

# Cross-Cultural Differences in Gesture: Conceptual Preliminaries

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## Abstract

There is a fair amount of research on gesture that focuses on, or allows us to infer information about, cross-cultural differences. But while the biggest issue is empirical, it is important to prepare the problem conceptually. The notion of 'gesture' has many meanings, and if we define the different phenomena that come under the rubric, certain predictions can be made about what we can expect to find from empirical work on gesture across cultures. I argue that when form-meaning mappings are grounded in natural semiotic principles, including both ontogenetic ritualization and microgenetic/enchronic inference, this should correlate with lower diversity in form-meaning mappings in gesture; conversely, when form-meaning mappings are grounded in arbitrary conventions, this should correlate with greater diversity in mappings across cultures. I argue that cross-cultural diversity should be generally lower for gesture than for semantics or syntax because the manual-visual modality is more susceptible to being interpreted via natural meaning principles. In the lexico-semantics of spoken language I can withhold information more easily than in gesture, while in manual signs (including in sign language) I may need to rely on you to suppress it. If in the manual modality it is harder not to make certain information available, then your agency over the expression of that information is lower and it will be taken as less likely that you mean to convey that information as part of what you're saying (basic correlation between semiotic agency and accountability). It follows from these considerations that, for principled reasons, cultural diversity in gesture will be significantly less than that for the symbolic conventions of language.

**Keywords:** Semiotics of gesture; cross-cultural variation in gesture; universals.