

Commentary

Human Actions as Primary Bearers of Meaning

[I]f we understand dance, with Best and McFee, as a type of formalised intentional human action or activity, we can also attribute meaning to it—since intentional action, like language, is a primary bearer of meaning (David Carr, p. 70).

I wonder how often specialists (the so-called 'experts') in a field of study read what other authorities write, sharing my wish that a single statement such as that cited above appeared without additional qualification?

I could say 'yes' to Carr's statement quoted above and to the assertion following the quote, i.e. "[S]miles, shrugs, hugs, handshakes, caresses, waves, gestures of insult and so on nevertheless all have meaning within systems of convention—which...nevertheless clearly have a life of their own" (p. 70), but there is a problem: what Carr actually writes is this:

[I]f we understand dance, with Best and McFee, as a type of formalised intentional human action or activity, we can also attribute meaning to it—since intentional action, like language, is a primary bearer of meaning *At a primitive level*, smiles, shrugs, hugs, handshakes, caresses, waves, gestures of insult and so on all have meaning within systems of convention—which *(even if we should argue that they are parasitic upon linguistic meaning)* nevertheless clearly have a life of their own (Carr, p. 70—italics added).

Why are the words, "a primitive level," used? Why argue that smiles, shrugs, handshakes—or any human actions—are *parasitic upon* linguistic meaning?

One can agree when Carr says, "There is more to a handshake than stands to be expressed in the word 'hello' (p. 70)," but I am suspicious when I then read his parenthetical statement: "(and different qualities of handshake 'speak' volumes concerning different personalities and attitudes)." Handshaking involves much more than "qualities" affecting personality and attitude.

Because I cannot assume that philosophers have read recent anthropological writings on the meanings of human actions, I want briefly to examine the ethnographic reasons why handshaking involves more than "qualities." I also want to point out how handshaking is connected with, but not "parasitic upon" linguistic classificatory systems.

I. "Shaking Hands"

Let us consider the shaking of hands in England and among the Ibo of south-eastern Nigeria. In both languages there are apparently intertranslatable terms for the gesture (Ibo *ji aka*). Although *aka* is usually translated "hand" the boundaries of the parts concerned are, however, quite different. The English "hand" is bounded at the wrist. The Ibo *aka* is bounded just below the shoulder. The fingers and thumb are called *mkipisi aka*, in which *mkipisi* is "any thin somewhat elongated object" (cf. "a stick" *mkipisi osisi*—*osisi* "tree", "a match" *mkipisi okhu*—*okhu* fire"). The more open-gestured nature of the Ibo handshake compared with the English handshake is linked in part to

this difference of classification. For the English-speaker the extreme, "formal" possibility of presenting an only slightly mobile hand at the end of a relatively stiff arm becomes a choice reinforced by language. For the Ibo-speaker, even if that is a possible gesture it has no backing from language. On the contrary, for him, gripping the forearm and other variants of the gesture are still covered by the concept of shaking the *aka*, and are, as it were allomorphs of the common gestural morpheme. For the English-speaker such arm-grips are gesturally (that is, not merely linguistically) separate from shaking hands—they are gestures of a different "meaning".

We do not resort to any linguistic determinism if we argue that the gestural classification rests to a certain degree on the labelling of bodily parts. The possibility of a different classification of greetings exists for the English speaker because of the particular placing of a conceptual boundary, which does not exist in Ibo (Ardener 1982: 4).

Ardener later asserts: "It is quite clear then that the *aka* is not a "mere" taxonomic label" (1982: 6), subsequently adding,

It seems that *aka* is not a "mere" word in some nineteenth century lexicographical sense. It is attached to the upper limb, but it is a mnemonic for conceptualizations which are not conventionally linguistic or psychological, and which are actualized almost unconsciously as far as the individual is concerned. This is undoubtedly part of the distinction known by the terms "signifier" and "signified" (Saussure 1916). Nevertheless, such a "signified" is too complex for the traditional "linguistic sign" to encompass (Ardener 1982: 7).

Indeed, it is the complexity of such 'signifieds' out of which a semasiological approach to the study of human movement with its central concept of the *action sign* emerged (see Williams 1982).

Furthermore, as the movement-writing examples in Fig. 1 (p. 95) illustrate, the Ibo grasps the lower arm rather than the "hand" as defined by an English-speaker's taxonomy. In the Assiniboine-Sioux example (Fig. 1), we see that the emphasis on "hand" involves mainly the fingers, and there is no "shaking" involved. Only the Euro-American example illustrates a palm-to-palm clasping of hands with subsequent "shaking" up and down. Farnell's work is illuminating.

Native American "Handshaking"

Prior to the early 1800s, the offering of a hand to shake was equally strange as a form of greeting on the Plains, as illustrated by the following report about the introduction of Nakesinia (Red Calf) a Crow chief, to French fur trader La Rocque:

When we offered to shake hands with this great man, he did not understand the intention, and stood motionless until he was informed that shaking hands was the sign of friendship among white men: then he stretched forth both his hands to receive ours. (McKensie 1804-1806, quoted in Wood and Thiessen 1985: 245).

The shaking of hands has long since been adopted as a form of greeting between both strangers and acquaintances. . . .

There is, however, a distinct quality of handshake among Assiniboine and Sioux women that is a relaxed gentle touch of the fingers only, not the whole hand. This serves to transmit important information about ethnic identity for the participants. The gentle touch, not a shake, confirms that the person engaged in the act is Indian (if this is not obvious from appearance) and if not, then at least it is someone who is famil-

iar with Indian ways. For Euro-Americans, this lack of pressure in the hand and contact of mostly fingers, rather than whole palm, seems rather cool and distant. They expect this action to contain an expression of emotion: for them the firmer the grip and the wider the smile, the greater the investment of "friendliness," a quality deemed essential to successful social interaction (Farnell 1995: 286-287).

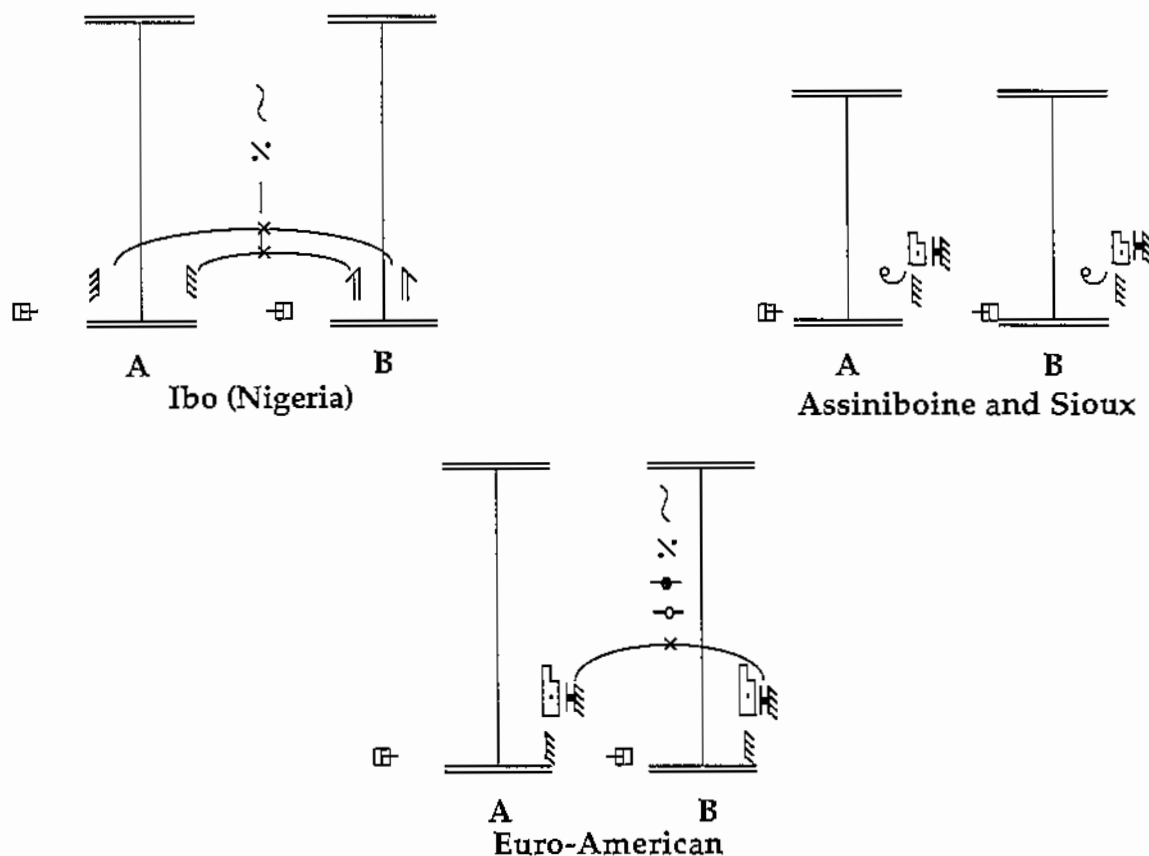


Figure 1. Three distinct action signs glossed as "a handshake"
(From Farnell 1995: 288).

Handshaking was adopted by native Americans fairly recently. Not unexpectedly, the act has many subtle variations. In (Fig. 1) I have reproduced Farnell's Figure 7.22 (1995: 288) in order to emphasize the point that word glosses such as 'handshake' do not provide accurate indices into the intricacies of the action signs involved. Indeed, "It becomes clear how, in these kinds of cross-cultural comparisons of action signs, word glosses such as "handshake" often [conceal] distinct action signs and their meanings in unfortunate ways" (Farnell 1995: 287).

Handshakes ... belong to an area of human social life that is commonly taken to be the most observable, the kind of behavior that can be relatively objectively described. As Ardener ... reminds us, however, action and thought even in this apparently simple zone are inextricably linked ... In both Nakota and English, as with Ibo and English, there are apparently intertranslatable terms for the gesture of shaking hands, but they cannot be said to refer to *the same* action sign across cultures [see Fig. 1]. For the Native American woman offering relaxed fingers, a hearty grip is a gesture with a different

meaning, a gesture that is not only a greeting but also an indicator of ethnic identity and ethnic awareness. To paraphrase Ardener, the instance may appear to be socially trivial, but the relationships between Native Americans and non-Indians have no more characteristic a framework than this (Farnell 1995: 289—italics added).

I have so far drawn attention to an important theoretical connection in human movement studies: fully to understand human bodily movement, one must comprehend the nature of human classification in essential ways. In particular, movement analysts must be aware of the power and influence of differing taxonomies of the body.

This claim naturally leads to the notion of translation, about which Chapman says:

It will be clear that the possibility for misjudgement and misinterpretation of the kind that I have described is very great in "non-verbal" matters. Character, emotional states, and changes of mood, are judged and expressed according to a great diversity of non-verbal "semantic" phenomena, including bodily posture, gesture, stress or rapidity of pitch in speech, frequency or rapidity of movement of the body, avoidance or seeking of bodily contact, and so on. All these things are semantically loaded, rule governed, and category based, and vary greatly from culture to culture. *There is not, however, any serious popular conception that such things require "translation" from one culture to another. Most people, when faced with an unintelligible foreign language, will recognize the need for "translation"; non-verbal "language" gestures, and generally semantic use of the body, of the person, or of groups of people, are not usually granted the same status as language in this respect. Translation will not be thought necessary* (Chapman 1982: 133-34—italics supplied).

Chapman's observations are true regardless of whether or not Carr believes that "Some meaningful actions and activities, such as waves and handshakes, are simple ..." (see p. 71).

II. "Body Language"

Before discussing 'body language' in this context, I have a confession to make: I do not understand this passage in Carr's essay (p. 70):

It is important, by the way, to distinguish what is at issue here from those unintentional physical cues (causally correlated with such largely sub-rational responses as the submissive behaviour of subordinate to dominant baboons) generally known as 'body language'. The present point is that intentional action and activity are in their own right prime modes of communication in which human beings deliberately engage because they are often as, if not more, effective than linguistic communication. Moreover, it is crucial to grasp that 'intentional action' does not here mean 'accompanied by an intention' and that although intentional actions are rightly described as performed for a reason, reasons are not lodged in actions as a pilot in a ship. Human actions are meaningful in virtue of being performed in accordance with systems of publicly recognisable convention, and they can be so in the absence of any 'inner' rehearsal of thoughts or propositions

First, is there a contradiction here? If it is true that we can speak of "intentional action and activity" in a normal, common-sense way, how are we then supposed to "grasp that 'intentional action' does *not* mean

'accompanied by an intention'?" Does Carr mean *conscious* intentions, or what? Moreover, when he says, "although intentional actions are rightly described as performed for a reason, reasons are not lodged in actions as a pilot in a ship." No, reasons aren't lodged in actions in that way, but neither are they lodged in words and sentences as are pilots in ships.

And one more point: spoken words and sentences are meaningful in virtue of being performed in accordance with systems of publicly recognizable conventions called 'languages', and they can, like human actions, be meaningful in the absence of any 'inner' rehearsal of thoughts or propositions. So, what is Carr's point?

Second, perplexity *again* turns around the wish that single statements appeared without unjustified embellishments. For example, I have no problem with Carr's assertion that "It is important ... to distinguish what is at issue here from those unintentional physical cues ... generally known as 'body language'," although I must point out that among anthropologists of human movement, 'body language' is *not* widely known as a set of "unintentional physical cues" if that means sneezes, coughs, hiccups, bodily movements caused by breathing and such. But, here is the embellishment: such cues are "causally correlated with such largely sub-rational responses as the submissive behaviour of subordinate to dominant baboons."

Why bring baboons into a discussion of human intentional actions?

Third, how is the word, 'causal' being used in this instance? Carr doesn't say, but for those of us who have fairly lucid notions about causality and the action sign (see Varela 1993 and 1995), the notion of causality cannot be taken for granted. If it is the case that "intentional action and activity are in their own right prime modes of communication in which human beings deliberately engage because they are often as, if not more, effective than linguistic communication," then the submission behavior of baboons (or any other species) is irrelevant because human intentional actions are not the same as the "largely sub-rational behaviour of ... baboons," nor are we given any reason for offering implicit correlations between the two. And that isn't all.

Julius Fast's book entitled *Body Language* (1970) sold more than two and a half million copies, but, like many popularizations, it was (and still is) responsible for several dubious preconceptions about human movement study. Sixteen years after the book was published Randall Harrison remarked, "[M]any serious scholars consider Fast's book superficial—and even misleading ... it suggests immediately that there should be a dictionary of movements, just as we have dictionaries of words" (1986: 79). Today, the belief that there is a still-to-be-compiled-and-written universal dictionary of movements is kept alive, I think, by a misplaced trust in unexamined notions about the universality of movement. For example,

I thought I could always rely on hand gestures and signs when the going got rough. . . . But I quickly learned that they never worked as well as I had hoped. None of my hosts knew my sign language. One time when I pointed to my chest with my forefinger to indicate 'me,' I was shown to the bathroom because to the Japanese that same gesture means 'I want a bath.' The Japanese point their fingers to their noses to mean 'me' (Simmons 1983: 107, cited in Williams 1991: 196).

Simmons's trust was rooted in the naïve observation that all human beings move, therefore (it should follow even if it doesn't) movements *mean* the same thing across cultures.

'Body language' has become what I believe Wittgenstein called "port-manteau" words. For David Carr, 'body language' means "unintentional physical cues." For Simmons (an American teacher of English), it means a personalized "sign language" used in everyday situations. I have heard the words used as if they referred solely to organized animal behaviors. There are probably hundreds of interpretations and definitions, but for me (and for want of a better phrase), the phrase 'body language' provides an available alternative for "non-verbal communication,"¹ or any locution using the word 'nonverbal'. I will not, however, belabor the point farther.

Semasiology postulates ten primary features of the concept 'body language' for use by movement analysts.² Numbers five and six read thus:

5. Body language, as conceived by semasiologists, is 'species-specific' to human beings. Indeed, that is why the term 'semasiology' is used to distinguish this approach from more general semiotic approaches—because of the irrevocable ties that are believed to hold between body languages and the neurological capacities (including all of the language-using and meaning-making faculties) of the human mind. Other creatures have the capacity to move, certainly, and they can monitor their movements on a restricted level, but humans possess the capacity to act, to monitor their movements according to preconceived notions of behaving and what it means to 'behave'. Human beings have conceptions of acting, thus it is a serious error to reduce the notion of body language in the human social context to meaningless physical movements and leave it at that.

6. The most important single feature characterizing human body languages as against the organized, instinctual movement behaviors of other sensate animal or marine life is its infinite productivity and creativity. Human beings are unrestricted in what they can act upon and what they can move, act, or dance about, although there are certain intransitive structures of local Euclidean space, degrees of freedom of the jointing parts of the body and locally experienced time which impose constraints on a structural level.

As Harré and Secord rightly point out, if human actions are reduced to gross physical movements set in a physiological or biological context, the significance of the action as part of human social life is lost (1972: 38). Best puts the matter succinctly: "one cannot specify an action, as opposed to a purely physical movement, without taking into account what the agent intended,

¹ Semasiologists consistently use the phrase "non-vocal" instead of "non-verbal."

² The complete list can be found in Williams (1991: 186-190). Unfortunately, it is too long to include in its entirety here.

that is, there are reasons for, and purposes to, actions (Best 1974: 193). Speaking of Best, one of the major reasons that he has endeared himself to anthropologists of human movement at any rate is his emphasis on *context*: "most of what we may want to know about a person's intentional action cannot be understood by a narrow concentration upon his [or her] physical movement but by ... standing back from it and seeing it in context" (1978: 78).

The foregoing brief discussion about body language should clarify why I am puzzled by Carr's observations about human actions. On the one hand, he seems to affirm non-Behavioristic, non-empiricist conceptions of human action. On the other, he embroiders his statements with parenthetical remarks using words (e.g. "primitive level," "parasitic upon linguistic meaning," "submissive behaviour," "baboons," and "intentional actions not meant to be accompanied by intentions") that seem to subvert his principal thoughts.

III. "Language"

Human actions are primary bearers of meaning because meaningful actions are embedded in human relationships. Human actions "signify" because they are embodied in persons who are located in time/space.

A person's sense of self, the particular knowledge of who "I" am, within a general cultural framework, is re-created from moment to moment in all the signifying acts of all the relations in all the events that make up a person's life. There are moments in relationships that are especially performative in this respect, moments of intense creation or realization of self.... (Urciuoli 1995: 202).

Human beings enact their selves to each other in many ways, but *sound and movement (both primary mediums of expression)* are related in specific ways:

The property that [conventional] language shares with all sign systems is its indexical nature; its maintenance and creation of social connections, anchored in experience and the sense of the real. Linguistic indexes may be grammaticalized or lexicalized as shifters—devices that locate actions in time and space: personal pronouns, verb tenses, demonstratives, and time and space adverbs. These are deictic in that they point outward from the actor's location. The structure of action fans out from the center, the locus of *I* and *you*, to delineate where and when everything happens relative to the central actors: *he* and *she* versus *I* and *you*, *there* versus *here*, *then* versus *now*, *present* versus *non-present* (past or future). This is the structure of *parole* in the language, the structure of each situation of speaking and the key to the ongoing evolution of linguistic categories. ... Discourse by its very nature is socially embodied. ... In short, indexes make the social person. ... The indexical creation of the social person (and the terms of action) is the performative nature of action. ... Performativity may be thought of as a process that sometimes surfaces as an explicit formula (commands, promises, etc.) but is more often implicit. Any index can be performative, depending on the dynamics of the context (Urciuoli 1995: 189-90).

Performances, whether they are dances (Kaeppler 1995; Puri and Hart-Johnson 1995 and Friedland 1995), sign systems (Kendon 1995), fights (Macdonald 1995), rituals and ceremonials (Williams 1995), dramatic story-telling (Farnell 1995: 173-241) consist of human beings enacting their selves. In view of the

sophistication of these ethnographies, it will not do to “conceive dance as a kind of language of movement by analogy with music construed as a language of sound” (Carr, pp. 59-60). There is no need to construct analogies of movement with music, as a linguistic analogy to structured systems of movement is sufficient. We are also not obliged to conceive of ‘dance’ as some kind of “language of movement” (see Durr 1981 and Farnell 1994).

In any case, we look upon dances, sign languages, the martial arts, rituals and ceremonies etc., as structured systems of human action(s). They are subsets of human body languages, as we define that term (pp. 97-8). Each ethnographic example of any system has its own semantics and syntax compatible with the socio-linguistic context in which it belongs.

Regrettably, however, we do not possess a clear interdisciplinary conception of ‘language’ with regard to the medium of movement. I contend that if we had as clear a conception of ‘language’ and the medium of movement as the conception we have with regard to language and the medium of sound, we would not have most of the problems to which I’ve drawn attention.

Barring congenital defects, disease or unusual accidents, human beings talk and they move. They most often talk and move simultaneously. As human beings, they possess the nature, powers and capacities to do both at once, or they can move without talking (which is what dancers usually do) and they can talk without moving. In any combination both acts emanate from human *persons*. That’s to say from linguistically capable agents who utilize both expressive mediums—speech and movement—to communicate (Williams 1998: 90-91).

As the architect of semasiology, I see human movements as ‘action-signs’: as the intersubjective construction of significant actions into ‘systems’ belonging to differing cultural contexts. Human actions are thus conceived to exist in larger sociocultural programs of meaning. There has to be what Urciouli has called “a mediating frame” that informs human relations and actions—a theory of culture, if you will, that accounts for the sociolinguistic context within which human actors operate—in which *they* find their cultural practices and relationships meaningful. Otherwise, we can simply see the study of human action systems as being about physical movement, *sans* language, *sans* culture-specific semantics, *sans* ‘art’ and ‘aesthetics’—*sans* anything meaningful in a human sense.

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