

# Language and Gesture

## Lecture 6

---

*Sherman Wilcox — Beijing, China*

# What is the relation between gesture and language?

---



# Roman Oratory

---

“By altering the speed with which a gesture was made and its range of motion, the same gesture could have multiple meanings or purposes ...



Quintilian

... this strategy of modulating the speed of gesture in order to express slightly different meanings was used to give versatility of denotation to several basic gestures.”



The hand thrown out gently  
promises and declares assent;  
moved more quickly, it is a  
gesture of exhortation or  
sometimes of praise.





# British Elocution

---

- ❖ Thomas Sheridan (1719-1788), *Lectures on Elocution. Lecture VI: Tones.*

“Words are, by compact, the marks or symbols of our ideas; and this is the utmost extent of their power. Did nothing pass in the mind of man, but ideas; were he a different kind of being from what he is; were he like the Houynhms of Swift, always directed by cool, invariable, and as I may say instinctive reason; to make known the ideas of such a mind, and its internal operations, would not be beyond the power of words only.

Thomas Sheridan (1719-1788), *Lectures on Elocution. Lecture VI: Tones.*



But as there are other things which pass in the mind of man, beside ideas; as he is not wholly made up of intellect, but on the contrary, the passions, and the fancy, compose great part of his complicated frame; as the operations of these are attended with an infinite variety of emotions in the mind, ... it is clear, that unless there be means found, of manifesting those emotions, all that passes in the mind of one man can not be communicated to another."



Every one will at once acknowledge that the terms anger, fear, love, hatred, pity, grief, will not excite in him the sensations of those passions, and make him angry or afraid, compassionate or grieved; nor, should a man declare himself to be under the influence of any of those passions, in the most explicit and strong words the language can afford, would he in the least affect us ... if he used no other signs but words.



If any one should say in the same tone of voice that he uses in delivering indifferent propositions from a cool understanding, *'Sure never any mortal was so overwhelmed with grief as I am at this present'* or *'My rage is rouzed to a pitch of frenzy, I cannot command it: Avoid me, be gone this moment, or I shall tear you to pieces'*; no one would feel any pity for the distress of the former, or any fear from the threats of the latter. We should either believe that he jested, or if he would be thought serious, we should be moved to laughter at his absurdity.



And why is this? But because he makes use of words only, as the signs of emotions, which it is impossible they can represent; and omits the use of the true signs of the passions, which are, **tones, looks, and gestures.**”



# Cartesian Roots

---



# René Descartes

---

- ❖ “I believe that this power of imagining that is in me, insofar as it differs from the power of understanding, is not a necessary element of my essence, that is, of the essence of my mind; for although I might lack this power, nonetheless I would undoubtedly remain the same person I am now. Thus it seems that the power of imagining depends upon something different from me.”



# René Descartes

---

- ❖ “Although perhaps ... I have a body that is very closely joined to me, nevertheless, because on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself — insofar as I am a thing that thinks and not an extended thing — and because on the other hand I have a distinct idea of a body — insofar as it is merely an extended thing, and not a thing that thinks — it is therefore certain that I am truly distinct from my body, and that I can exist without it.”



# Mind/Body Dualism

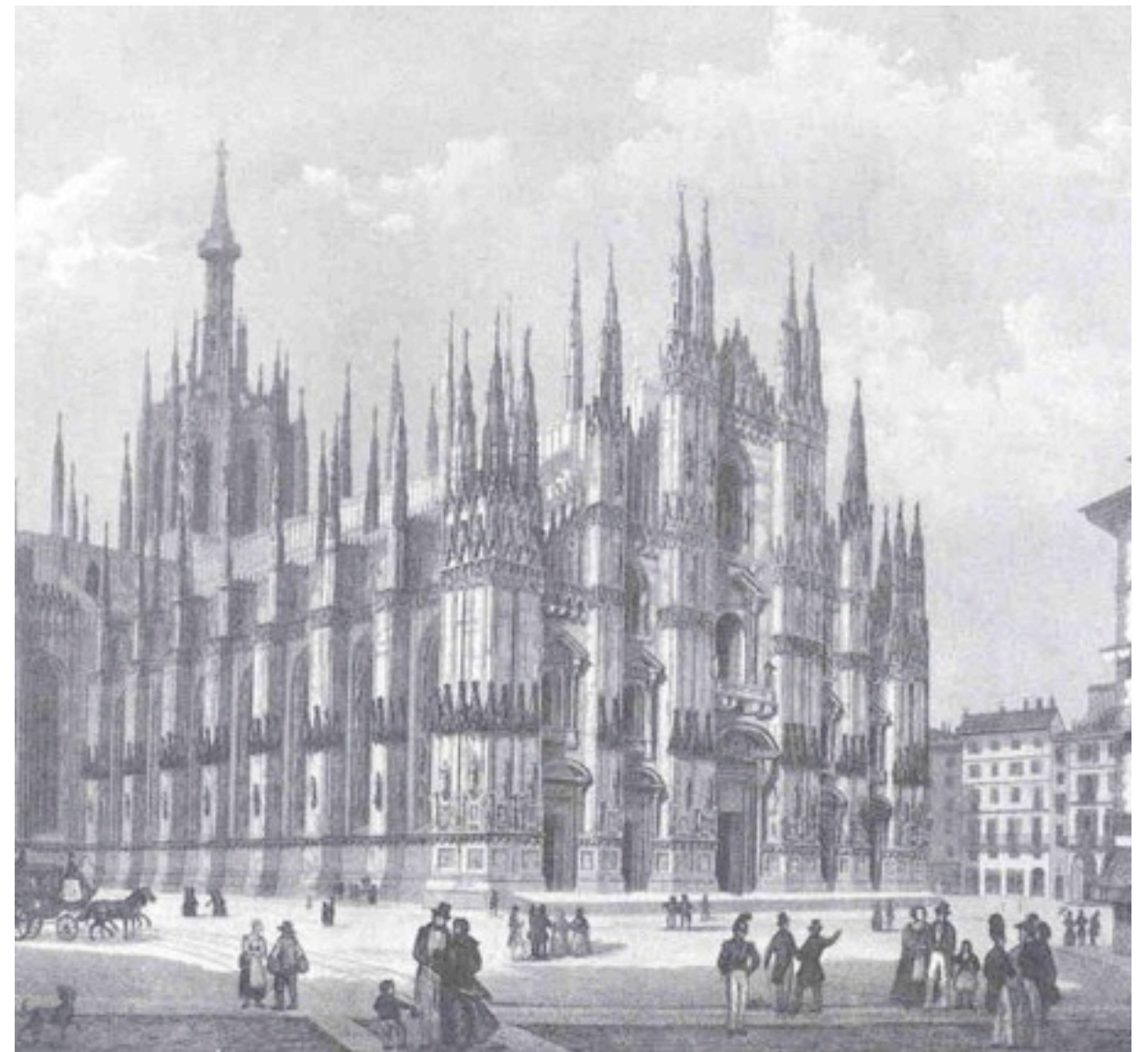
---

“I am truly distinct from my body”



# 1880 Milan Conference

The advantages of articulation training [speech] ... are that it restores the deaf to society, allows moral and intellectual development, and proves useful in employment.





Moreover, it permits communication with the illiterate, facilitates the acquisition and use of ideas, is better for the lungs, has more precision than signs, makes the pupil the equal of his hearing counterpart, allows spontaneous, rapid, sure, and complete expression of thought, and humanizes the user.



Gesture is not the true language of man which suits the dignity of his nature. Gesture, instead of addressing the mind, addresses the imagination and the senses.

Moreover, it is not and never will be the language of society. Thus, for us it is an absolute necessity to prohibit that language and to replace it with living speech, the only instrument of human thought.





Oral speech is the sole power that can rekindle the light God breathed into man when, giving him a soul in a corporeal body, he gave him also a means of understanding, of conceiving, and of expressing himself.

While, on the one hand, mimic signs are not sufficient to express the fullness of thought, on the other they enhance and glorify fantasy and all the faculties of the sense of imagination. The fantastic language of signs exalts the senses and foments the passions, whereas speech elevates the mind much more naturally, with calm and truth and avoids the danger of exaggerating the sentiment expressed and provoking harmful mental impressions.

Manually taught children are defiant and corruptible. This arises from the disadvantages of sign language. It is doubtful that sign can engender thought. It is concrete. It is not truly connected with feeling and thought. ... It lacks precision. ... Sign cannot convey number, gender, person, time, nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives.

It does not allow [the teacher] to raise the deaf-mute above his sensations. ... Since signs strike the senses materially they cannot elicit reasoning, reflection, generalization, and above all abstraction as powerfully as can speech.

Giulio Tarra



# Mind

language

speech

acquisition of ideas

expression of thought

restore to society, calm, prudence, truth  
(human-like)

precision (grammar)

reason, reflection, abstraction,  
generalization, conceptualization,  
rationality

soul, spirit

# Body

gesture

sign

concrete

cannot engender thought

defiant, corruptible, undignified  
(animal-like)

lacks grammar

sensual, material, glorifies imagination,  
foments passions

corporeal body, flesh

The manual language used by the deaf is an ideographic language ... it is more pictorial, less symbolic ... Ideographic language systems, in comparison with verbal systems, lack precision, subtlety, and flexibility. It is likely that Man cannot achieve his ultimate potential through an Ideographic language. ... The manual sign language must be viewed as inferior to the verbal as a language.

Helmer Myklebust (1957)





# Anthropology & Linguistics

---

- ❖ “We English are perhaps poorer in the gesture language than any other people in the world. We use a form of words to denote what a gesture or tone would express.”
- ❖ Accounts of people halfway between “the mythic dumb [i.e., deaf] nations and ourselves and having a speech so imperfect that even if talking of ordinary matters they have to eke it out by gestures.” (E.B. Tylor 1865)



# Anthropology & Linguistics

---

- ❖ “The upper-class Victorian English regarded gesticulation as a ‘natural’ act and therefore as ‘rude’ [i.e., raw and unformed].”
- ❖ Gesture was regarded “as a feature of the savage stage in human evolution and indeed as the only expressive recourse of true savages.” (Hertzfeld, 1987)

# Anthropology & Linguistics

---

- ❖ Even the famous American anthropologist and linguist Benjamin Whorf proposed a dualistic mode of thinking in the Western mind characterized by either / or thinking: either a word, or, in the absence of adequate vocabulary, a gesture. (Whorf 1956, cited in Farnell 1995: 34)



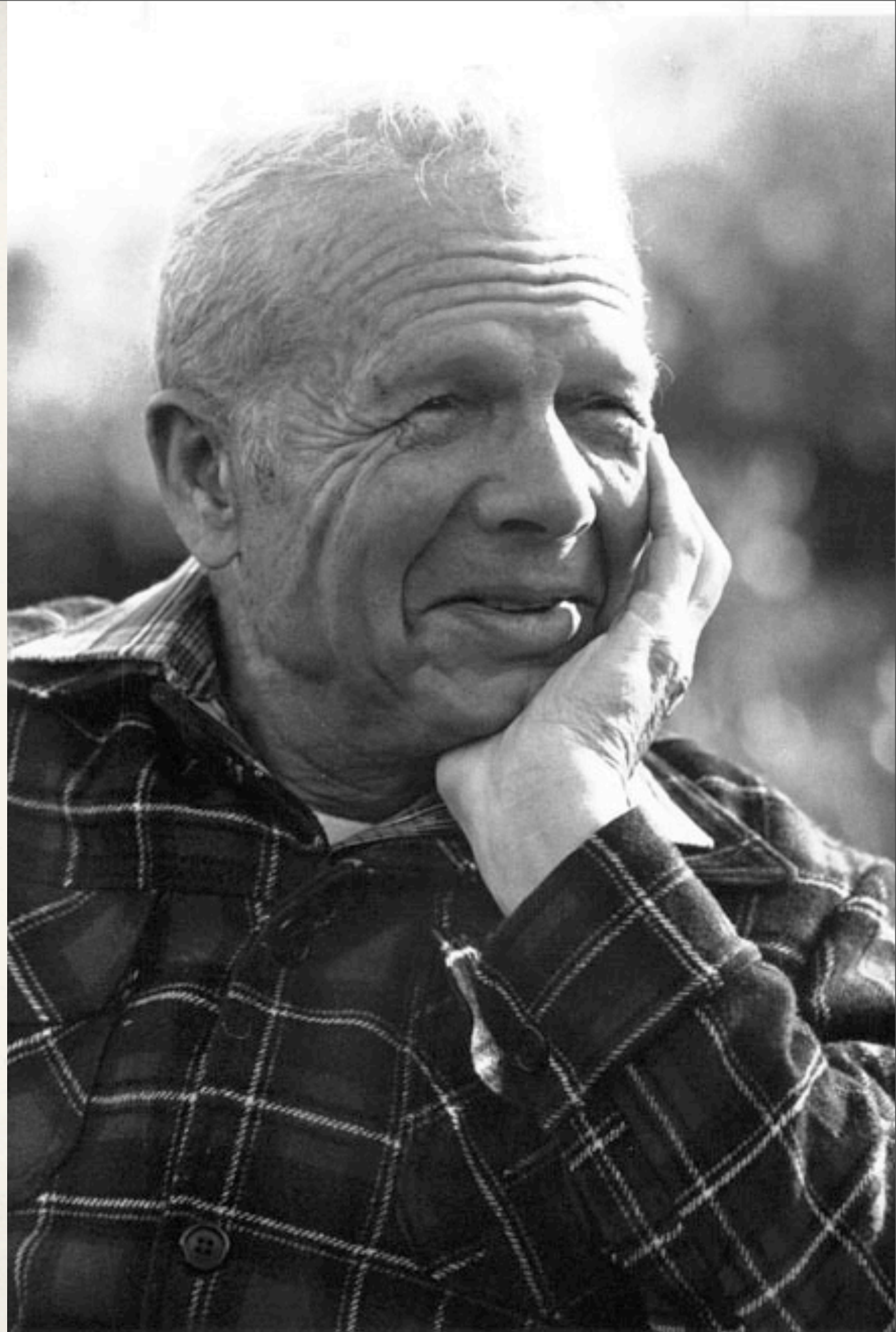
“In western societies ... spoken language generally tends to be associated with ‘real’ knowledge, where body languages are not often, if ever, associated with ‘real’ knowledge. In the minds of many, there is an unfortunate equation between linguistic signs and thought and action signs and non-thought.” (D. Williams, 1980: 109)



# Linking Gesture and Language

---

“I don’t mind *what* she said,  
but I don’t like the *way* she  
said it.”





# Gesture and Language

---

- ❖ “But running through this fabric of organized sound there is a master thread that holds it all together and by its weavings up and down and in and out shows the design of the whole — the motifs from phrase and sentence to paragraph and discourse, the highlights and shadows, and the relevance of the speaker’s intent.” (Bolinger, 1986, p. 3)



# Gesture and Language

---

- ❖ The WHAT and the WAY:
- ❖ “Logical people like to view language as primarily the business of exchanging information. This view is reinforced by the importance we attach to writing: most of what we read is written to inform, either the mind or the imagination. But speech is different. It informs sometimes (as often inadvertently as by intent), but much of the time its aim is to cajole, persuade, entreat, excuse, cow, deceive, or merely to maintain contact — to let the hearer know that ‘channels are open.’
- ❖ Furthermore, even when we inform we are not above slipping in an extra message sub rosa: ‘the information I am giving you is important.’ The importance can be underscored by the words we choose ... or it can be underscored by the tone.”



# Gesture and Language

---

- ❖ Bolinger regarded intonation and gesture as two modes of expression that are inextricably linked psychologically, physically, and evolutionarily, noting that “the whole notion of a gestural complex that includes intonation becomes a mere reflection on man’s antiquity.” (Bolinger, 1986, p.197).

# Gesture and Language

---

- ✧ Bolinger assumed that “physical gesture has conventionalized grammatical uses that have not been hitherto appreciated.”



# Gesture and Language

---

- ❖ “How far has intonation come on the road to the arbitrary and conventional?”

# Gesture and Signed Languages

---

- ❖ How can we bridge the categorical distinction between signed languages and gesture?
- ❖ Is there a developmental story to be told?
- ❖ Non-linguistic gestures can enter the linguistic system of signed languages



# Constructed action

---

- ❖ The use of body parts for communicating the actions of an animate referent.
- ❖ Character-viewpoint gestures, demonstrations, depiction, and reported action.



Bader Studio



# Language *or* gesture

---

Semantics

Pragmatics

Separate Components

Semantics

Non-Existence

Semantics / Pragmatics

Non-differentiation

Semantics

Pragmatics

Gradation



Language

Gesture

Separate Components

Language

Non-Existence

No gesture, only language

Language/Gesture

Non-differentiation

Signs are merely gestures

Language

Gesture

Gradation

Articulatory gestures

# Constructed action as grammatical schema

