

Gesture Language: a Short Introduction

On the language of gestures, in general, a lot has been written and debated, but here it will be sufficient to outline, only broadly and succinctly, what are the basic characteristics of this language and why it is important to take them into account in any communication activity involving young immigrants-students, who might not easily master the language of the host country.

Sign language vs gesture language

First of all, a distinction must be made between gestural language and the so-called "sign language", i.e. the language generally used by deaf people, a form of communication which includes, among others, some verbal language characteristics (i.e. "signs") and non-verbal aspects (such as intonation, which in sign language is however rendered with the expression of the face), also common to other languages.

Linguistic variation

The "sign language" and the so-called "vocal languages" share several peculiarities, contrary to what one might imagine, the main one of which is this: they change according to various sociolinguistic factors that influence them. But what are these factors? Here they are: the time, the place, the social status of the user of the language, the medium of communication and the level of formality of linguistic interaction. In other words, we are referring to the so-called "linguistic variation" which, on the basis of the specific terminology of linguistics, are the following: *diachronic* (relating to time), *diatopic* (relating to place), *diastratic* (relating to social class), *diamesic* (relating to the medium of expression), *diaphasic* (relating to the formality/informality of the situation in which the language is used).

The sign language

Even if the "sign language" is not the main object of our introduction, it is worthwhile to dwell briefly on some of its qualities, if only to better distinguish it from the gesture language to which we refer to.



In the context of our project we are interested in emphasizing that sign language is not “universal”, but it changes according to the place where it is used, in compliance with the so-called “diatopic variation”, which characterizes it in a significant way, as well as it does with the gesture language.

As a matter of fact, each country has its own specific sign language, defined and structured independently, as can already be clearly seen from the different acronyms that identify it, depending on the country where it is used. To give a concrete example of that, it will suffice to mention the acronyms indicating the sign languages of the countries that are part of the Equity project, starting from what we can define as our “lingua franca”, i.e. English: in the United Kingdom the sign language is known as BSL (British Sign Language), in Finland it is indicated by the acronym SVK (Suomalainen viittomakieli), in France is LSF (Langue des Signes Française), in Germany is known as DGS (Deutsche Gebärdensprache), in Italy it is called LIS (Lingua dei Segni Italiana), while in Spain it takes the name of LSE (Lengua de Signos Española; no information has been found on a possible Basque Sign Language, but there are a Catalan and a Valencian variant), while the Swedish one is instead known as SSL (Svenskt teckenspråk).

Furthermore, there are also local sign languages, used in a narrower context than the national one, but we can assume that the examples mentioned above are already sufficient to state that they follow the path of vocal languages in this territorial differentiation.

Gesture language

However, one point needs to be reiterated: the language of gestures, i.e. the language to which we refer specifically, must not be confused with the “sign language”, from which it differs above all for one reason: gesture language is characterized by the typical gestures of a community of speakers, i.e. people grown up or living in a specific area (a small town, a city, a region, or even a nation), who do not have audio-oral communication difficulties.

They can use body, head, face and hand gestures to illustrate or reinforce what is said orally, while on other occasions they can use them to completely replace the



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

audio-oral message, i.e. to render faster, more incisive and often more spontaneous and effective what they could put into words.

Gesture language ambiguity

We are referring above all to hand gestures and their interaction with certain facial expressions or head movements. The thing we want to underline for our purposes is that the language of gestures can be ambiguous, because the same gesture in different countries can take on a different meaning, causing surprise, misinterpretation, misunderstanding, or even embarrassment among the people who use it to communicate, especially if belonging to different cultures.

The head toss

Linguistic studies usually devote some space to this difference in interpretation of identical or similar gestures, which have different meanings instead, as for example occurs with the so-called "head-toss", i.e. the thrust of the head backwards, accompanied by an indefinable sound of the mouth (an almost imperceptible click of the tongue), a typical gesture of the southern area used to say "no", unlike what happens in the Nordic countries and Northern Italy, where usually, to say "no", people move their head horizontally, from left to right and right to left, or vice versa. To say "yes", however, still in the North, the head moves vertically, from top to bottom and vice versa, and this movement can be confused with that used in the South to say "no", thus becoming a possible source of misunderstanding.

Polysemy

Furthermore, the language of gestures is also characterized by a non-negligible polysemy, given that the same gesture can take on different meanings in the same cultural area depending on the context in which it is used. An example of this polysemy is that of the gesture of the horns, as regards Southern Italy and Italy in general. If the horns are turned upwards, in the direction of another person, they represent a personal offense, because in this case they have the meaning of "cuckold", i.e. a person betrayed by the partner. If instead, in particular way in Southern Italy, they are turned downwards, they have an apotropaic meaning, i.e. they are used as a sort of exorcism, in the event that an ill-omened experience has been evoked, or somebody has



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

mentioned a misfortune, or any other phenomenon that the interlocutor who makes the gesture of the horns considers adverse, negative.

Again, the same gesture in other countries can take on different meanings. For example, in Great Britain the upward gesture of the horns was often used to mean "that rocks" in the realm of rock music, a meaning corresponding more or less to the youthful Italian "spacca", with reference to something extraordinarily appreciated, a music, a song, an event, etc.

Gesture language and teaching

These are just a few small examples concerning the diatopic variation (leaving aside the other variations), a phenomenon that assumes considerable importance when discussing gesture language and how it must be taken into account in the interaction with interlocutors with a different cultural background, especially when dealing with young immigrant students coming from the most disparate areas of the world.

Quite often it is not possible to predetermine how a gesture will be interpreted by a foreign interlocutor living in the host country, especially if arrived recently, but some pedagogical strategies can be adopted to make clear how one must get used to not taking for granted the understanding of this important means of non-verbal communication. The broader aim of such an approach must be to improve the interaction and mutual understanding of the interlocutors, as well as the cultures they represent, giving the deserved value to learning and teaching, to student and teacher, involved at the same time and with equal relevance in a process of mutual and fruitful exchange for both of them. Moreover, some studies seem to prove that "learners have better memory for words encoded with gestures" (see the entry "Manuela Macedonia, Thomas R. Knösche, *Body in mind: How gestures empower foreign language learning*, in the bibliography of this introduction).

The above mentioned aim can also be achieved, although partially, thanks to a series of activities such as exercises and games based on the interpretation of gestures (mimic the gesture; guess the gesture; etc.), which exploit as much as possible a playful and motivating approach able to induce participants, teachers



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

included, to ask themselves questions about the meaning of other people's gestures and their own, thus enriching their linguistic, cultural and human background.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

SUGGESTIONS FOR A BIBLIOGRAPHY/WEBLIOGRAPHY

for further information on Gesture Language and pedagogical tools

Jean Ann Graham, Michael Argyle, *A cross-cultural study of the communication of extra-verbal meaning by gestures*, "International Journal of Psychology", volume 10, issue 1, February 1975, pp. 57-67 (from the abstract: "An analysis of the recorded verbal utterances has shown that the detriment in communication accuracy with the elimination of gestures cannot be attributed to disruption of speech performance; rather, changes in speech content occur indicating an increased reliance on verbal means of conveying spatial information. Nevertheless, gestures convey this kind of semantic information more accurately and evidence is provided for the gestures of the Italians communicating this information more effectively than those of the English".)

Susan Goldin-Meadow, *The role of gesture in communication and thinking*, in "Trends in Cognitive Sciences", 3, 1999, 419-29 (conclusion from the abstract: "gesture serves as both a tool for communication for listeners, and a tool for thinking for speakers")

Patrick W. Miller, *Body Language. An Illustrated Introduction for Teachers*, Patrick W. Miller & Associates, 2005 (interesting book, aimed at teachers. At the end it contains a useful verification test. It can be consulted freely on the website <https://archive.org/>)

A.A. Sobrero - A. Miglietta, *Introduzione alla linguistica italiana*, Roma-Bari, Editori Laterza, 2006, pp. 192-205 (on proxemics, gestures and sociolinguistic variations of gesture language - in Italian)

Marianne Gullberg, *Gestures and Second Language Acquisition*, in Peter Robinson - Nick C. Ellis (eds), *Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition*, New York, Routledge, 2008, pp. 286-315

John White, *The Classroom X-Factor: The Power of Body Language and Non-verbal Communication in Teaching*, Routledge, 2011

(Volume published by one of the two directors of the Center for Studies on Non-Verbal Communication. Very interesting, because it deals with this subject in relation to teaching of all levels, from primary school to university, and to how proxemics, gestures, tone of voice, facial expressions, etc., influence the effectiveness of teaching and the relationship with the students).



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Manuela Macedonia, Thomas R. Knösche, *Body in mind: How gestures empower foreign language learning*, in «Mind, Brain and Education», volume 5, issue 4, December 2011, pages 196-211. Very interesting report of an important experiment about the hypothesis that the use of gestures in teaching can empower foreign language learning: “The overall results support the prediction that learners have better memory for words encoded with gestures. In a transfer test, participants produced new sentences with the words they had acquired. Items encoded through gestures were used more frequently, demonstrating their enhanced accessibility in memory. The results are interpreted in terms of embodied cognition. Implications for teaching and learning are suggested” (quotation from the abstract: it can be read here: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1751-228X.2011.01129.x>).

David B. Givens, John White, *The Routledge Dictionary of Nonverbal Communication*, Routledge, 2021

Julia Grosse - Judith Reker, *Don't get me wrong! The Global Gestures Guide*, Photography Florian Bong-Kil Grosse, Munich, Bierke, 2010
(Very interesting: there are various photos of hand gestures and the indication of the countries where they have a certain meaning and that of others in which that meaning changes. There are also anecdotes of blatant misunderstandings due to different conventions relating to different cultures).

Adam Kendon, *Gesture*, in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 26, 1997, pp. 109–28 (accessible on JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2952517>. Accessed 24 Nov. 2022).

[https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/gesti_\(Enciclopedia-dell'Italiano\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/gesti_(Enciclopedia-dell'Italiano)/)

Webpage of a very appreciated online encyclopedia. Entry "gesti" (gestures), with a series of indications for a possible bibliography (in Italian)

<https://sites.unimi.it/zucchi/NuoviFile/MitiLingueDeiSegni17.pdf>

Sandro Zucchi, Università degli Studi di Milano, *Lingue dei segni e lingue parlate*, [Sign Languages and Spoken Languages] 2016-2017: comparison between Italian Sign Language (LIS) and American Sign Language (ASL). The text reports the conclusions of an experiment which demonstrates that sign languages "do not follow the grammar of spoken languages in a simplified way" (in Italian).

<https://www.scienceofpeople.com/hand-gestures/>

60 hand gestures, shown with videos, and a huge set of useful information on the use of gestures. Page well done, with indication of some interesting “Science Facts About Hand Gestures”. A sort of clickable "glossary", on the left of the screen, leads to the gesture that illustrates the concept expressed. It also contains a useful



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

warning: “**Be careful cross-culturally.** Not all hand gestures are created equal! Here is a fun video on the meaning of hand gestures around the world”, with a very short video that illustrates some relevant and different interpretations of the same gesture:
<https://youtu.be/-J1pXCFE-ok>

<https://youtu.be/qCo3wSGYRbQ>

Another example of possible misunderstandings in the interpretation of gestures

<https://padova.unicusano.it/studiare-a-padova/espressioni-facciali/>

Unicusano: facial expressions and their meaning (website in Italian)

<https://www.igorvitale.org/comunicazione-non-verbale-linterpretazione-dei-gesti/>

Website of the psychologist Igor Vitale. Classification of gestures into various types, with some mention of the studies from which the theories enunciated originate (website in Italian).

<http://center-for-nonverbal-studies.org/htdocs/1501.html>

Center for Nonverbal Studies, directed by David B. Givens, Ph.D., Director (509-939-7494; givens@center-for-nonverbal-studies.org) and John White, Ph.D., European Director (01-884-2296; john.white@dcu.ie). It also contains an interesting link to a Nonverbal Dictionary, with a series of terms relating to everything concerning non-verbal communication from various points of view (neurological, psychological, linguistic, etc.).

<https://corsi-di-italiano.babilonia.it/gesti-italiani/>

List of “Italian gestures”. Website in Italian. It can be useful as a starting point for lessons on gesture language.

<https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/979/docs/conference2016/11carnemolla/i-lezione-gesti-italiani.pdf>

Well done web pages, with a series of photos and drawings that clearly illustrate different Italian gestures and a final part on gestures typical of other countries (in Italian).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQquNGJMXe8>

Italian gestures. Videos by Alma Editions. Scene with a “dialogue” between two people: made up of hand gestures, body movements and facial expressions only. The scene is shown without subtitles first, and then the same scene is played back with subtitles (in Italian).

<https://psycatgames.com/it/magazine/party-games/charades/>

Team online game: guess the word written on a piece of paper, using only gestures.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

You can also play online, choosing the degree of difficulty and the medium to play with. Every minute the word to guess changes. Here the link with the rules:

<https://psycatgames.com/it/app/charades/> (website in Italian).

https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/le-lingue-dei-segni-nel-mondo_%28XXI-Secolo%29/

Webpage of a very appreciated online encyclopedia (in Italian. Entry: "Le lingue dei segni nel mondo" (*Sign Languages in the World*).

<https://www.ethnologue.com/>

List of languages of the World: A) Verbal communication: spoken and written languages; spoken languages. B) Non verbal communication: sign languages. Sorted by name, language code, language family, region.

<https://www.ethnologue.com/subgroups/deaf-community-sign-language>

Deaf community sign language in the world, subdivided into 157 languages and 129 communities (in English)

<https://www.linguisticamente.org/dalle-lingue-vocali-alle-lingue-dei-segni-e-ritorno-tramiti-e-realta/>

From Vocal Languages to Sign Languages and Back: Between Myths and Reality, published 9/23/2020 (in Italian).

<https://bodylanguageproject.com/>

Very interesting project with several useful resources, included a free Ebook and a web [Body Language Dictionary](#)

Some freely downloadable games used to teach English with miming:

<https://www.teach-this.com/images/games/what-am-i-doing.pdf>

<https://www.teach-this.com/images/resources/how-have-you-been.pdf>

<https://www.teach-this.com/images/games/back-to-the-board.pdf>

<https://www.teach-this.com/images/games/charades.pdf>

<https://www.teach-this.com/images/games/classic-charades.pdf>

<https://www.teach-this.com/images/games/emphasize.pdf>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.