

# Social Interpretation of Gestures and the Advancement of Human Communication in South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

*People use gestures to communicate various messages. When a person is happy or unhappy, one can tell from the gestures he/she makes. The aim of this paper is to investigate social interpretation of gestures; to find out how they advance human communication. This is accomplished by analyzing gestures as they are found in our daily lives. The research employed social and qualitative methods as well as participatory observation in data collection. Hence, the analysis was made based on qualitative model.*

**Keywords:** *Social interpretation, gesture, advancement, Human communication*

## INTRODUCTION

Gestures are objective. When used by a person they mean something. According to the *Oxford School Dictionary* (1994) a “gesture is a movement or action that expresses what a person feels”. It is a meaning attached to a sign that can be consciously or unconsciously made by a person to mean something. Gestures could be human and non-human signs that can be interpreted into meaningful expressions. Furuichi and Jonson (2008) state that history tells us that communication research has focused on vocal modality, usually with the exclusion of other forms of communication signals. Prevalent theories of language evolution emphasize the vocal trajectory as the evolution of language. Recent theoretical debates about the evolutionary history of language have opened up the possibility that other communicative behaviours conceivably evolved along with or perhaps even earlier than spoken language. According to Liknapp and Hall (2006) gestures are:

Movements made by the body or some part of it may involve movements by the hand, arm or head. They replace speech complement during a dialogue and they can be used when speech is not used at all. They regulate the flow and rhythm of interaction, maintain attention, add emphasis, clarify speech and help characterize and make memorable the content of speech. Gestures act as a forecaster of forthcoming speech and help the speaker access and formulate the speech. While some gestures are universal, others are culture-specific. Pease (1992) maintains that gestures are the same all over the world. Universal gestures, will, for example, include nodding of one’s head. In many parts of the world, it signals that you are affirming (yes) or agreeing with the next person.

## **GESTURES DISPLAYED DURING HUMAN INTERACTIONS**

In this section the researchers will divide gestures into four categories: those showing direction, those that are displayed when a person is greeting someone, those that are displayed when someone is angry and others (that do not fall under these categories).

### **GESTURES DISPLAYED WHEN SHOWING DIRECTIONS**

***Folding fingers with thumb waving to and fro:*** When a hitch-hiker is on the side of road with all fingers folded, except for the thumb waving forward and backward, a motorist who sees him/her would know he/she is hitching a lift. The Respondent One says this gesture is interpreted as 'may we go together to the same direction'. It is understood that the person is asking for a lift. The driver of the car may stop to give him/her a lift.

***Folding all fingers and the forefinger pointing to the sky:*** When one is and sees a pedestrian with all his or her fingers folded and the forefinger pointing to the sky, the Respondent One says that the driver will interpret the gesture to mean that the pedestrian wants a lift going to the farthest town. If he/she is pointing in a southern direction, it is not certain which town he/she may be referring to. It could be Polokwane, Pretoria or Johannesburg. What is certain is that the person is not going to a nearby town.

***Driving and stretching the hand to the right:*** When a person is driving and sees a driver pointing to the right with his/her right hand, the Respondent One says one will immediately know that the driver wants to turn to the right hand side. The driver would be signaling to turn to the right although he did not indicate to use the indicators /signals of the car. It will be interpreted that he is going to turn to the right.

***Stretching one's open hand/finger and moving it to and fro:*** When a person stretches one's hand and points the forefinger to another person, the Respondent One says that the second person will know that he/she is being called by the person, making the gesture. However, this gesture is considered disrespectful in some cultures, including the Vhava—a culture. It is believed that it undermines the other person. The forefinger is also believed to be used for pointing to witches. As a result, the Vhavenda people will not welcome such a gesture.

***Opening both arms and waving then inward and outward:*** If a person opens/waves his /her hands inwards and outwards, the Respondent One says that this is an indication that the person who sees the gesture is summoned to the initiator of the gesture.

### **GESTURES DISPLAYED IN ANGER**

***Holding both hands on the head:*** When a person is sitting alone with his/her hands on his head, the Respondent Two says that it is a suggestion that the person is deep in thought. He or she could be having a problem that is difficult for him/her. If such person is not helped, he/she may even commit suicide. It is an indication that he or she needs some help or solutions to his or her problems.

***Shaking of the head:*** Shaking the head from side to side indicates a no or negation. It is universal and may well be a gesture that is learned in infancy. The Respondent Two says that when a child wants the parent to discontinue feeding him or her, he/she will make the same gesture to mean 'no'.

***Stretching both legs sideways and both hands while holding the waist*** : When a person stretches his/her legs sideways with both hands on his/her waist, one will know that the person is surprised at something, although the gesture could be interpreted differently depending on the culture. The Respondent Two says that the usual interpretation is that one is disappointed by what one sees.

***Pointing at a person with the forefinger moving up and down***: When a person's forefinger is pointing at a person and moving up and down, the Respondent Two says that the person pointed at should know that the initiator of the gesture is angry with him/her.

***Stretching one's hand with all fingers moving to and fro***: If a person stretches his/her hand with all fingers moving to and fro, as if waving, the Respondent Two says that the person seeing that gesture should know that he/she should move away from the speaker. This is an indication that the person being shown the gesture is not welcome. The initiator of the gesture is saying 'go back' or 'do not come near to me'.

***Crossing hands on one's chest***: When a person is sitting with his/her arms crossed on one's chest, the Respondent Two says that it is a gesture that he/she does not want to involve himself/herself in what is going on. This gesture means that one does not want to be part of what is happening.

***Showing a fist to a person***: If one shows a fist to another, the Respondent Two says that it means that the person making the gesture will fix him/her. This is not a friendly gesture. It could mean one can be punished or beaten up at any time.

***Frowning***: Slater, (ed) (1992:198) says that 'when you frown, you crease your forehead because you are angry, worried, puzzled or thoughtful'

When the forehead is wrinkled with wrinkles it symbolizes anger. The Respondent Two says that he/she believes that this gesture shows that the person is not happy.

***Rolling of eyes***: When eyes move in the direction of another person, it is an indication that the person making the gesture is angry. The Respondent Two says that it will be made mostly in the presence of visitors and when it is impossible to verbalize the gesture; for example towards a child who is being mischievous. This will immediately send a message to the child that he or she should stop his or her behaviour.

***Pointing of a finger***: A finger may be pointed at someone during a heated argument. It is mostly accompanied by words, to show that a person is very angry. Respondent Two says that usually, people use the forefingers to point at one another, to say "I will show you my true colours, or "I will fix you." This gesture will be interpreted to mean that the person is angry.

***Holding the hips with both hands***: This is a gesture that shows aggressiveness. The Respondent Two says that the gesture makes the initiator appear to be taller and more threatening.

***Moving the fourth finger across the neck***: Respondent One says people use the gesture in communication to say to the next person that they would kill them. The hand moves across the neck, like a knife slashing.

***Spitting to the next person:*** The Respondent Two says, often, when people hear of a recent death, they spit on the ground. In some instances, they will spit on the other person to say ‘you are a dog’ ...or what you did is unacceptable. Some people would spit on the next person to say ‘I am done with you ‘. For example, if you tell a secret to a person and he passes it on to others, it would be interpreted as saying that one will never tell that person a secret again.

#### **GESTURES DISPLAYED DURING GREETINGS**

***Shaking hands:*** Shaking hands is a way of greeting. It can be used either with a friend, a relative or family member and even a stranger. People may shake hands even in formal meetings. Respondent One says some people, especially the young, may also rub the palm of a hand as a love signal while shaking hands, especially males rubbing females. This is a gesture used by lovers. The person whose palm is being rubbed will know that the doer is deeply in love.

***Raising the hand and waving them sideways:*** When a person raises his/her hands with open palms and waving them sideways, Respondent One says that it is a gesture of goodbye. The response will be to wave back to say goodbye to you too.

***Hugging:*** This may be displayed when friends are greeting each other or by people who are in a love relationship or just ordinary family members, depending on the culture of the specific group. Respondent One says this practice was rarely displayed in rural South Africa but it is becoming common practice nowadays. Hugging is interpreted as revealing that two people are intimate friends who warmly accept each other.

***Kissing:*** Osculating someone in a public place is mostly interpreted as a way of greeting a close relative in some cultures. This may be a family member, a lover or a friend. Groups like Vhavenda still view kissing in public as being immoral, especially if people are lovers. Blacks who live close to urban areas, especially those who live with whites, might be more comfortable with the gesture than rural ones. Respondent One says that depending on the relationship with the person, a kiss may differ from person to person. A kiss might be on the cheek or on the lips. When kissing involves lips and the tongue or what some call a wet kiss, it is mostly restricted to people in sexual relationships. This is supported by Respondent Two who says that people may also kiss the hand when greeting. This type of kissing is interpreted to mean different things, depending on the nature of the relationship.

***Kneeling down and lying on the side:*** A Muven woman may do a little bending of the legs when passing the elders which can be interpreted as a sign of respect and greeting at the same time. In many cases, they will be looking down, as if they are shy. In other cases, especially if it is the chief being greeted, Vhavenda women will also lie on the side with their hands touching close to the head. Respondent Two says that Vhaven—a woman can also greet in this way when there are important visitors like in-laws. Girls may use this gesture when greeting parents and older women. This gesture is interpreted to mean or to show respect to those people who are in close affinity.

**Removing the hat from one's head:** Male persons entering a homestead will sometimes remove their hat from the head when there are elderly people around. Respondent Two says that they remove their hats from their heads as a way of greeting and showing respect. Verbal greetings may sometimes accompany the gesture: “*Ndaa or Ndau ya nduna*”.

**Waving a hand:** When a person waves a hand, this can be interpreted as a gesture to say “hallo!” This is an informal kind of greeting that can also be made to friends. Respondent Two says that universally, people wave hands with open palms as a way of saying goodbye.

There are other gestures that are not displayed when showing direction, during greetings or anger. Such gestures include the following:

**Two thumbs facing down:** We see this kind of gesture during wrestling or other sports matches. Respondent Two says that the gesture is displayed by the spectators to tell the players that they are bored with them or they are not happy with their performance.

**Throwing in a towel during boxing:** This gesture is displayed when people are fighting. Respondent Two says that the towel will be thrown in, in the middle of the ring as a sign of defeat. The towel is thrown by the fighter's trainer or coach. Respondent Two says that this is done when the pain is no longer bearable.

**Shaking the head side ways:** The head is shaken sideways as a way to say ‘no’, or ‘I do not like it’. Respondent Two says it is a sign that a person refuses to succumb to what he/she is being ordered to do. It is amazing that even small children may also be seen making this gesture.

**Re-inforced Arm-Cross:** A full arm-cross gesture, when a person has clenched the fist, indicates a hostile and defensive attitude. This cluster is often combined with clenched teeth and a red face. Respondent One says a verbal or physical attack may be imminent in this case. A submissive palms-up approach needs a hostile gesture if the reason is not already apparent. The person using this gesture cluster has an attacking attitude.

**Arm gripping gesture:** It is characterized by the hands tightly gripping the upper arms to reinforce the position and to stop any attempt to unfold the arms and expose the body. The arms may often be gripped so tight that the fingers and knuckles turn white as the blood circulation is cut off. Respondent One says that this armfold style is common among people sitting in doctors' and dentists' waiting rooms, or first time air travelers waiting for the plane to take off. It shows a negative restrained attitude (Pease, 1992). Status can influence arm folding gestures. A person can also place his/her hands when speaking with another.

**Raising one's hands during a fight:** In a fight, when one feels that he/she has had enough, one may opt to quit. To show that one is surrendering, one may raise his/her hands. Respondent One says that when the opponent sees that, he will automatically know that the opponent has accepted defeat. If the fighter continues hitting the person with his/her hand raised, one will be sanctioned.

**Putting the forefinger across the lips:** When two people are talking to each other and one is seen putting the forefinger across the lips, the Respondent One says it is a gesture to

say one is too loud or keep quiet. One will automatically know that one should talk softly. It could also mean that one should keep some information heard a secret.

## CONCLUSION

The above discussion has shown that the use of gestures and non-verbal languages is as old as human language itself. Understanding gestures enables people to interpret information even when the verbal message is not provided. During human communications people rely mostly on information given by the other person. When the communicators are face to face with one another, they can also notice these non-verbal behaviours and in doing so, they can observe trends as information unfolds, to view if verbal information is in line with the non-verbal information. It has been established that gestures could help to strengthen verbal information during communications. It was shown that gestures may be divided into three categories; namely, gestures that are displayed to show direction, gestures displayed during greetings and other gestures that do not fall under these categories.

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