

Natural conventions: Gestural diversity and its limits

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Anthropologists, linguists, psychologists, and other scholars of human communication often align with one of two poles: the universalist position that communicative forms and structures are rooted in our species-typical brains and bodies and are thus broadly similar everywhere; or the relativist position that communication is a product of culture and thus varies prismatically from one group to the next. In the case of gesture, neither position is tenable—something the linguist Roman Jakobson noted almost fifty years ago. He alluded instead to a middle ground in which gestures grow out of the “interrelation of naturalness and conventionality.” In this talk, I articulate this middle ground more fully, drawing on my own cross-cultural work in Papua New Guinea and Mexico, as well as on other recent findings. I argue that gestural phenomena such as head shakes and nods, pointing gestures, palm-up gestures, and spatial gestures can be fruitfully understood as “natural conventions.” As such, they exhibit bounded variation; they are not nearly as uniform as universalists might have assumed, but nor are they as variable as relativists could have imagined. I close by highlighting crucial gaps in our current understanding and by echoing Jakobson’s exhortation that gestural diversity and universals “demand a comprehensive and systematic examination.”