stated that Efron's book seemed to exemplify "the best methods" then available for a study of this problem and "in several respects to break completely new ground" while setting a new standard of work. He also drew attention to the fact that the book showed "not only what race cannot explain, but positively what culture can explain" in the field of gestural comportment. This evaluation is confirmed by Dr. Paul Ekman who in the preface of the 1971 edition states that the methods used by Efron were "unique for his time and exemplary for ours" and that he is "not just a brilliant pioneer... (but also)... a current, major and, in some ways, still unique contributor to the now rapidly growing field of research into facial expression and bodily movement in social interaction".

Among the lasting contributions made by Efron in this field is the attempt to establish a basis for the codification of expressive bodily movements, with respect to both their spatio-temporal and "linguistic" aspects, among various ethnic groups living under similar as well as different environmental conditions. Thus, in a relevant article published in the May, 31, 1970 issue of *The New York Times Magazine*, the name of Efron is mentioned together with those of Boas, Sapir and LaBarre as one "who first put forward the notion that body motions are actually a code that can be cracked".

The book is profusely illustrated with sketches drawn from life by the American painter Stuyvesant Van Veen.

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# GESTURE, RACE AND CULTURE

A TENTATIVE STUDY OF SOME OF THE SPATIO-TEMPORAL  
AND "LINGUISTIC" ASPECTS OF THE GESTURAL BEHAVIOR OF  
EASTERN JEWS AND SOUTHERN ITALIANS IN NEW YORK CITY,  
LIVING UNDER SIMILAR AS WELL AS DIFFERENT ENVIRON-  
MENTAL CONDITIONS

*by*

DAVID EFRON

*sketches by*

STUYVESANT VAN VEEN

1972

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The original English text, *Gesture and Environment*, was published in 1941 by King's Crown Press, New York. There also appeared a Spanish translation, *Gesto, raza y cultura*, published in 1970 by Ediciones Nueva Visión of Buenos Aires.

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*To my wife, thirty years after*



## PREFACE TO THE 1972 EDITION

It is rare that a book reissued thirty years after its first publication is of more than historical interest in the development of a field of knowledge. But this is that rare book. Efron is not just a brilliant pioneer. He is a current, major and, in some ways, still unique contributor to the now rapidly growing field of research into facial expression and body movement in social interaction.

Efron designed his study to test the claims of the Nazi scientists that differences in gestures were due solely to racial inheritance. In reviewing this book in 1942, Gardner Murphy wrote, "Actually Dr. Efron has a vastly more important contribution to make than the mere annihilation of so trivial a doctrine [racial theory of gestures]. He shows not only what race cannot explain but positively how culture can explain."<sup>1</sup> Efron found, when comparing groups of immigrant Italians and Jews in the U.S., that they used almost completely different repertoires of hand, head and trunk movements during conversation. He believed these differences in conversational nonverbal behavior could be explained by differences in the environments these groups had experienced in Europe.<sup>2</sup> But the idea that culture is the major influence

<sup>1</sup> Book Review, Gardner Murphy, *The Annals of the American Academy*, Vol. 220 (1942), pp. 268-269. Efron's book was also reviewed in the *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 44 (October 1942), pp. 715-716 and the *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 7 (April 1942), pp. 279-280.

<sup>2</sup> Efron gave only some hints of how ghetto life and free village life in Europe might have shaped the distinctive gesture behavior of the Italian and Jewish groups. Gardner Murphy emphasized this explanation in his review, and Efron in recent correspondence suggested that Murphy's comments be quoted in this republication. "The Italian gesture appears as the expression of a village existence where space is free, family status clear-cut, and conversation much like song or dance in its expressive value. Under conditions of economics and social persecution, the European Jewish gesture tends to be a gesture of escape, or, in a struggle to cope with difficulty, a gesture of localized aggression directed to the only immediate available object. Metropolitan life in an American city makes both types of gesture

in shaping gestures does not rest upon inference. Efron also studied the first generation offspring of these two immigrant groups. Those who were assimilated into U.S. culture failed to maintain the distinctive gestural style so clearly seen in the immigrants, while those who maintained traditional ties retained their distinctive pattern of conversational nonverbal behavior. Within the broad picture of these results, Efron reports additional findings and intriguing observations, many of which merit further study (e.g., the hybrid gesture).

Efron's methods are unique for his time and exemplary for ours. Rarely has such a diversity of investigatory techniques been utilized in a single study of body movement. The very choice of topic, conversational nonverbal behavior, the scope of the question asked, ("Are gestures culturally determined?"), and Efron's rejection of laboratory controls in favor of natural settings would seem to necessitate the use of a wisdom approach, where the data are qualitative, and the argument rests upon logically ordered impressions and convincing anecdotes. While Efron made full use of qualitative observations, including an artist's sketches of behavior as it occurred, he was committed to obtaining quantitative evidence. His qualitative hypotheses are proven by frequency counts of the occurrence of different types of hand and head movements, by measurements made directly from motion picture film records, and by systematic study of the information obtained by observers who viewed film records.

It is not just Efron's innovative use of quantitative methods in field research which merits attention, nor only his fundamental finding on the influence of culture on gesture. His theoretical distinctions between classes of nonverbal behavior and his isolation of measurable analytic units may well be his most important contribution to the research problems confronting many investigators today.<sup>3</sup> Because

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less meaningful and more and more useless. It is not just the imitation of the American norm; it is the positive role of gesture in social living that requires emphasis."

<sup>3</sup> In the last five years there has been a resurgence of interest in studying nonverbal behavior in conversational settings; witness two international conferences in the summer of 1969, and one in the summer of 1970. (Conference organizers were: Michael Argyle, Oxford University; Robert Kleck, Dartmouth College; Erving Goffman, University of Pennsylvania and Thomas A. Sebeok, Indiana University).

Some examples will serve to show the relevance of Efron's work and will also provide the reader with some introductory references to this field of study.

Efron's notational system is relevant to that proposed by R. L. Birdwhistell,

these distinctions are not presented concisely in one place, but are introduced and elaborated in different parts of the book as Efron presents his data, I will draw them together here, so that the reader may better appraise the scope and importance of this aspect of Efron's work.

Efron focused primarily upon hand movements and to a lesser extent on head movements, with occasional consideration of trunk position; he did not consider facial expression, posture, gait, or eye movements. Three aspects of hand-head movements were distinguished and measured: (A) Spatio-temporal; (B) Inter-locutional; (C) Linguistic.

A. SPATIO-TEMPORAL – Gestures are considered simply as movement, independently from their interactive or referential aspects.

1. *Radius* of the gesture: size of the radius of movement and axis of movement, whether elbow, wrist, etc. (pp. 68-72; 107-110; 134-136; 149-150).
2. *Form*: sinuous, elliptical, angular, or straight (pp. 73-79; 110-114; 136; 151).
3. *Plane*: sideways-transversal; towards auditor-frontal; up-down-vertical; away from speaker and auditor-lateral centrifugality; or away from speaker toward auditor-dorsoventral centrifugality (pp. 79-81; 114-115; 136-137; 151).
4. *Bodily Parts*: involved in gesticulation and ways in which they are

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and his concern with the influence of culture on gesture has been one of Bird-whistell's major interests: *Introduction to Kinesics*, (University of Louisville Press, 1952); and "The kinesic level in the investigation of the emotions", in P. H. Knapp (Ed.), *Expression of the Emotions in Man* (New York, International Universities Press, 1963).

Efron's distinctions among the linguistic-referential aspects of gesture have been incorporated, expanded and modified as part of Ekman and W. V. Friesen's account of the repertoire of nonverbal behavior: "The repertoire of non-verbal behavior", *Semiotica*, 1 (1969), pp. 49-98.

A number of investigators have made distinctions between types of hand movements which are considerably simpler than the distinctions made by Efron: N. Freedman and S. P. Hoffman, "Kinetic behavior in altered clinical states: Approach to objective analysis of motor behavior during clinical interviews", *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 24 (1967), pp. 527-539; George F. Mahl, "Gestures and body movements in interviews", in John Shlien (Ed.), *Research in Psychotherapy*, Vol. 3 (Washington, D.C., American Psychological Association, 1968); and Howard M. Rosenfeld, "Approval-seeking and approval-inducing functions of verbal and nonverbal responses in the dyad", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 4 (1966), pp. 597-605. Although spatial behavior was only one of the aspects of gestures considered by Efron, his work on this is relevant to the current studies of Hall, Summer, and Watson: E. T. Hall, *The Silent Language* (Doubleday, New

employed (pp. 81-86; 115-118; 137-139; 151-152).

- a. Head gestures: area of movement, rate, and frequency, and whether used as substitute for hands.
  - b. Digital gestures: variety of positions and shapes of hands.
  - c. Unilaterality versus bilaterality in hand movement.
  - d. Ambulatory gestures: sequential transfer of motion from one arm to the other.
5. *Tempo*: abrupt, dischronic versus flowing transitions from one movement to another (pp. 86-88; 118-119; 139; 153).
- B. **INTERLOCUTIONAL ASPECTS** – The communicational or interactive element of gesture is considered, separately from the referential aspect.
1. *Familiarity with the Physical Person* of the Interlocutor: to interrupt or capture attention; also compared with contacting own body (pp. 89-92; 119-120; 140).
  2. *Simultaneous Gesturing* of all Interactants (pp. 92; 120-121; 140; 153).
  3. *Conversational Grouping*: use of space and distance between speakers and auditors (pp. 92-93; 121; 140; 153).
  4. *Gesturing with Objects*: using an inanimate object as an arm extension (pp. 93-94).

C. **LINGUISTIC ASPECTS** – The referential meaning of the gesture is considered. There are two broad classes of gesture distinguished in terms of whether the gesture has meaning independent of or only in conjunction with speech (pp. 94-106; 121-128; 140-146; 153-154).

1. *Logical-Discursive*: gestures which do not refer to an object or thought but to the course of the ideational process. They lend emphasis to the content of the verbal-vocal behavior. They are related more to the *how* than to the *what* of the idea they enact. They are bodily re-enactments of the ideational process, of the logical pauses, intensities, inflections, etc.
  - a. *Baton*: gestures which time out with the hands the successive stages of referential activity. They beat the tempo of mental locomotion.
  - b. *Ideographic*: gestures which trace or sketch out in the air the path and direction of thought.
2. *Objective*: gestures which have meaning independent of speech to

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York, New York, 1959); Robert Summer, *Personal Space: The Behavioral Basis of Design* (Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1969); and O. M. Watson and T. D. Graves, "Quantitative research and proxemic behavior", *American Anthropologist*, 68 (1966), pp. 971-985.

which they may or may not be an adjunct.

a. *Deictic*: gestures which indicate a visually present object, usually by pointing.

b. *Physiographic*: gestures which visually show what they mean.

(i) *Iconographic*: gestures which depict the form of a visual object.

(ii) *Kinetographic*: gestures which depict a bodily action.

c. *Emblematic* or symbolic: gestures which represent either a visual or a logical object by means of pictorial or nonpictorial form which has no morphological relationship to the thing represented. These have standardized meaning within a culture, and are culture specific. If the emblem is morphologically similar to that which it represents it is considered a hybrid Emblem. (Figure 73 gives a list of Italian emblems; this material was not included in the original publication of the book, but has importance not only as an illustration of what Efron means by the term *emblem* but also as a listing of the emblematic vocabulary of this group.)

It might be well to indulge the curiosity of the reader, and answer the question raised by a number of my colleagues when they heard that I had been in correspondence with Efron about the republication of this book. What has David Efron been doing in these last thirty years? After completing his doctoral dissertation at Columbia University, Efron joined the research staff of the National Planning Association in Washington, D.C. in 1942. He worked on socio-economic and institutional planning in Latin America for the post-war period. One of his studies was published in 1943 under the title *LATIN AMERICA IN THE FUTURE WORLD*, co-authored with George Soule and Norman T. Ness (Holt & Co.). Efron also was sole author of a book on the social, economic, cultural, and institutional problems of the Argentine Northwest. Though never published in its entirety, parts of his work have been published in journals. Dr. Efron is now bringing this work up-to-date for publication as a book.

In 1944 he joined the staff of the International Labor Organization where he has worked for 22 years. Efron occupied a number of posts within the International Labor Organization in fields relating chiefly to institutional development. Among these was his position as a program coordinator of development projects which were intended to integrate indigenous and tribal populations in Latin America, Africa and the Middle East. This work resulted in the book *INDIGENOUS*

PEOPLES, published by the International Labor Organization in 1953 and in the preparation of an international convention for the protection and integration of indigenous and tribal populations. The convention was approved by the International Labor Conference in 1957, with the support of the United Nations, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, World Health Organization and United Nations Children's Fund. This work also involved supervision of the Andean Indian Program, which now has 25 action centers in seven Latin American countries; all the international organizations, including the Inter-American Development Bank, participate in this program under the general coordination of the International Labor Organization.

Three years ago Efron retired. Residing now in his native Argentina, he has completed a book on sociological and philosophical subjects which will appear shortly.

San Francisco, May 5, 1970

Paul Ekman  
University of California

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