

# MOVING BODIES, ACTING SELVES

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■ **Abstract** This review describes a paradigmatic shift in anthropological studies of human movement, from an observationist view of behavior to a conception of body movement as dynamically embodied action. After outlining the scope of such study, historical and cultural reasons for the relative neglect of body movement in anthropological enquiry are examined critically and placed in the wider context of recent social and cultural theorizing about the body and the problem of dynamic embodiment. A historical overview situates earlier approaches, such as kinesics and proxemics, in relation to more recent developments in theory and method, such as those offered by semasiology and the concept of the "action sign." Overlapping interests with linguistic and cognitive anthropology are described. The emergence of a holistic "anthropology of human movement" has raised new research questions that require new resources. Theoretical insights have challenged researchers to devise new methods and to adopt or devise new technologies, such as videotape and an adequate transcription system. An example of the latter illustrates the analytic advantages of literacy in the medium.

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## INTRODUCTION

As human beings we talk and move, often simultaneously. We possess the nature, powers, and capacities to do both at once, or we can move without talking (as dancers do) or talk without moving. In any combination both acts emanate from human persons: that is, from linguistically capable agents who utilize both expressive mediums—speech and movement—to engage in numerous forms of intelligent activity (Williams 1998:90, Ingold 1993a).

This nondualistic approach to body movement informs current research in the “anthropology of human movement,” providing a focus for ethnographic enquiry that brings sociocultural, linguistic, visual, and cognitive anthropologies into dialogue with each other. Although many anthropologists are familiar with the approaches to understanding body movement and space that were pioneered by Birdwhistell’s kinesics (1970) and Hall’s proxemics (1959, 1966), less well-known are theoretical and methodological developments that have built upon, or radically departed from, these earlier attempts.

Prior to discussing such developments, I examine broader theoretical developments in social and cultural theory with respect to the problem of embodiment. Although in the past two decades considerable interdisciplinary attention has been given to “talk about the body” as a cultural object, and to “talk of the body” as a phenomenological realm of subjective experience, “talk from the body” as dynamically embodied action in semantically rich spaces has received comparably little attention (Farnell 1994, Varela 1995a). It is the latter, together with an exploration of reasons for its relative neglect, that provides the focus here. This essay also aims to complement two recent reviews in this series, one on gesture (Kendon 1997) and one on dance (Reed 1998), by situating them in a wider theoretical and historical context.

## HUMAN MOVEMENT AS EMBODIED ACTION

“Do you notice my sleight of hand: while I’m telling you watch the left hand, watch the hurt left hand, look at its wound and what it says. I distract your attention away from the right – from the hand holding the knife? This hand is silent in a way even the wounded flesh is not. It is silent because it is whole, it has not even a mark that could stand for a voice or a word. But it speaks in actions, not in being acted upon.... This hand holding the knife is silent in action, loud in the voice it produces” (McLane 1996:112–13).

Thus speaks an investigator trying to bring into words the unspeakable experience of a victim of physical and sexual abuse, whose enforced silence has made her turn upon her own body in acts of self-mutilation. "Her rage and anguish move outward and strike at the boundaries enclosing her, and having no other place to go, rebound towards herself." (McLane 1996:112). This is one example of body movement as action, i.e. as the dynamically embodied signifying practice of a human agent. In this case, paradoxically, the action confirms the self-mutilator's agency through violence against herself, even as she attempts to find and create unity in her body, and therefore in her self. In such extraordinary ways can body movement provide human beings with a resource for action in a semi-otic modality that frequently elides spoken expression but is never separate from the nature, powers, and capacities of linguistically capable agents (Williams 1998, Ingold 1993a).

Human beings everywhere engage in complex structured systems of bodily action that are laden with social and cultural significance. They employ an embodied intentionality to act (Gibson 1979:218–19) that is embedded in inter-subjective practices. Some modes of action are acquired during childhood and, as a result of habit and skill, remain out of the focal awareness of their actors. Examples include discursive practices such as talking (vocal gestures), signing, and the hand and facial gestures that accompany speech in social interaction. There are also numerous mundane techniques (skills) such as ways of eating, dressing, walking, sitting, digging, planting, cleaning, cooking, bricklaying, and fishing, all of which vary according to cultural and local conventions [Mauss 1979 (1935)]. People also frequently learn and practice additional specialized bodily techniques according to their age, ethnicity, class, family tradition, gender, sexual orientation, talent, skill, circumstance, and choice. For example, craftsmanship involves highly skilled human subjects in intelligent activities that engage the material world, involving elaborate tool use and the shaping of things (see Ingold 1993b: 434). Equally skilled are choreographed "action sign systems," (Williams 1975) such as those found in sacred and secular rituals, ceremonies, sports, military action, fighting, martial arts, and the expressive complexities of myriad danced, theatrical, and other performance traditions.

Such dynamically embodied signifying acts generate an enormous variety of forms of embodied knowledge, systematized in various ways and to varying degrees, involving cultural convention as well as creative performativity (Farnell 1995c). In all cases, such *techniques du corps*—the "ways in which from society to society [people] know how to use their bodies" [Mauss 1979 (1935):97]—are everywhere constitutive of human subjectivity and intersubjective domains. Older dualistic divisions of such intelligent embodied activities into practical and expressive, instrumental and symbolic, technical and ritual, verbal and non-verbal, and the notion of "discursive and practical consciousness" (Giddens 1984) have proved unhelpful in understanding the range and complexity of human action (see Farnell 1995a:19, Ingold 1993b:437, Williams 1991:242).

In current anthropological practice, many investigators of human movement contribute to wider anthropological goals regarding the need to articulate more

dynamic views of “culture.” They proceed from the position that such dynamically embodied signifying acts (including spoken language) in symbolically rich spaces are the dialogical, intersubjective means by which persons, social institutions, and cultural knowledge are socially constructed, historically transmitted, and revised and so are constitutive of culture and self (Farnell & Graham 1998:411). Structured uses of sound other than speech (Feld 1991), as well as somato-sensory modes of knowledge such as touch, smell, taste, pain, and our kinesthetic sense (Howes 1991, Scarry 1985, Seremetakis 1994, Stoller 1989, Tausig 1993), complement vocal signs and action signs to complete the range of semiotic systems open to human processes of meaning-making and communication, but talk and action can probably be considered primary in the human domain. If, as Giddens pointed out 15 years ago (1984), the next major problem for social theory is how to connect saying with doing, current research in the anthropology of human movement would seem particularly well situated to make definitive contributions to its solution.

## DYNAMICALLY EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE AND ETHNOGRAPHY

Despite the ubiquitous presence of body movement in human lived experience, as an intimate part of one’s being, one’s language, and one’s ability to exist in complex material worlds within realms of social action, the detailed study of human movement constitutes a relatively minor tradition in anthropology. This paradox is itself worthy of anthropological attention. Why, in a discipline that defines itself by a holistic approach, do systematic analyses of dynamically embodied knowledge only rarely find their way into ethnographic representations, and thus into the academy? This seems especially odd given that anthropologists necessarily encounter, engage in, and frequently master new skills and embodied modes of expressive conduct during field research, although new modes of somatic knowledge can also be intellectually and emotionally threatening (cf Stoller & Oakes 1987).

Jackson (1989:135) provides important insights into this paradox in a confessional account of his own alienation from “bodily praxis.” He recalls his conversion experience from participation characterized as “stand[ing] aside from the action, tak[ing] up a point of view and ask[ing] endless questions” to participation characterized by the learning of everyday household skills and dancing. He admits that this was an important precursor to many of his most valued insights into Kuranko social life. One is led to suspect that Jackson’s prior alienation may be a common experience for anthropologists socialized into the mores of Western academia (cf Bourdieu 1977:2). From the perspective of an anthropology of human movement, we can say that Jackson discovered the value and necessity of paying equal and serious attention during fieldwork to learning visual-kinesthetic acts in addition to acts achieved with words (vocal gestures).

Ardener's (1989a) landmark paper on the analysis of events is helpful in understanding this omission. He reminds us that our awareness of particular events depends upon the "modes of registration and specification" available to us, i.e. on the means by which they are apperceived. If most anthropologists literally do not see body movement empirically (although they are not alone in this), or if when they do they conceive of it as behavior and not action, it is because they lack modes of registration or specification adequate to the task (Farnell 1994:935). Without suitable theoretical resources, which, after all, "determine where, in the multiplicity of natural phenomena, we should seek for...evidence" (Harré 1986: 83), many anthropologists have found it hard to imagine how forms of dynamically embodied action might constitute cultural knowledge worthy of investigation. A further difficulty, as Chapman has observed, stems from the fact that although we recognize a need for the translation of foreign spoken languages, action sign systems are not granted the same status: "[T]ranslation will not be thought necessary" (Chapman 1982:134).

Critical discussion of some of the cultural and historical reasons for this state of affairs will help to situate the import of recent theoretical and methodological developments in the study of human movement, explored below. The current challenge for anthropology is to develop modes of registration and specification that will facilitate the learning and analysis of action, allow records of visual-kinesthetic action—alongside records of speech—to become a normal part of fieldwork practice, and so lead to the presence of enacted forms of knowledge in ethnographic accounts (Farnell 1994:936). Significant strides have been made in this direction. The extent to which they will be taken up by the discipline remains to be seen.

## THE ABSENT BODY IN SOCIAL AND CULTURAL THEORY

Scholars suggest that the curiously disembodied view of human beings that until recently has permeated the social sciences is due to a longstanding bias against the body in that tradition of thought we call Western (i.e. European and European derived). This precluded social theorists from attending to physical being and bodily actions in their definitions of social action.

Barish (1981), Best (1974, 1978), Farnell (1994, 1995c), Harré (1986), Ingold (1993a,b), Streeck (1993), Turner (1984), and Varela (1995a) discuss the pervasive influence of the Platonic-Cartesian notion of person in this regard. With its now familiar dualisms of mind/body, mental/behavioral, reason/emotion, subjective/objective, inner/outer, and nonmaterial/material, Platonic-Cartesian metaphysics has produced discourses in which these oppositional dimensions get mapped onto each other. Generally speaking, the Western model of person provides a conception of mind as the internal, nonmaterial locus of rationality, thought, language, and knowledge. In opposition to this, the body is regarded as the mechanical, sensate, material locus of irrationality and feeling. After Darwin (1872), such physicality has most often been understood as natural rather than

cultural, a survival of our animal past perhaps. In Western academia, this bifurcation has led to a valorization of spoken and written signs as “real” knowledge, internal to the reasoning mind of a solipsistic individual, to the exclusion of other semiotic (i.e. meaning-making) practices, thereby bifurcating intelligent activities. This, in turn, has produced a radical disjunction between verbal and so-called nonverbal aspects of communication in our meta-linguistic discourse.

Although dictionary definitions of the term nonverbal refer to an absence of words, as a negative appellation it has become largely synonymous with the absence of language and mind. As such, the term provides a conceptual repository for all those qualities that traditionally reside on the less-valued side of the aforementioned oppositions. Alternatively, in an attempt to reverse the epistemological hierarchy that has excluded embodied knowledge, the body has become, for some, the last refuge from language and is romantically viewed as the last bastion of the natural, the unspoiled, the preconceptual, and the primitive, a retreat from the moral responsibility and complexity of the verbal condition (Farnell 1994: 937). Ironically perhaps, the postmodern, phenomenological valorization of the sensuous usually retains the dualistic terms of the Platonic legacy, abandoning what counts as rationality to intellectualists, rather than making a case for the rationality of feeling (see Best 1992; cf Grosz 1995:25–43, Nussbaum 1995: 53–78). Conversely, as Ardener (1989a) has suggested, for others, language has long figured as a refuge from materiality.

Turner (1984) suggests that the Platonic-Cartesian legacy has been bolstered by the Christian disdain for the flesh as a locus of corrupting appetite, sinful desire, and private irrationality (see also Bottomly 1979, Brown 1988, Bynum 1991, Onians 1954). Freund (1988) adds that the marked absence of the body in the social sciences also stems from a revolt against biological reductionism, which as feminist critiques have shown was not without its political uses as a means to justify sexist and racist assumptions about human nature (Birke 1986). Such a stance was also part of the effort to establish an autonomous social scientific discourse. Ironically, acceptance of the deeper philosophical assumption of mind/body dualism was shared with biological determinism: social science assigned mind priority over body and severed it from its embodied form, whereas biologism assigned priority to the organism (Freund 1988:839).

## NEW DISCOURSES ON “THE BODY”

For some time now, a number of social theorists have been working on “the problem of embodiment” and have sought to articulate ways of “bringing bodies back in” (Frank 1990; see also Csordas 1989, 1994a; Frank 1991; Featherstone et al 1991; Shilling 1993; Turner 1984, 1991; Varela 1994b, 1995a,b). This interest is part of a much wider explosion of academic literature on the body, much of which has been stimulated by the work of Foucault (e.g. 1973, 1977, 1978) and by feminist theory (e.g. Allen & Grosz 1987; Bordo 1993; Butler 1993; Grosz 1991, 1994, 1995; Jaggard & Bordo 1989; Martin 1987; Suleiman 1986; see also essays in Fehar et al 1989).

Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to review this broad, multidisciplinary work, the discussion by Turner (1994) provides an important anthropological critique that is relevant here. Turner suggests that the current salience of bodily related political movements and the surge of interest in the body in social, cultural, and psychological theorizing is associated with the appropriation of all aspects of bodiliness in the production of personal and social identity within the culture of contemporary late-capitalism. The embodied subject is “the object of seduction by advertising, interpellation by semiotically loaded commodities, torture by a broad spectrum of political regimes, bitter conflict over reproductive rights and health care, struggles for the reevaluation of alternate sexual identities, threats from new epidemic diseases, and the object of new technologies permitting the alteration of physical attributes hitherto accepted as naturally determined” (Turner 1994:27). Turner suggests that this emergence of the body as an academic focus in the context of late capitalism helps account for some of the major limitations and distortions of the nature of the body in current social and cultural theory. These include a severance of the body’s social roots, its dematerialization as a figment of discourse, and its reification as a transcendental individual, all of which promote a general tendency to “[substitute] the body conceived as a set of individual psychological or sensual responses and needs for the body as material process of social interaction” (Turner 1994:28).

Within anthropology, this multidisciplinary literature has stimulated renewed attention to the anthropology of the body, a long-standing if relatively minor anthropological tradition. Since the discipline’s inception, anthropological studies of the distanced bodies of non-Western others as cultural objects have often included attention to visual phenomena such as masking, costuming, body ornaments and decoration, tattooing, and scarification. This continues, but recently it has been supplemented by studies of bodies closer to anthropological selves (Burroughs & Ehrenreich 1993, Lock 1993, Mascia-Lees & Sharpe 1992, Schepers-Hughes & Lock 1987). In the theoretical shift from structure to process and practice, Bourdieu’s (1977) notions of “habitus” and “hexis” have been sensitizing in drawing widespread attention to the role of habitual bodily and spatial practices in social action: for example, ways of moving (stance, gait, posture), ways of making things, and practical taxonomies of sensory experience. This has been “good to think with” despite residual Cartesian and Durkheimian assumptions regarding human agency and social structure in Bourdieu’s practice theory (see Bourdieu 1977, Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, Farnell 1998, Varela & Harré 1996). Likewise, Foucault’s prominent and influential turn to a post-structuralist body, although theoretically problematic for similar reasons (see Turner 1994) has nevertheless stimulated new questions and opened up new potential sites for embodied research in anthropology. Schepers-Hughes & Lock (1987) and Lock (1993) provide reviews of the anthropological literature on the body, especially as it has emerged in the context of new developments in medical anthropology (see also Burroughs & Ehrenreich 1993, Csordas 1994b, Rapp & Ginsburg 1995, Strathern 1996, Synnott 1993, and references therein).

## THE ABSENT MOVING BODY IN SOCIAL AND CULTURAL THEORY

Although in this rapidly accumulating literature, the body is portrayed as a social and cultural entity rather than the purely biological or mechanistic object typical of behavioristic accounts, it nevertheless usually remains a static, more or less passive cultural object of disciplines and representations, separate from the mind. Varela (1994a, 1995a) suggests that a viable post-Cartesian theory of embodiment remains incomplete if it does not acknowledge the dynamic nature of human action and include accounts of persons enacting the body. This means including physical actions of all kinds as components of personal and social action; incorporating (literally) the agentic production of meaning through actions that may be out of awareness through habit and skill or may be highly deliberate choreographies.

The issue of dynamic embodiment is deeply related to the problem of the nature and location of human agency, a theoretical arena that can only be mentioned here, but one in which a Copernican revolution against Cartesianism has been underway for some time (Aronson et al 1995; Harré 1986, 1998; Harré & Maddon 1975; Shotter 1991, Varela 1994a, 1995a,b; Varela & Harré 1996; Warner 1990). The search to articulate post-Cartesian concepts of personhood is not new and remains active (see Harré & Gillett 1994). Solutions appear to reside in our willingness to abandon the dimensions of dualistic talk in order to recover the notion of person as a causally empowered (but not causally determined), dynamically embodied center of action who engages in multiple kinds of semiotic practices (Harré 1986; Varela 1994a, 1995a; Farnell 1998). This has been articulated in Harré's "causal powers theory," which locates human agency in the powers and capacities of embodied persons for all kinds of action, rather than in a scientifically implausible Cartesian nonmaterial mental substance or, in a reversal of that center of privilege, in the equally ambiguous subjectivist "bodily intentionality" of the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1962; Russow 1988, Varela 1995a,b). Wittgenstein's anti-Cartesian position that "it is our acting that lies at the bottom of our practices" (Wittgenstein 1977:204) is thereby scientifically grounded.

A causal powers reading of human agency manages to transcend Descartes's version of our mental lives without rejecting mind per se (as did behaviorism), and without resorting to subjectivism or an ontological monism that reduces subjectivity to physiology or genetics. It thus provides a new Western metaphysics of person, a scientifically grounded notion of dynamically embodied human agency from which an anthropology of human movement might proceed with some confidence.

### A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Where discussions of body movement have found a place in anthropological writings, interpretations have, of course, been influenced, if not determined by, the theories and explanatory paradigms of the time. This point is well illustrated in

Williams's ethnohistorical survey of writing in English on the subject of dance from the latter third of the nineteenth century up to the 1960s. She uncovers a fascinating array of explanations accounting for why people dance, couched in terms of emotional, psychologistic, biological, intellectualist, literary, religious, quasi-religious, and functional explanations (Williams 1991:19–117, Keali'inohomoku 1980).

In light of the aforementioned philosophical and religious legacy, it is not surprising to find that prior to the formal establishment of the discipline, the accounts of early explorers, missionaries, and nineteenth century amateur ethnologists are replete with expressions of curiosity and a fertile tension between desire and disgust over alien bodily practices, unfamiliar domestic activities, "excesses" of gesticulation, "exotic" rituals, and "wild" dancing. On the whole, the greater the observable variation from acceptable European norms of physical behavior, the more "primitive" a society was judged to be. This line of reasoning and distancing as "other" provided justification for widespread colonial efforts to "civilize the savages" through the radical control of bodily practices (i.e. clothing, hairstyles, eating habits, sexual liaisons, social manners, work ethic, and ritual activities) as well as political and economic practices. For example, in North America, the US Office of Indian Affairs book of regulations for 1904 listed participation in Native American religious rituals and dancing as a punishable offense because they "stirred the passions of the blood" and hindered progress toward "civilization" (i.e. assimilation) (cf Comaroff & Comaroff 1991).

In the discipline's formative period on both sides of the Atlantic, it was the evolutionist search for the origins of language that motivated interest in body movement. For example, the Victorian English anthropologist Tylor regarded sign languages and gesture as components of a universal "gesture language," more primitive than speech or writing, and he expected the elements to be universally recognizable (Tylor 1865). Tylor believed he was close to discovering the original sign-making faculty in humans that once led to the emergence of spoken language. Meanwhile, in the United States, Tylor's work provided theoretical support for Mallery's extensive collection of data on signing and gesture. Mallery compared Native American signing systems with deaf sign languages and provided accounts of the use of gesture in classical times, in Naples, and among contemporary actors [Mallery 1972 (1881)]. The first publications of the newly established Bureau of American Ethnology in Washington D.C. were entirely devoted to accounts of Mallery's research on the subject [1972 (1881), 1978a,b (1880a,b)]. On both sides of the Atlantic, however, this focus quickly disappeared once the evolutionary paradigm and the fascination with "origins" waned. Interest in tool use and gesture continued to play a significant role in accounts of the evolution of human intelligence, however (see Gibson & Ingold 1993).

In typical contrast to the universalist theories of gesture espoused by these evolutionists, Boas stressed the learned, culture-specific nature of body movement. He recognized that artistic form and cultural patterning were present not only in Native American dances, but also in the complex hand gestures and other body movements that accompanied song, oratory, and the performance of oral litera-

ture (Boas 1890, 1939, 1972; see also Kaeppeler 1978:33, Williams 1991:88–89). Despite this, Boas chose to exclude “gesture-language” from his influential introduction to the *Handbook of American Indian Languages* (1911). Aligning body movement with “musical means of communication,” he limited his consideration to “communication by groups of sounds produced by the articulating organs [of mouth and tongue]” (1911:10). Boas thus inadvertently set the pattern for the exclusion of body movement from future research in American linguistic anthropology. Subsequent research became focused on a rather narrow conception of spoken language structure (Farnell 1996a).

Boas’s student Sapir also recognized that manual gestures interplay constantly with speech in communicative situations, but the linguistic and social significance of what he referred to as an “elaborate and secret code” were left unexplored (Sapir 1949:556). Likewise, Whorf (1956) made programmatic suggestions about spatialized metaphors in speech and gesture when he noted that, as speakers of English, “we are more apt to make a grasping gesture when we speak of grasping an elusive idea, than when we speak of grasping a door knob” but the statement appears to have gone unnoticed. Consistent with the high status of American psychology at the time, interest in the psychological (mental) took precedence over the body, as witnessed by the rise of interest in culture and personality.

Other students of Boas’ contributed to a functionalist view of human movement systems. For example, Mead [1959 (1928)] regarded the dances of Samoan adolescents as a vehicle for psychological adjustment; for Benedict (1934), the function of the entire Kwakiutl Winter Ceremonial (a series of religious rites) was to rehabilitate the individual back into secular society. Boas’ daughter Franziska published a book called *The Function of Dance in Human Society* (1972), which contained an essay by her father on dance and music among Northwest Coast Indians, as well as essays on the function of dance in Haiti, Bali, and “primitive” African communities. Actual body movement is epiphenomenal in such descriptions, however, as ritual actions and dancing are described in terms of adaptive responses either to the social, the psychological, or the physical environment (Williams 1991:119). Similar descriptions appear in the work of many British functionalist anthropologists also [e.g. Firth 1965 (1936), Malinowski 1922, Radcliffe-Brown 1964 (1913)].

The unprecedented essay of French anthropologist Mauss [1979 (1935)] prefigured the interests of Benedict, Mead, and others in noting how each society imposes on the individual a rigorously determined use of the body during the training of a child’s bodily needs and activities. Mauss’ essay clearly illustrated how seemingly “natural” bodily activities were (Durkheimian) social facts that were simultaneously sociological, historical, and physio-psychological.

In the 1940s and 1950s, the potential importance to anthropologists of recording and analyzing body movements was demonstrated by the photographic analysis of Balinese character by Mead & Bateson (1942), by the contrastive analysis of the gestures of Italian and Southeastern European Jewish immigrants in New York by Efron (1942) by La Barre’s essay on the cultural basis of emotions and

gestures (1947), and by the cross-cultural comparison of “postural habits” by Hewes (1955).

In the 1960s, Goffman’s influential micro-sociological studies of social interaction included attention to the agentic management of bodily performances in the presentation of self. Goffman introduced the term *body idiom* to describe the socially constructed knowledge found in conventionalized vocabularies of gestures/postures and the corporeal rules important to understanding behavior in public, thereby prefiguring Williams’ “action sign systems” (1975) in some ways. However, Goffman did not systematically explore this notion, nor was he concerned with providing an explicit theory of the body in society (Goffman 1963, 1969; see Shilling 1993:74, 85-88).

The outstanding early pioneer in anthropological research on bodily communication was Birdwhistell (1970), who coined the term *kinesics* to describe his approach. Birdwhistell was inspired by what he viewed as Sapir’s anticipation of the interdependence of linguistic and kinesic research (Sapir 1949), and by attempts on the part of others to apply the methods of structural linguistics to other aspects of vocalization (“paralinguistics”) as well as the work of Bateson (1958) and Goffman (1963, 1969). He envisioned a discipline that would parallel linguistics but deal with the analysis of visible bodily motion. Using filmed data, he applied a linguistic model, attempting to identify movement units based on contrastive analysis in a manner similar to that established by structural linguists for establishing the phonemes and morphemes of a spoken language. Unfortunately, without the theoretical means to specify how bodily movements could be made finite for analytic purposes, and minus the concepts of “action” and “sign system” (Williams 1975), Birdwhistell’s analyses dissolved into analytical minutia from which he seemed unable to emerge.

Birdwhistell’s research, like Goffman’s, was limited to interaction contexts, usually in clinical settings, and he considered more formalized idioms such as dancing, drama, mime, and religious ritual to be beyond the interests of kinesics (1970:181). This was unfortunate, as it narrowed the scope of the potential field and separated kinesics from much that was of interest to mainstream anthropology.

Whereas kinesics focused on body motion, the proxemics of Hall (1959, 1966, 1968) drew attention to the role that space plays in human relations. Hall postulated that there are socially established zones of space surrounding individuals that are generally out of awareness but that influence, and may even determine, daily interactions (Hall 1959, 1966). Hall’s writings include many thought-provoking ethnographic observations about the uses of space in different contexts, including situations of cultural contact.

Kinesics and proxemics provided important sensitizing constructs in the 1960s and 1970s. They raised new questions and suggested a framework that could be developed by later investigators. Problems arose in the two approaches, however, from the separation of body motion and space. Kinesic motions of the body exist in a spatial vacuum whereas proxemic zones of space are empty of the dynamically embodied action that structures their meaning. It is dynamically embodied

action within structured spaces that we wish to account for. In retrospect we can see that this separation was possible because both approaches take an observationalist rather than an agentic perspective on action.

## ACTION SIGNS AND VOCAL SIGNS

Kendon (1982) suggests that the kinesics program envisaged by Birdwhistell might have been implemented had the interest of many people in linguistics not been redirected in the 1960s by Chomsky's generative linguistics. Concerned exclusively with the formal analysis of syntax and linguistic "competence," with the goal of uncovering a universal grammar in the human mind, the Chomskian agenda consigned actual acts of speaking to the "wastebasket of 'performance'" (Kendon 1982:53). Prior to this, Saussurian influenced structural linguistics focused primarily on *la langue* (language system) to the exclusion of *la parole* (speaking). Only when linguistic anthropology embraced Hymes's "ethnography of speaking" with its "breakthrough to performance," in explicit contrast to the Chomskian agenda, did attention turn to the performance of speech in social contexts.

This provided a theoretical climate for the 1980s and 1990s in which to add the embodiment of social actors to the notion of language-in-use. A number of linguistic anthropologists and conversation analysts recognized that the visual-kinaesthetic components of discourse, such as manual and facial gestures, postures, and gaze, are meaningful components of linguistic utterances and began to build on Goffman's earlier insights. This has produced detailed research into "deixis" (the spoken and gestural organization of space/time), indexicality (connections to the communicative context), performativity (language as action), and the analysis of conversation (e.g. Farnell 1995a; Goffman 1974; Goodwin 1986; Goodwin & Goodwin 1986, 1992; Haviland 1993; Heath 1986; Kendon 1980, 1983, 1992; Sherzer 1972, 1991; Streeck 1993, 1994; Tedlock 1983; Wiget 1987; for review of research on gesture see Kendon 1997).

Spatial orientation and spatial contexts have also received attention from discourse-centered linguistic anthropologists. Duranti (1992), for example, recognized the need to enlarge the notion of linguistic context to include Samoan body movement through locally conceptualized spaces (see also Duranti 1997: 321–28, Keating 1998). Hanks' (1990) detailed study of Mayan deixis draws attention to the corporeal field of spatial orientation, in which speech acts are embedded. Farnell (1995a) and Haviland (1993) illustrate how action signs within such corporeal fields are themselves dynamic components of deictic reference, inseparable from the symbolically rich, structured spatial contexts in which they are embedded (cf Levinson 1997). As Williams notes, "there is an irrevocable connection between human spatial points of reference and points of application for linguistic predicates" (1991:339).

Anthropological research into signed languages and the communities that employ them offer additional important challenges to the disembodied ideology

of traditional linguistics. For example, Monaghan (1998) explores the complexities of communication in the New Zealand deaf community in the wake of oppressive oralist methods of education (cf Baynton 1995 for parallel history of American Sign Language). Nakamura (1999) explores identity and deafness in Japan, while Senghas (1998) examines the recent emergence of a Nicaraguan sign language resulting from new educational opportunities that have brought deaf individuals into contact with each other (see also Kegl et al 1998). These contexts of rapid linguistic change have provided opportunities to study processes of pidginization and creolization in signed languages. Kendon (1988) documents the sign languages of Aboriginal women in central Australia that developed during periods of mourning, when speech is prohibited, whereas Farnell explores the complex integration of spoken Nakota and Plains Indian sign language in Assiniboine storytelling on the northern plains (Farnell 1995a,e).

Additional interest in dynamic uses of space and spatial orientation comes from cognitive anthropology. Levinson (1996) notes the extensive recent interest in the subject of space from (a) the cognitive sciences (which posit innate bases for spatial cognition), (b) cognitive linguistics (with assumed commonalities of human experience), and (c) neo-Whorfian findings that suggest far more cultural variation in spatial language and cognition than expected by the first two. He observes that, unfortunately, these debates remain unconnected to many other studies of space in anthropology because of the relative neglect of how people think and talk about spatial notions in everyday life (Levinson 1996:377). One would want to add that in addition to thinking and talking about spatial notions, people also move in and through space and manipulate objects, and they have conceptions about those actions (cf Lave 1990, Ingold 1993c). The illuminating study by Keller & Keller (1996) of tool use among American blacksmiths, for example, illustrates how physical actions, language use, and associated concepts are integrated parts of the total picture, thus bringing dynamically embodied action into cognitive anthropology.

These investigators would presumably agree that, like the body itself, lived space is not a given physical reality but an achieved structuring, simultaneously physical, conceptual, moral, and ethical (Williams 1995:52). Spaces are mapped through indexical devices in words and action signs, through names, locomotion in and through places, and remembered senses of place (Basso 1984, 1988, 1996; Feld & Basso 1996; Duranti 1992; Keating 1998; Farnell 1995a,d,e; Hallowell 1955; Hanks 1990; Haugan 1969; Haviland 1993; Jarvella & Klein 1982; Levinson 1996, 1997, and references therein; Pick & Acredolo 1983).

The exploration of action signs as embodied corporeal memory is a fertile arena awaiting further investigation. Comaroff & Comaroff note the “implications of actual bodily experience for imagining and acting upon the forces of history” (1992:72). If, as history, the past lies behind us, as memory it remains with us, not only in words but also in our neuromuscular patterning and kinaesthetic memories—the way in which specific experiences and concepts of time/space are built into our bodily *modus operandi* (e.g. Behar 1996:104–35). Connerton (1989:96) suggests that in cultural memory “the past is, as it were, sedimented in the body.”

For example, walking through familiar landscapes can evoke physical memories of former acts that have eluded verbal memory (W Kelleher, manuscript in preparation); places hold experiences together, and it has been argued that we experience temporality spatially through moving (see Feeley-Harnik 1996:215). Traumatic actions perpetrated against one's person are frequently memorized in physical acts of defensive response (Young 1998), and in "emotional tremors that surface in our bodies to protect us" (Winkler 1994:256). We can also engage in energetic practices of forgetting in attempts to deaden feeling. Schieffelin (1976) provides an extraordinary ethnography of the work of recollection and emotion in which events are re-presented (made present again) in Kaluli dramatic ritual performance, whereas Farnell (1995a) illustrates the indexical connections between action signs and remembered (re-membered) landscapes in Assiniboine narratives.

## TOWARD AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF HUMAN MOVEMENT

The vision of a more holistic "anthropology of human movement" that studies all kinds of "action sign systems" (Williams 1975, 1982) or "structured movement systems" (Kaeppler 1971, 1985,) emerged during the 1970s and was institutionalized with the inauguration of the *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement* (JASHM) at New York University in 1979 in conjunction with the Master of Arts program in the subject that Williams directed. JASHM, now in its twentieth year of publication (currently at the University of Illinois), provides a record of the wide range of research and writing that has been going on in the anthropology of human movement, despite its small, albeit international, constituency. Additional collections of research and writings include a book series, *Readings in the Anthropology of Human Movement* (Williams 1997, 1999), a special issue of *Visual Anthropology* (Williams 1996), and Farnell (1995b).

Williams's doctoral dissertation (1975) exemplified the new vision in its ethnographic treatment of three diverse movement systems: a ritual (the Catholic Latin Mass), a dance idiom (classical ballet), and an exercise technique/martial art (tai chi chuan) (Williams 1975, 1994a, 1995). Williams developed new theoretical resources for a specifically human semiotics of action called semasiology that enabled her to accommodate this wide range of subject matter. She employed a linguistic analogy based on certain Saussurian ideas (e.g. la langue/la parole, signifier/signified) in marked contrast to Birdwhistell's attempt to calque the phonological level of a linguistic model directly onto bodily movement. Williams's embodied theory of human action is also grounded in Harré's post-Cartesian theory of person (see above) and is situated in the context of British semantic anthropology (see Crick 1976; Harré 1971; Parkin 1982).

Kaeppler, another important pioneer in this endeavor, also chose a linguistic analogy but based her approach on the emic/etic distinction from a combination of Pike's structural linguistics and American ethnoscience of the 1960s. This per-

spective provided a fruitful means to identify culturally relevant units of movement. Those movement patterns that practitioners themselves identified as structural components of a movement system could be distinguished as kinemic (Kaeppler 1967, 1971; see also Kaeppler 1986).

Kaeppler's authoritative studies of a wide variety of structured systems of movement practiced in Hawaii and Tonga provide exemplars for the in-depth ethnographic study of choreographed movement systems across genres within one society (e.g. Kaeppler 1985, 1993a,b). For example, in her study of Hawaiian Hula Pahu (1993a), Kaeppler carefully distinguishes three traditional activities that employed formalized movement. During mourning ceremonies, chants provided mourners with an appropriate medium for self-mutilation as well as formalized movements to accompany lamentations and wailing. In sacred ceremonies, formalized movements were performed with sacred texts and drumming, presenting a sacrament that communicated the ceremony to the gods both visually and aurally. Formal entertainments, meanwhile, employed dancers sitting or standing in rows who performed movements in conjunction with metaphorically laden spoken or sung texts that contained veiled references honoring people and places. Such veiled or layered meaning (*kaona*), which depends on extensive cultural knowledge for a nuanced understanding, was thought to have a power of its own that could honor or harm (Kaeppler 1993a:8–12; see also Kaeppler 1995). Similar careful distinctions are made in Kaeppler's research on Tongan expressive culture, which contains detailed analysis of the poetic elements shared by both speech and structured movement systems—systems that may be visual manifestations of social relations as well as part of an elaborate aesthetic system (Kaeppler 1985, 1993b).

As the diversity of ethnographic research by Kaeppler and Williams exemplifies, an anthropology of human movement casts widely, incorporating under one general rubric studies previously separated, somewhat arbitrarily, into categories such as dance, ritual, gesture, or nonverbal communication. These classifications have proven problematic because attached to them are unproductive preconceptions such as divisions between art and nonart, verbal and nonverbal, practical and symbolic. They also frequently occasion a lack of fit with indigenous categorizations of movement (Gore 1994:59; Kaeppler 1978:46, 1985:92–94; Middleton 1985:168; Spencer 1985:140; Williams 1991:5, 59; cf Vogel 1997). For example, Lewis (1992) illustrates the complexity of a Brazilian action sign system called Capoeira that defies easy categorization because it incorporates techniques of combat, sport, dance, and creative-movement “play” specifically related to its history as an “art of resistance” for Brazilians of African descent (see also Browning 1995). Likewise, Friedland (1995) describes the ways in which “movement play” in African-American youth culture is part of a complex of interrelated communicative and expressive systems that constitute a whole world of artistic performance. Frequently drenched with social commentary, such movement play is often transformed into exhibition forms, only a minute proportion of which became popularized through the American mainstream media as “break dancing.” Similarly, Jordan & Thomas (1997) explore developments in Olympic ice-

skating that effectively blur previously well-established boundaries between “sport” and “performance art.” Gore (1997) draws attention to classifications that have more to do with generational subcultures than genres, or national and ethnic boundaries, as exemplified by “rave culture”—recreational events driven by the mass media that engender an enormous following among contemporary European youth.

In addition, such predetermined English language categories tend to mask interesting features that cross Western genres. For example, Hall (1996) shows how Irish ideals about bodily comportment and moral standing in everyday contexts transfer into the distinct upright posture of Irish dancing. Farnell (1995f) found that features of spatial orientation that structure the intimate, intersubjective corporeal space of Assiniboine storytelling with Plains Indian sign language (based on a specific conception of the four cardinal directions) also structure the performance spaces of dance events, although the sign language itself is not used in the dances. In contrast, Williams (1991) observed that signs that designate kinship relations in an Australian Aboriginal sign language used in Cape York are utilized in dances in ways that highlight those relationships and confer knowledge about them. These examples clearly suggest that investigators who restrict their attention to gesture, sign language, or dance are likely to overlook important features that cross western genres and which may attest to the import of embodied knowledge in other social and cultural domains.

Contemporary approaches to investigating human action sign systems, (Williams 1991), or structured movement systems (Kaepler 1985) resonate with the recent call by Feld (1990, 1991) for ethnomusicology to shift from the category of music to an anthropology of structured sound. These wider goals also parallel those of linguistic anthropology in the sense of aiming to provide rich and varied resources that facilitate the ethnographic investigation of dynamically embodied signifying acts in any cultural context.

### Structural Universals, Semantic Particulars

In the early 1970s, Williams, like Kaepler, recognized that an anthropological approach to all forms of human movement required theoretical resources beyond those offered by kinesics and proxemics. In addition to the need to combine bodily actions with the spatial contexts in which they appear, both aspects of action required reconceptualizing in ways that would make them available to analytical rigor. The problem was how to achieve this without compromising a focus on the agent centered articulation of nuanced cultural meanings to which, as a former dancer, Williams was deeply committed.

The first theoretical task semasiology undertook was to delineate those resources with which every human being is equipped, to identify structural universals of the body in space that are common to all human movement systems anywhere. This necessitated conceptualizing a way of making all possible movements of the signifying body finite, taking into account the anatomical possibilities and limitations provided by the structure of the human organism without resorting to the terminology of anatomy or biomechanics. The notion of a

semasiological body with its specific degrees of freedom articulated at each joint provides this groundbreaking and essential resource (see Williams 1979, 1982).

Although Hall's proxemics had explored a near/far dimension in detail, the differentiated hierarchical values and nature of other spatial dimensions, such as up/down, right/left, front/back, inside/outside, remained unexamined (the exception being left/right dual symbolic classification [see Hertz 1960 (1909), Needham 1973]). The second task, therefore, was to articulate a conception of the structure of enacted spaces that also delineated the universal constraints in which humans operate. Williams adopted the notion of euclidian space consisting of three dimensions of space and one dimension of time in which a person, as a dynamic agent, is centered. Rather than try to devise numerical means of measurement (the problem being where you measure from), she adopted set theory. Again working from the agentive perspective, the spatial directions and orientations of body parts in motion as well as whole body movement through space were delineated. In addition to the corporeal/personal space immediately encompassing a single human actor, theoretical resources were required to delineate interactional space and larger performance spaces. These are handled with the same basic three-dimensional structure (plus time) but viewed as a series of nested possibilities.

Semasiology also utilizes a number of Saussurian ideas, especially the edict that a sign takes its meaning from its place within a system of signs. This entails a Wittgensteinian "nonrepresentational" view of language and other signifying acts, thus avoiding the problematic assumption that a sign necessarily stands for something, which separates signifier from signified (See Williams 1982, 1991: 178–243). This factor seems to be at the heart of some misconceptions about semiotic approaches to the body as being necessarily intellectualist, because representational.

Having identified these structural universals (in some ways analogous to the linguistic delineation of the manner and places of articulation in the mouth and throat, distinctive features that structure all spoken languages), the second frame of reference to be maintained in a semasiological point of view consists of "the particularities of the individual action sign system that is being studied, the forms of these particularities, and their inclusion into a human value system" (Williams 1995:49). Strategies for investigation include close attention to the local value (in the Saussurian sense of *valeur*, or relative weighting) attached to local taxonomies of the body, movement, spatial dimensions, and space/time, as these can be observed, learned, and practiced, and as they are talked about in local discourses of personhood and self in the poetics and politics of lived experience. Close attention is also given to the indexical and performative functions of both action signs and spoken discourse, and to relationships between these two modalities. Although the theoretical resources provided by semasiology do not specifically deal with relationships between bodily practices and asymmetries of social power, this approach does provide the necessary analytic resources for examining exactly how such asymmetries emerge and are maintained and/or contested. The

semiotic practices of talk and action are the corporeal means by which power and authority operate in social contexts.

A third frame of reference to be maintained in a semasiology of action involves the reciprocal comparison between participant-observer and the subjects of the action sign system under investigation, searching for correspondences and lack of fit between what I/we believe and what they acknowledge and understand (Williams 1995:50). This reflexive stance is, of course, integral to new notions of objectivity in the social sciences (Pocock 1994, Varela 1994a, Williams 1994b).

## From Nonverbal Behavior to Action Signs

In addition to the establishment of these universal structural principles and strategies for investigating semantic particulars outlined within a semasiology of action, there has been a general theoretical shift in the anthropological study of human movement that can probably be considered paradigmatic in the Kuhnian sense. This paradigmatic shift, from an empiricist and observationist view of movement to an agent-centered perspective, is encapsulated in the preferred use of the term action over the term behavior (see Williams 1991:244–76, Ardener 1989b). At the heart of theories that define body movement as “culturally and semantically laden actions couched in indigenous models of organization and meaning” (Williams 1982:15) lies a definition of what it means to be human that is entirely different from that found in theories that define movement as “physical behavior” or “motor movements.”

This shift to action has meant leaving behind a number of encumbrances from older theoretical paradigms, although lingering evolutionary, ethological, universalist and psychologistic assumptions remain problematic. For example, investigators still fall prone to the Cartesian dualistic trap of assuming that human actions, being of the body, are somehow separate from the cognitive capacities of a language-using, symbol-manipulating human mind and, thus, are more “natural,” “primitive,” “spontaneous,” or even “instinctive,” as if these higher faculties do not apply to our actions or our conceptions of those actions. Human body movements, as Mauss [1979 (1935)] also observed, are necessarily biologically enabled but are everywhere subject to the transformative power of human psycho-social realms of meaning, including language. This is just as true of activities such as tool use as it is of actions that fulfill expressive and communicative functions (Ingold 1993c, Keller & Keller 1996).

Although phylogenetically speaking, we can observe some rudiments of human expression in nonhuman primate behaviors, it is an observationist fallacy to assume that what looks the same means the same in human and nonhuman domains. Whereas crucial differences between nonhuman vocal calls and human spoken languages seem clear in this regard, human action sign systems have frequently not been afforded the same distinctions, as a direct result of this fallacy. Even Hall's proxemics were prone to a residual evolutionism, although his own data suggest that the rich diversity of culturally defined human spaces make triv-

ial any comparison with notions of programmed responses to critical distancing and territoriality in other animals.

A naive universalism often accompanies these evolutionary assumptions of functional continuity. For example, facial gestures such as smiles or grimaces are often assumed to be universally understood (e.g. Ekman et al 1972), but this is a misconception based on the observationist perspective. Although there are many facial gestures that look the same across cultural boundaries, it cannot be assumed that they mean the same things. All peoples in the world may smile, but in English the word refers to much more than an observable movement—a behavior of the facial muscles—and it does not have a one-to-one correspondence with a single action sign. For example, within Euro-American culture, one can smile not only out of happiness or pleasure but also out of embarrassment, when at a momentary loss for words, when putting on a “brave face,” or when lying or trying to deceive someone about malicious intent. What is meant by smiling, when considered an action as opposed to a behavior, must be determined by local norms of interaction and specific contexts of use (La Barre 1947, Hall 1966). Ironically perhaps, what makes physical movements of the body “actions” in the human realm is not, in fact, visible. Actions are defined by the varied and complex nonobservable conceptual resources that are part of them. Actions, then, in contrast to behaviors, cannot be understood from observation alone (Farnell 1995c, Williams 1991: 212–13).

Interest in the body from cognitive linguistics inadvertently continues this dualistic misconception in a different guise when the body is viewed as a natural organism that is somehow capable of direct correspondence with the world through “experience.” For example, Lakoff (1987) and Johnson (1987) posit that body movement and its orientations provide experiential grounding for “kineshetic image schema.” Although it is certainly true that “the dynamics of tropes are to be found in the corporeal and sensation anchored domains of human experience” (Fernandez & Herzfeld 1998:92), such approaches contain a residual dualism in so far as they imply that the moving body only provides “the crude origins of abstract reason” and nothing more than the experiential grounding for spoken language and cognition. As Csordas observes, “rather than asking how metaphors instantiate image schemas it is more apt to begin with the lived experience from which we derive image schemas as abstract products of analytic reflection” (1994a:20). When reduced to basic physical experience, motor programs (Johnson 1987:xiv), or motor movements (Lakoff 1987:xiv), physical being and bodily actions are denied the status of signifying acts and embodied forms of knowledge. In contrast, Farnell (1996b, 1999), McNeill (1992), Taub (1997), Young (1999), and Wilcox (1993) illustrate the numerous “metaphors we move by” that employ body movement for metaphoric and metonymic purposes. “This implies that our imaginative capacity is not merely indirectly embodied ‘since the [spoken] metaphors, metonyms and images are based on...bodily experience’ [Lakoff 1987:xiv] but that our imaginative capacity is directly embodied because action signs themselves can be imaginative tropes, some of which integrate with or are taken up in spoken language forms” (Farnell 1996b:312).

## Modes of Analytic Discourse

The new paradigm involves new terminology and modes of analysis free of the misconception that the discourse of physiology or kinesiological measurements of muscles and kinetic energy is necessary in order to be “scientific” and achieve analytic rigor, as if the only “real” body is the biological or medical one. Conceptual confusion frequently arises when terms and concepts appropriate to a biological/physiological realm of discourse are employed in attempts to produce explanations that involve meaning in the social realm. Although more typical of studies in nonverbal communication, and of behaviorist approaches in psychology, such confusion has had its effects in sociocultural anthropology, as for example in the functional-anatomical explanations by Birdwhistell (1970) of movement as a “kinesic stream.” Williams (1991:182–85) succinctly identifies the problem in this explanation of the hitchhiker’s action of thumbing a ride: “When we are told by Birdwhistell that a ‘macro-kinesic’ explanation of this state of affairs is something like this: ‘two members of the species *homo sapiens*, standing with an intra-femoral index of approximately 45 degrees, right humeral appendages raised to an 80 degree angle to their torsos, in an antero-posterior sweep, using a double pivot at the scapular clavicular joint, accomplish a communicative signal’ we are justified in saying ‘no.’ That is not what we see. We see *persons* thumbing a ride” (Williams 1991:184).

Williams’s point is that the stretch of functional-anatomical terminology explains nothing about the sociolinguistic or semantic properties of the action involved. Likewise Prost’s graphs (1996), which show postural and gestural groupings that cluster in a “happy area” based on angular variables estimated from still photographs and film frames, at best reveal simple correlations; they explain nothing (see Williams 1996:345–70). Williams summarizes by noting, “[a]s Harré & Secord (1972) so 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 a part of human life is lost” (Williams 1991:182).

Best clarifies the difference this way: “[O]ne cannot specify an action, as opposed to a purely physical movement, without taking into account what the agent intended, that is there are reasons for, and purposes to, actions” (Best 1974:193). Equally important is seeing actions in context: “[M]ost of what we may want to know about a person’s intentional action cannot be understood by a narrow concentration upon his physical movement but by...standing back from it and seeing it in context (Best 1978:79). To understand body movement as a component of social action, then, one must see in social reality: not muscles, bones, and angles of displacement, locomotor patterns, or positional behaviors (Prost 1996) nor even an arm moving upward, but a woman greeting a friend, a man trying to attract attention, or two young men thumbing a ride.

## Sound, Movement, and Literacy

Sociocultural and linguistic anthropologists have long been aware that traditional methods of writing are inadequate for representing visual aspects of social inter-

action and the structured spatial/material contexts in which it occurs (Duranti 1997:144–45). The relatively minor attention paid to such components, however, is only partly due to technological limitations or the recognized centrality of speech in human societies. It is also a consequence of a linguistic ideology that privileges semantico-referential functions of spoken/written signs over indexical and iconic functions, and excludes visual-kinaesthetic signs from what counts as “language” (Urciuoli 1995, Farnell 1995a:41–57; cf. Silverstein 1976). The realization that “[I]n face-to-face interaction what humans say to each other must be understood vis a vis what they do with their body and where they are located in space” (Duranti 1997:145) has presented researchers with the challenge of how to create transcriptions that maintain the connections between body movement, spatial orientation and co-occurring talk. Goodwin (1979), for example, introduced a series of conventions designed to integrate information about eye gaze with sequences of turn-taking at talk. Haviland (1996), McNeill (1992) and Heath (1986) use combinations of transcribed talk supplemented with positional drawings and verbal descriptions to represent body movement. Farnell (1994) discusses the analytic inadequacy of such positional drawings, word glosses, and verbal descriptions and makes a strong case for the use of a movement script (Labanotation) in conjunction with video recordings. Duranti (1997:144) agrees that transforming non-talk into talk through verbal descriptions reproduces the ideological dominance of speech over other forms of human expression.

Because different modes of specification engender different kinds of knowledge (Rothbart 1998), methods of literacy specific to the medium under consideration would seem to be essential if we are not to reduce all knowledge to propositional statements (Page 1996:171). If body movements constitute forms of embodied knowledge (Varela 1995a) gained through the consciousness of signifying bodies moving in a four dimensional space/time (Page 1996:172) such knowledge requires a description in its own terms rather than through translations into words.

There is a widespread misconception, however, that something in the nature of sound and movement as communicative modalities makes sound inherently segmentable, whereas body movement is inherently unsegmentable (e.g. Duranti 1997:150, Margolis 1981, McNeill 1992). This erroneous assumption probably stems from the influence of literacy on our thought processes, on “our noetic habits” (Ong 1982:170; see also Goody 1976). For example, our ways of thinking and talking about sound structure in speech and/or music, are fundamentally tied to the technology of writing if we are literate. Few researchers have similar ways of thinking, talking about, and apperceiving the structure of body movement, since most are not literate in the medium. This fact means that even if we cannot read the graphic signs of a musical score or those of an unfamiliar script for a spoken language, say Slavic or Arabic, familiarity with the very idea of segmenting and writing vocal and other sounds enables us to imagine how the graphic signs might represent its structure. This is not the case with movement. Many people have difficulty imagining how movement could be readily segmentable and written with graphic signs because they do not have conceptual frameworks, “modes of regis-

tration and specification” (Ardener 1989a), that facilitate such a conception. As Page observes, “[t]he role of movement writing for the analysis of human action systems is not well understood, commensurate with its current use by specialists in only a few disciplines” (Page 1996:171).

Scripts that facilitate movement literacy are a comparatively new technology, utilized by few, but it is worth reminding ourselves that this was the case for most of the history of spoken language literacy: the idea of universal literacy in relation to spoken language in Western societies only came about in the late nineteenth century, alongside the institutionalization of compulsory formal education, when spoken language literacy was perceived as a social good. It is also instructive to note that arguments against movement writing as somehow destructive of the holistic, global experience of movement performance mirror exactly Plato’s early objections to spoken language literacy circa 400 BC (Havelock 1963).

The recent breakthrough into movement literacy represents a fundamental theoretical and methodological shift in studies of human movement within anthropology (Farnell 1994, 1996c, Williams & Farnell 1990). Earlier in the century Kurath (1960) and Birdwhistell (1952) both recognized the need for a transcription system in movement research and attempted to develop one for use in dance ethnology and kinesics, respectively. However, neither succeeded in creating a finite set of graphic signs that could economically represent human action (see Farnell 1996a, Kaepler 1978).

A comprehensive movement writing system has to resolve several difficult technical issues. Human actions take place in three dimensions of space and one dimension of time and mobilize many parts of the body simultaneously. An inventory of graphic signs is therefore required to represent (a) all parts and surfaces of the body, (b) the three-dimensional space in which those parts move, (c) time, (d) dynamics, and (e) relationships between the moving body parts of one person and, intersubjectively, between persons and objects in the structured performance space of the movement event (Farnell 1996c:868). Farnell (1996c) describes the historical development of movement notation systems in Europe (see also Hutchinson-Guest 1984) and the emergence of three general scripts in extant use: Labanotation, Benesh notation, and Eshkol-Wachman notation. Page (1990) compared the Benesh with the Laban scripts and concludes that the latter is of greater value to anthropological investigations because its agentic perspective and descriptive flexibility are better able to encompass indigenous conceptions of body, movement, and space. Laban also developed a taxonomy of terms and graphic signs known as “effort-shape” that has been utilized as an analytic tool by some investigators (e.g. Ness 1992, Novack 1990).

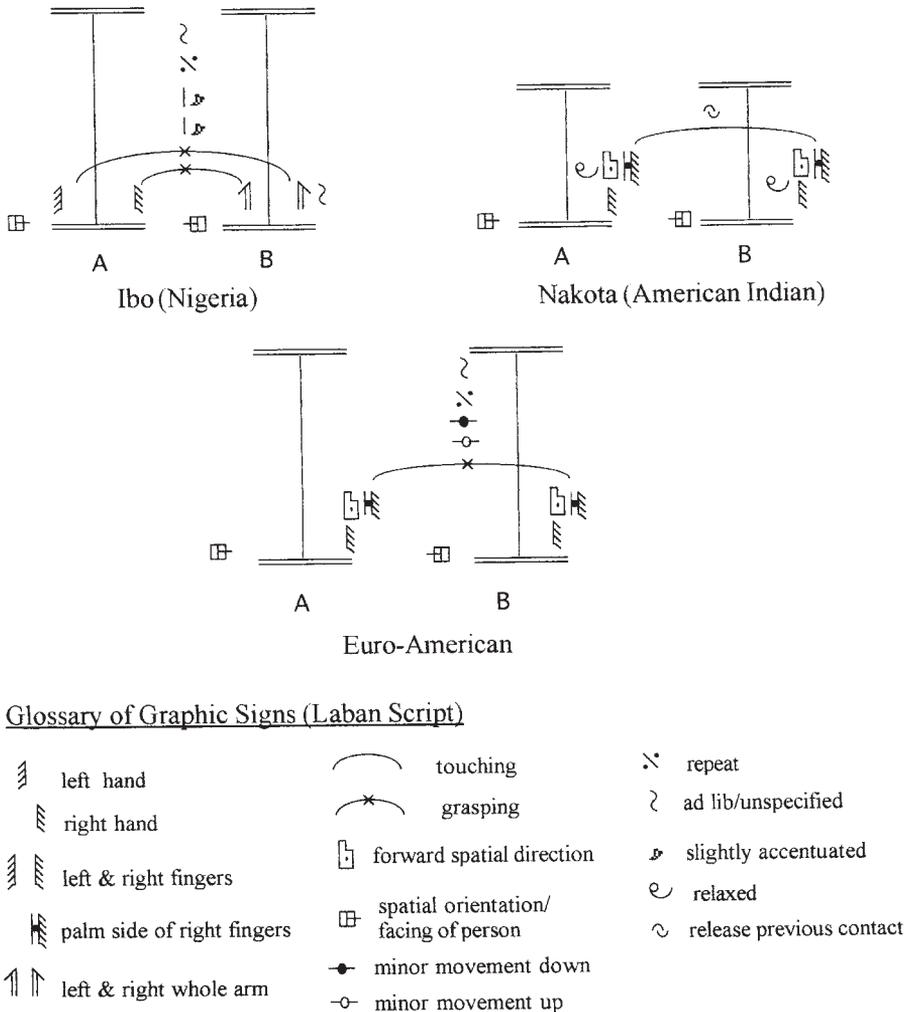
The development of two new technologies—the video camera and a viable transcription system—has transformed fieldwork methods in this subfield, not unlike the way in which discourse-centered approaches in linguistic anthropology were transformed by the portable tape recorder, when new modes of transcription also arose (see Tedlock 1983).

Researchers often make video recordings of movement events that are later translated and transcribed into ethnographic “movement scores.” Creating such a

score involves working in close collaboration with local practitioners and participants (see Farnell 1995a,e; Kaepler 1993a; Page 1996; Williams 1979, 1982, 1991; Williams & Farnell 1990).

### Reading and Writing the Action

Figure 1 provides an example of movement writing with the Laban script that demonstrates its ethnographic importance and utility. The graphic symbols repre-



**Figure 1** Important cultural differences between three distinct action signs, glossed in English as a “handshake,” emerge when transcribed with the Laban script. Two persons, *A* and *B*, are interacting. A centerline divides left and right sides of the body of each actor. Movement through time reads from *bottom* to *top*.

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sent the constituent parts of three different action signs, all of which might be glossed in English as a “handshake.” Ardener (1989c:166) reports that for the Ibo of southeastern Nigeria, an action glossed in English as a “handshake” engages not just the body part defined in English as “hand” (i.e. bounded at the wrist) but any part of the arm from just below the shoulder, down to and including the hand. The “handshake” thus requires transcribing as an action sign involving a unit  $\uparrow$  that corresponds to the Ibo part of the body called *aka*—the whole arm from just below the shoulder. Ardener tells us that “[t]he 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 classification” (1989c:166). For English speaking Europeans, then, greeting someone by presenting an only slightly mobile hand at the end of a relatively stiff arm becomes a choice reinforced by language, whereas for Ibo speakers, 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 with a different meaning” (Ardener 1989c:166).

We can compare this with the Assiniboine (Nakota) case. During my own field research I learned that the European handshake was introduced to peoples of the Plains as a form of greeting in the early 1800s and was quickly adopted. Today, however, there is a distinct quality of handshake among Nakota, Dakota and Lakota 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 (Farnell 1995a:287). The gentle touch, not a shake, confirms that the person engaged in the act is Native American (if this is not obvious from appearance), or at least someone who is familiar with “Indian ways.” For the Euro-American, this lack of pressure in the hand and contact of mostly fingers rather than the whole palm, seems rather cool and distant, because it is expected that this action contains 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 1995a:286–87).

The Assiniboine (Nakota) classification of parts of the body, like that of the Ibo, does not coincide with that of English. Whereas the term arm in English usually includes the hand, in Nakota the arm, (*isto*), extends from the shoulder to the wrist only, while the hand, (*nape*), is a different body part.

It becomes clear how, in these kinds of cross-cultural comparisons, word glosses such as “handshake” often conceal distinct action signs and their meanings in unfortunate ways. As we see, for Ibo and Assiniboine people, a “handshake” can involve neither the hand (as bounded by the English term) nor a shaking action. The transcriptions make the differences in these action signs, and the need for translation perfectly clear. They also illustrate how a movement text

is an ethnographic description that records indigenous understandings of action, not gross physical movement.

Handshakes belong to an area of social life commonly taken to be the most observable, the kind of behavior that can be relatively objectively described. As Ardener reminds us, however, action, thought, and language, even in this relatively 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. To paraphrase Ardener (1989c:172), the instance may appear to be socially trivial but the relationships between American Indians and other Americans, and between Ibos and Europeans, have no more characteristic a framework than this (Farnell 1994:954). And what about the handshakes of Yoruba Agbegijo dancers at Egungun festivals, who caricature colonial power relations when they shake hands, say how do you do, and perform a ridiculous ballroom dance? Using mimesis to master otherness, they make partial sense out of their experience through such dynamically embodied acts of resistance (Stoller 1995:87).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The field of research outlined in this essay, in addition to that described in reviews of research on gesture (Kendon 1997) and the poetics and politics of dance (Reed 1998) promise to yield a new understanding of social action as dynamically embodied practices, in which people talk and/or move in structured symbolic spaces, integrating action signs and vocal signs in numerous ways, in varied contexts. Body movement is an arena of human lived experience that has been much neglected in anthropological research, but one in which recent significant developments in theory, methods, and new technologies offer exciting possibilities for future ethnographic research. In this review, I have attempted to make its history and theoretical scope accessible to the general reader in the hope that its promise may be better appreciated and more quickly realized.

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