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Conversation of Gestures

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The word “gesture” comes from the Latin words *gero*, *gessi*, *gestum* – do, manage, perform. It usually refers to movements of the body – especially the hands – which are a visual feature of communication as an embodied process (Tenjes, 2001: 303–304). The concept of gestures was used by Wilhelm Wundt, a pioneer of psycholinguistics, who considered researching language to be the best way to understand the workings of the human mind (Blumenthal, 1973: 11). The conversation of gestures formed the basis of George Herbert Mead's social behaviorism, a variant of pragmatism that consisted in researching an individual's experience in the context of the associations between his actions and the actions of others.

Mead took the concept of gestures from Wundt, but unlike him believed that the mind emerges in the communication process and not as its prerequisite (Blumenthal, 1973: 17). Mead broadened the definition of gestures to include communication between animals as well as human communication, both verbal and nonverbal.

A gesture is, basically, a behavior of one organism which becomes a stimulus that provokes another organism's reaction (e.g., baring teeth). A gesture is a phase of action (the act of baring teeth precedes an attack). While human communication involves gestures which function as natural signs, it relies primarily on conventional signs – in Mead's terms, on significant gestures and significant language symbols. A gesture gains significance when it elicits a response in an individual that resembles the response elicited by this individual's gesture in another individual. Vocal

gestures, which had a similar effect on the sender and recipient, played an especially important role in the transition from using gestures to using symbols. Thanks to vocal gestures, the intersubjectivity of meanings became possible.

In the conversation of gestures, Mead distinguished three levels: nonsignificant conversation of gestures, conversation of significant gestures, and conversation of significant symbols. They corresponded to the successive stages of the evolution of language and mind. Meaning as the result of “an interconnected sequence of behavioral events”

(Schneider, 2000: 124) emerges on the elementary level of gesture conversation, before there is any awareness of meaning.

Mead attempted to prove that awareness of meaning could not emerge independently of the reciprocal adaptation of gestures as a means of realizing joint action (Mead, 1981a). One organism's response to another organism's gesture is an interpretation of that gesture and represents its meaning (Mead, 1934: 114) on the elementary level of semiosis. On the other hand, significance consists in the anticipatory reciprocal presentation of the tendencies toward action which a gesture can elicit in another individual. Meaning can emerge only through imagining a gesture's consequences (Mead, 1981b: 111). Anticipating a gesture's consequences precedes the actual reaction, which consists in making a new significant gesture. Mead's conception of meaning involves a triadic relation, or threefold conversational process (Mead, 1934: 80):

significant gesture X indicates what X is going to do and what Y will do according to X's expectations;

significant gesture Y constitutes the adjustive response to gesture X;

a social object (e.g., greeting) is created as a result of the conversation of significant gestures.

In this semiotic triad (Wiley, 2005: 82), a gesture acquires meaning when it explicitly elicits a response from the individual to whom it is addressed, and that response resembles the one implicitly elicited in the individual who performs the gesture. Through significant gestures, human action carries signs of activities which don't have to be performed directly.

A bodily or vocal gesture acquires meaning in a specific situation of impact, through a gesture that constitutes the response. Meanings transcend the situations of social interactions (Mead, 1981c: 102) when

communication occurs on the level of significant symbols. According to Mead, a significant symbol is a gesture that evokes in the gesture-making individual the same response that is evoked in others at whom the gesture is directed (Mead, 1981d: 246). In the process of semiosis, Mead distinguished meaning and significance (Perinbanayagam, 1985: 9). He assumed the relative universality of meanings achieved within the communicative community. Universality consists in the convergence of the symbol-using individual's response with the responses of other participants in the same universe of discourse, or the "generalized other." Mead analyzed meanings as relatively constant and universal in language communication. In his view, language is a discourse – a statement directed at someone, not an abstract structure of signs. Although it can take the form of a statement directed at an abstract audience, the key features of language become visible in the situation of direct communication.

The mind emerges in language communication and is social in character, since thinking consists in the internalization of external conversations which constitute exchanges of significant gestures and symbols. The self, too, forms through internalization of interpersonal conversation, which makes intrapersonal conversation possible (Wiley, 2005: 34). The self is dialogue-oriented as a process of conversation between "I" and "me." Like the conversation of significant gestures and symbols, the self is reflexive, since it consists in giving oneself meanings by the subject, which becomes an object for itself (Mead, 1934: 135). Mead called the reflexivity of the self "role-taking" (Wiley, 2005: 34).

In Mead's opinion, communication based on the conversation of gestures is the most basic of all social processes. Communication allows the emergence of mind, self, and social organization in the temporal dimension of the present, past, and future. The conversation of gestures has a structure characteristic for co-operative action, and thus can serve as basis for the theory of practical intersubjectivity (Joas, 1985: 14). In his theory of communicative action, Jürgen Habermas (1981) conceptually narrowed the conversation of significant gestures to an interaction where actors strive for mutual understanding, and thus attempt to negotiate a definition of the situation.

Mead's pragmatic conception of meaning, the conversation of gestures,

reflexivity, mind, and the self capable of taking the roles of the other – all these conceptions found their sociological implications in symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1966). They were also developed further in labeling theory, conversation analysis, dramaturgical analysis, and performance theory.

SEE ALSO: [Conversation Analysis](#); [Discourse](#); [Mead, George Herbert](#); [Mind](#); [Pragmatism](#); [Self](#); [Symbolic Interaction](#)

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