

**GESTURES**



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**A REAL LANGUAGE  
AT THE SERVICE OF MAN**

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DSAA Graphic Design

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**«Body language is a very powerful tool. We had body language before we had speech, and apparently, 80% of what you understand in a conversation is read through the body, not the words.»**

Deborah Bull, British dancer



**Gesturing, without being aware of it. Gestures like pointing at something, nodding... Everyday gesture that we take as innocent and meaningless, are part of and convey our history, our culture, just like language. Communication is based both on words and gestures, thus enabling men to pass on messages and understand one another, to create links and relationships. People have contextualized gestures and languages, which gives them a function in everyday life. They have codified them to be understood by the members of the same community.**

**A gesture, be it body language or a specific hand gesture, can illustrate, support and complete the spoken language. Moreover, a gesture can also be used to replace words, to give indications on the intentions or feelings of the speaker. Gestures, together with language, constitute and define the way we communicate. Oral communication on its own does not exist. Our linguistic messages always come with gestures and postures.**

**The relationship between gesture and language will be analyzed in this essay and I will study why man uses both.**



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# **THE BODY LANGUAGE**



From a historical point of view, there have been many contradictory theories as to what motivated our ancestors to adopt the upright position. (1) Even if the reasons behind the development of human bipeds are still debated today, all scientists agree on its consequences, which is, the release of the arms. Hands, free from their pedestrian constraints, became the symbol of man's evolution.

Indeed, when man adopted the upright position, his hands adapted. They were not used exclusively to move around anymore, they became a technical aid enabling him to grasp, touch and manipulate. Then, at the same time as hand gestures developed, the size of the brain increased, modifying the skull's anatomy. Jaws and teeth were not only used for grabbing or cutting food anymore, these functions being fulfilled by hands and tools, thus freeing the oral cavity for the development of language. Gestures, with the birth of language, could then be added to oral communication. (2)

Mastering the environment is essential for man. It enables him to find his way, move around or define a position.

But before mastering his environment, man must discover it, that starts in his early childhood.

All the gestures that children, and more generally men, make are meant to perceive their environment, and more particularly to understand their individual existence in relation to that environment. Indeed, when we gesture, we use our body to experiment and understand what is good or dangerous for us. For example, when we touch a hot object, we understand that it is dangerous, so we remember that we must not do it again. The body is thus the tool that enables man to be aware of his own existence. Actually, when man lives different experiences, he tests his limits and discovers which ones are good for him but also which ones are harmful. Man's self-education and self-awareness develop his senses.

Language is also perceived as a way to exist. Man can reveal his personality through language. Language is not exclusively used to communicate useful information, but also trivial matters such as "pass me the salt". Moreover, language can demonstrate one's worth to others, arousing interest and showing one's personality. To achieve that, the speaker

uses anecdotes, stories and his knowledge to highlight and distinguish himself from others, which makes him an identifiable person. Man's speech helps him to exist, thus enables him to create and sustain social relationships.

Our civilization is based on communication. Thanks to communication, culture can be passed on, exchanged or reinforced. Language, be it an oral message or body language, is a major element in communication and more precisely in the construction of thoughts. The perception that man has of his environment can be described through language. The body plays an important role in acting out our thoughts, it enables us to gesture and communicate. The body works as an extension of the mind.

Unconsciously, we communicate not only orally but also with our body gestures. These gestures can be made with various body parts, mainly the face such as the eyebrows, eyelids and mouth. (3) In addition to facial and body expressions, arms especially hands are particularly expressive. (4) Hand gestures for example, along with

other body gestures, are used extensively in silent cinema. More than simply imitating an action, the body conveys the character's feelings to the audience. The spontaneous movements of a speaker are considered as a real communication help because they link thoughts and language. These gestures are not restricted to vocabulary, grammar or language and are performed spontaneously and immediately without prior thoughts. That is why children move about before being able to speak.

Some body gestures can also reveal a person's state of mind. For example, in a situation when our self-control is put to the test, we generally manage to hide our feelings through our speech thanks to the words we choose, but it is not the same with our body language. Instant execution of some gestures or facial expressions do not necessarily leave us time to master them all. Some of these spontaneous actions reveal our mindset and betray us, such as flushing or tapping a foot on the ground. Thus, our gestures can be spontaneous and uncontrolled or, on the contrary, intentional, such as smiling. In both cases, these actions have the potential to

affect social relationships and play a vital role in the creation of social links.

Even if we all make gestures, their meaning can be different. For example, the signs “yes” and “no” are not the same in France, in Thailand or Bulgaria. When French people move their heads from right to left to say no, up and down to say yes, Thai and Bulgarians do the opposite. It is the same for the thumb-up sign that can be used to mean an agreement or a hitch-hiking request in France but can also be seen as an insult in some countries in the Middle East or as a sexual invitation in Sardinia. This shows that gestures have a universal or cultural meaning. Men must observe, test and experiment in the society they belong to, to understand these gestures. Education also has a key role in the learning process because we are taught what they mean.

Generally, learning gestures is made through observation and reproduction of what is perceived. For example, to learn to tie his shoes, the child observes and tries to reproduce the gesture made by his parents. This process

of observation and imitation enables the complete mastery of this form of knowledge. This process is repeated from generation to generation, we can clearly say it is a gestural legacy.

Thus, thanks to the many links between different generations of people, all of them can relay information, knowledge and expertise and so make them last through time.

The transmission of information can be done directly, i.e. face-to-face. (5) The transmission can also be done indirectly when the information is recorded and saved on various media. The first transmission technique was writing. Then, with the birth of technologies such as photography, video and audio recording, pieces of information were saved virtually and lasted over time. In addition, these new media enabled a more extensive transmission to a larger number of people because the connections between individuals are many.



In all the gestures that we know and control, we find those of craftsmen. Indeed, all the stages of production are made through gestures that have been transmitted to them, that they have repeated, developed and perfected to achieve a perfect work. Technical gestures are craftsmen's main tools.

Technical gestures also carry out the idea of aesthetics. Does 'beauty' have a place in the technical production? Does the aesthetic value of an object come from the perfection of the technical process that created it? If we take the example of a wood carver, his way of holding tools, creating chips and carving wood come from a specific training. This heritage is designed to transmit the most effective and time-saving gestures, the ones that will allow a fine and precise outline. The end result is then 'beautiful', free from any flaw or imperfection. A 'beautiful' gesture, meaning a well-executed gesture, makes a 'beautiful' result.

In regards to the transmission of skills and knowledge, new media allow apprentices to study gestures and therefore be able to copy them, an essential parameter in the learning process that language cannot transmit. Indeed,

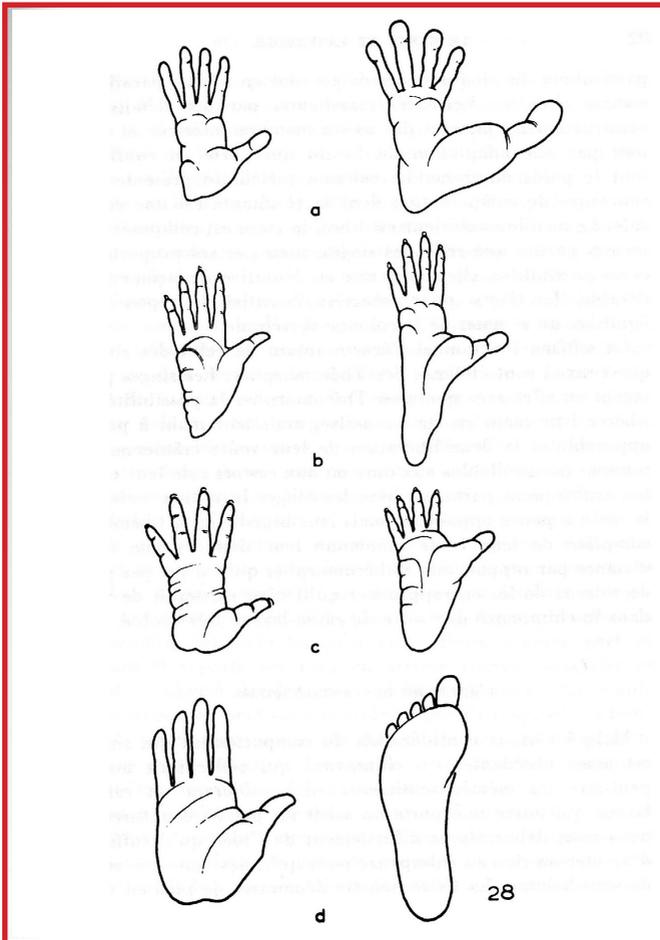
a word is used to designate something that can disappear. For example, we all have a name that identifies each one of us for our lifetime and, once gone, it testifies our passage on Earth. Words, expressions and their interpretation are unique to each individual and culture. What someone calls "beautiful" may be different from what another person has in mind. This shows that transmitting knowledge through language can be uncertain because the apprentice can interpret differently what is written and thus modify the original technique.

If we follow the reasoning of the ethnologist, historian and archeologist André Leroi-Gourhan, the oldest marks that we have and that we can consider as the first graphic marks date back to 35,000 years ago. (6) Graphic design was made possible due to upright position and the liberation of the hands. Man could use tools with his hands, free from their pedestrian constraints.

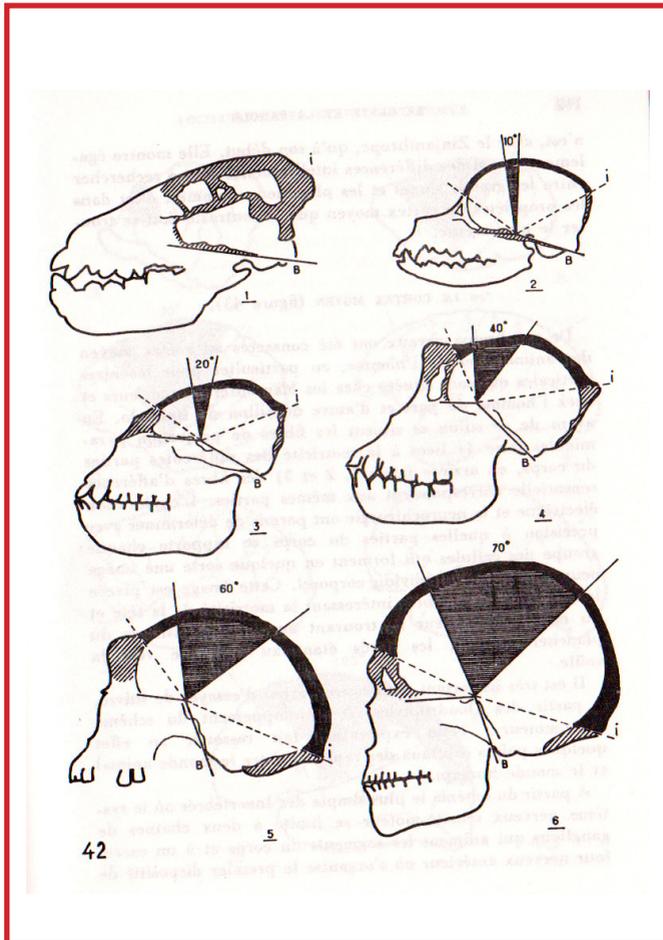
Today, the tools that can leave a mark are many. Defined as a physical instrument used by people directly or

as a machine performing an action, tools are interface between hands and actions. In art, tools allow the artist to make his thoughts visible. Brushes, felt pens, pastels or pencils are used but with the development of new technologies, the artist can also program, encode, edit or create on a computer as well.

By conveying their state of mind or any other form of knowledge on a medium, people and especially artists help preserve knowledge and make it last, while allowing their transmission. Indeed, as the art historian Annick Lantenois says «one of the historical functions assigned to graphic design is to make the world better understandable through sharing and understanding information».



(1) Feet evolution to become a human bipeds.



(2) Modify of the skull's anatomy.

*The body language*

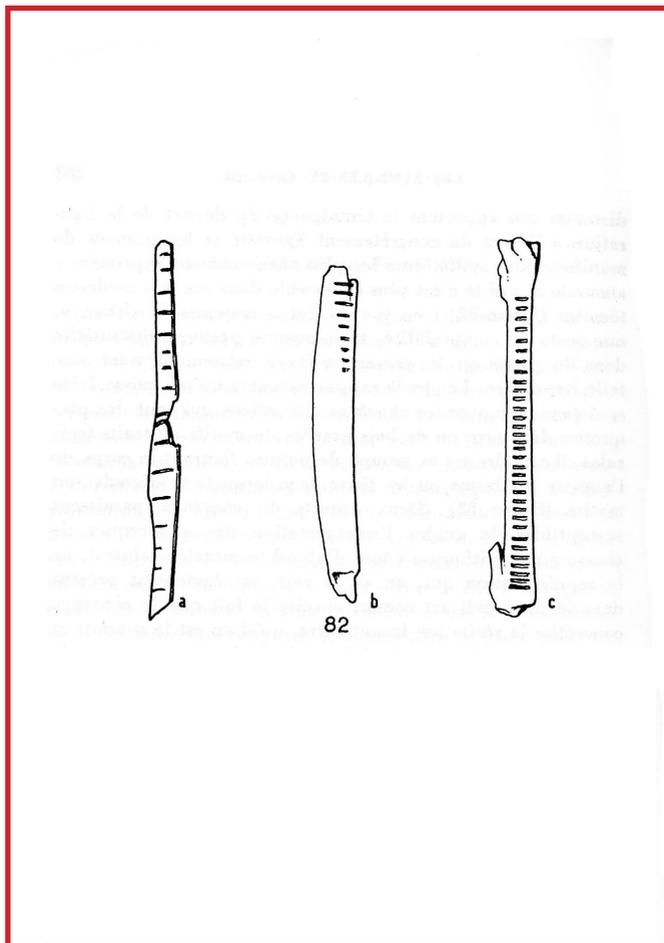
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**(3)(4)** Different face and hands gestures.



(5) Learning gestures in Bali. Child learns gestures directly with his teacher who manipulates him.



(6) First graphic marks.

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# **THE GESTURES BOX**



For my project, I intended to highlight the importance of the gestures we make. Indeed, man is generally characterized as a being who can speak, which distinguishes him from animals. So, for this project, I was interested in body language. Indeed, gestures are ephemeral because they are made only as we speak, they come in addition to speech, and therefore offer no real mark of their brief existence, unlike technical gestures, made by craftsmen for example. Craftsmen can leave marks with the objects resulting from their work and gestures because they are their working tools.

These gestures, captured and stored, complement our spoken language.

To do so, I made a small device, a box releasing simplified body parts – head and hands. Inside the box a microelectronics system linked to a computer is hidden. On this electronic system there are buttons which trigger an action on the computer. The various gestures are represented by expressive hands that activate buttons inside the box. These different gestures look like the ones we make regularly like pointing a finger at someone.

To keep a realistic image of the gestures, the different parts are recorded thanks to Kinect, a camera that detects movements. Its scanner function allows to save the gestures of people moving about and creates a 3D figurine on "Skanect" software. Thanks to this technological device, I could record the body and its gestures quickly and faithfully. After creating the 3D model, a 3D printer was used to print the gestures wanted. Printing very specific objects was easy and quick. Moreover the gestures thus captured could be printed in a very detailed way.

The actions triggered on the computer depend on the part selected to press the button. Indeed, each hand gesture triggers an image or a sound related to an emotion and/or an intention true to reality. For example, a clenched fist expressing anger triggers the color red on the screen and frightening music. A thumb up is lined to yellow and unifying music.

Thus, we do not see the gestures as a purely realistic depiction but thanks to this device, it is possible to perceive the atmosphere surrounding the gestures. This device could

thus allow us to discover the different gestures and their meanings, quite useful for people who want to learn a foreign language.

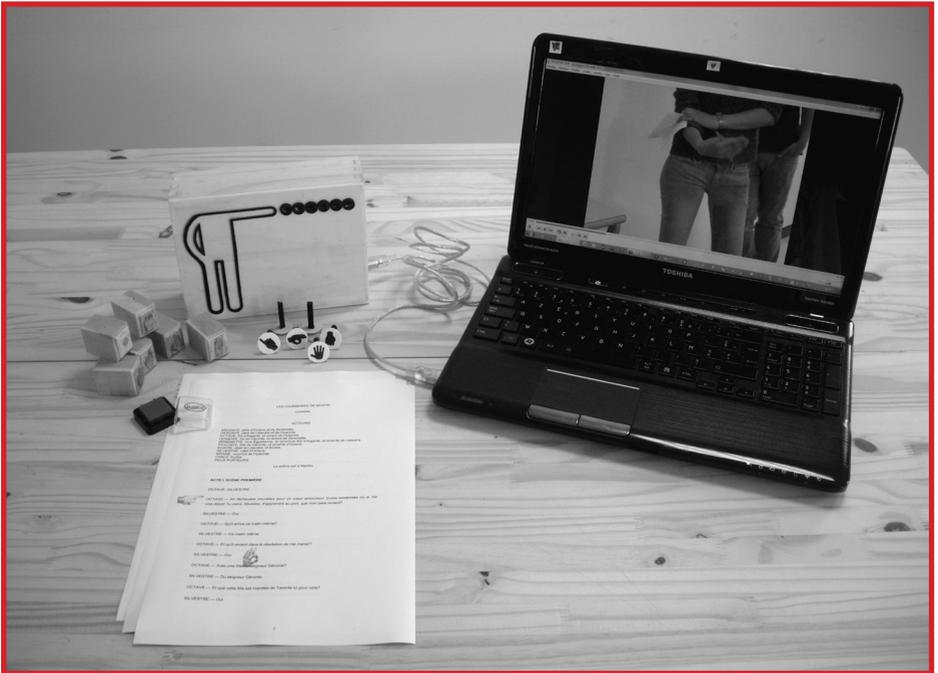
However, this device is also designed to give information about written speech, like a theatre play. In this context, I intend to set up in a second step. Stamps of the same gestures, that the director could use to help the actors reproduce the emotions/mood of the characters thus adding information to the stage directions.

With my project I do not try to save gestures as physical movements, but rather to preserve and transmit the emotions that go with these gestures as being part of our oral communication.

*The Gestures Box*

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