

Nonverbal Communication

*Movements with Precise Meanings*

by Paul Ekman

*Symbolic gestures, or "emblems,"  
differ from all the other things  
people do with their face and body.*

Our research on facial expression and body movement has been characterized by an attempt to distinguish among the very different activities which occur during conversation. The distinctions we have made (11,12) have been based on differences in the origins, coding, and usage of what we believe are fundamentally different actions. This article is concerned with one of the five types of actions we have studied, symbolic gestures, or what Efron (6) has called "emblems." It will be necessary to distinguish emblems from another type of movement which we have called "illustrators."

We have defined emblems as acts "(a) which have a direct verbal translation usually consisting of a word or two, or a phrase. (b) . . . this precise meaning is known by most or all members of a group, class, subculture, or culture, (c) which are most often deliberately used with the conscious intent to send a particular message to other person(s), (d) for which the person(s) who sees the emblem usually not only knows the emblem's message but also knows that it was deliberately sent to him, and (e) for which the sender usually takes responsibility for having made that communication. A further touchstone of an emblem

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is whether it can be replaced by a word or two, its message verbalized without substantially modifying the conversation" (14, p. 357).

If an action is truly an emblem, then the message it stands for is unambiguous even when the action is seen totally out of context. Take the example of the American emblem for "OK" (Figure 1). One need not know who showed it, to whom, when, or what behavior preceded, accompanied, or followed it to be certain the action signified "OK." Obviously, contextual factors may influence how one interprets that message. For example, is the "OK" to be taken seriously or not? Context is not required, however, to know what message the action stands for.

We defined illustrators as movements which are intimately tied to speech rhythms serving to illustrate what is being said. Illustrators can entail movements which emphasize a word, much like primary stress in voice, or movements which trace the flow of a thought, or movements which depict the rhythm, form, or action of an event or object, or movements which point to an event. Our findings and those of others suggest that the type and frequency of illustrators vary with ethnic group or culture and probably also vary with social class. Apart from these sources of variation, illustrators have been found, in studies limited to white middle-class Americans, to increase when there is affective involvement in what is being said and to decrease with boredom or conflict about the process of communicating. Illustrators also increase when the message is difficult to describe in words (e.g., it is hard to define zig-zag in words but easy to show it in a hand movement). They also increase when a person is caught in a grammatical cul-de-sac and unable to finish a sentence in any acceptable way, or when the person cannot find a word.

Emblems have been studied by scholars primarily concerned with the teaching of foreign languages or with communicating with people who speak another language (see 1,20,28). Emblems have also been of interest to those primarily interested in communication among the deaf (see 31,32). However, most of those who engage in the study of what has been called nonverbal communication, a term which has most incisively been criticized (30), have ignored emblems. They have combined emblems with illustrators contrasting their occurrence with another type of movement in which one part of the body manipulates another body part (see 19,23,25,26,27). Weiner (33) is the only student of so-called nonverbal communication who also has distinguished emblems from illustrators in his research.

Perhaps the confusion between emblems and illustrators stems from the fact that both often involve the hands (although there are facial emblems and facial



Figure 1: Emblem for "OK"  
(United States)

illustrators,<sup>1</sup> and conceivably there could be foot emblems or illustrators). Usually the hands are moved about in space, although with both illustrators and emblems the hands may touch the body or face. Perhaps another reason that others have failed to distinguish emblems from illustrators is that neither is typically shown when a person is alone. Clearly one can do so, but apart from rehearsals and hallucinations, illustrators and emblems are behaviors that occur in the presence of others, more specifically in the presence of another with whom some attempt is being made to communicate explicitly.<sup>2</sup> In this way emblems and illustrators both differ from the hand to body manipulations and from many facial expressions.

*While both emblems and illustrators occur during attempts to exchange information with another, emblems differ from illustrators in that there need not be concomitant speech or any verbal conversation at all.*

Emblems can and do occur during conversation, but they need not. In fact, emblems are often used in social situations where speech is constrained or not possible, e.g., in wartime patrol, between hunters not wishing to reveal audibly their presence to prey, or between students in a classroom behind a teacher's back.

A second key difference between emblems and illustrators regards the specificity of the significant. Emblems by definition must have a precise meaning or a limited set of alternative meanings, each of which is precise.<sup>3</sup> The context in which the emblem is shown provides shading to the meaning of the emblem. If the action stands for a limited set of precise meanings, then the context also will specify which meaning applies in a given instance. In this way emblems are like words. It is conceivable to write an emblem dictionary, which is precisely what we are currently doing in a number of cultures. Most illustrators have no such precise semantic content. Seen without hearing the words, most illustrators have only a vague referent. By contrast emblems can easily substitute for a word or be used with no reliance on words at all.

<sup>1</sup> There can also be voice emblems, sounds which meet the criteria for emblems and which are not words (29). We suspect that the repertoire of such vocal emblems will be quite small compared with the size of the repertoire for body movement emblems. Most of the time such sounds will fail to meet the criterion of being unambiguous without knowledge of contextual factors.

<sup>2</sup> As might be expected, illustrators are more frequent when conversing face-to-face than when not able to see the person with whom you are talking (12, 25). Even when not able to see the other conversant some illustrators do occur, suggesting habit may maintain their occurrence or that illustrators serve a self-priming function.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of American emblems which have limited sets of alternative precise meanings are the nose-wrinkle action, which signifies "I'm disgusted" or "it stinks," and the tracing of an hour-glass shape in the air with both hands, which signifies "woman" or "nice figure." Allowance for emblems to have a limited set of alternative precise meanings, rather than requiring there be just a single meaning, does raise the danger that more ambiguous actions which have a wide range of less precise meanings also might be designated as emblems.

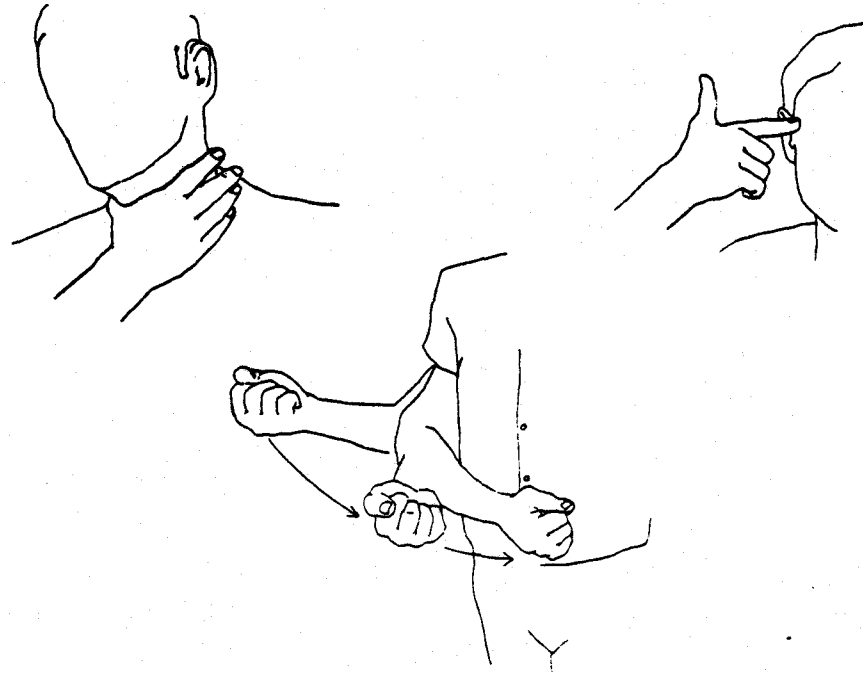


Figure 2: Emblems for suicide (top left: the South Fore, Papua, New Guinea; top right: United States; bottom: Japan)

the heterogeneous nature of U.S. culture, and the enormous exposure through television to the emblems of other groups.

We have also been interested in whether the same types of messages—the same domains of information—have an emblematic performance in different cultures regardless of whether or not the performance is the same. This comparison is not yet complete, but we can report that in each culture studied we have found emblems for insults, interpersonal directions (e.g., go, come, stop, etc.), greetings, departures, replies (e.g., yes, no, I don't know, etc.), and physical state and emotion.

*A discussion of the difference between emblems which signify emotion and those which signify an expression of emotion requires a digression about cross-cultural expressions of emotion.*

Our own research (8,9,10,13,15) and that of a number of other investigators (see especially 7,21) has shown that there are some universal facial expressions of emotion. The particular visible pattern on the face, the combination of

muscles contracted for anger, fear, surprise, sadness, disgust, happiness, (and probably also for interest) is the same for all members of our species. There are cultural differences in the attempts to control such expressions and in some of the causes of each emotion.

If an emblem signifies one of these emotions, and it uses the face to do so, it is likely that the emblem will draw upon some aspect of the universal expression of the emotion. The emblem about the emotion will be performed in a way which makes it evident to the beholder that the person showing it does not feel the emotion at that moment, but rather is just mentioning it. Otherwise the viewer would not be able to distinguish when a person was performing an emblem referring to emotion from when a felt emotion was being shown.<sup>4</sup> The emblem about an emotion will differ from the true facial expression in both muscular excursion and time duration. The emblem may be shorter or longer than the usual expression of the particular emotion and is stylized, showing either more or less muscular excursion than is usually seen in the emotional expression.

*In any culture there may or may not be emblems  
for some or all the emotions.*

It is our impression (as yet unverified) that in the United States the lower facial movements are used for emblems of happiness (smile), disgust (raised upper lip or nose wrinkle), and fear (horizontally stretched lips). Surprise is shown emblematically with either the dropped jaw or the raised brows. In each case the performance of the emblem for the emotion differs from the actual emotional expression in being limited to just one part of the face and in being either much briefer or much longer. There may be similarity across cultures in the emblems about emotion. Not that every culture will have an emblem for each emotion, but those cultures which do have a facial emblem about an emotion are likely to base it upon the universal facial expression of the emotion. There still could be a difference. For example, in signifying fear emblematically one culture could draw upon the brow/forehead part of the universal emotional expression and another culture could draw upon the lips.

The coding of emblems is most often iconic. The movement usually depicts the shape or action of its referent; less often the iconicity is based on rhythm or spatial relations. While inventions or pantomimes are also iconic, an emblem is usually more abbreviated, more stylized than a pantomime. Some emblems appear to be arbitrarily coded. Perhaps these originally were iconic but, through a process of stylization and abbreviation, their iconic base has become obscure. We do not, however, mean to imply that there may not be some emblems which always were arbitrarily coded.

<sup>4</sup> Simulated facial expressions are those facial behaviors which while not felt appear to be so. A correct simulation seems no different from a true expression. The distinctions between emblematic emotions, simulated emotions, and felt expressions is explained in Ekman (10, pp. 180-185) and Ekman and Friesen (16, chapter 12).

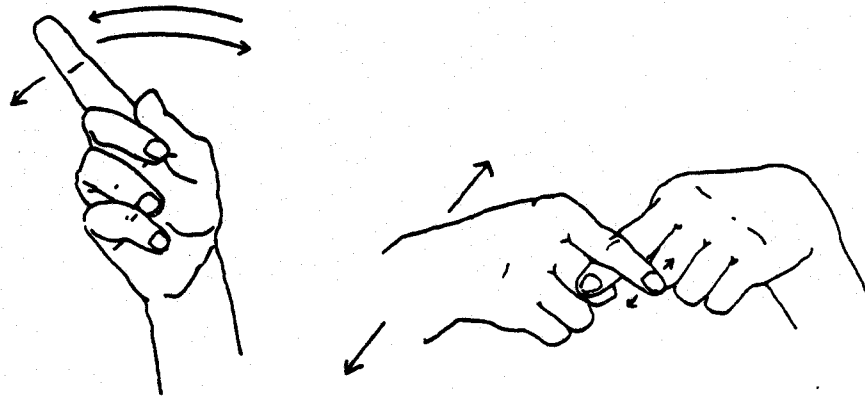


Figure 3: Emblems for finger-way "no" (United States) and "shame on you" (United States)

Little is known about the ontogeny of emblems. We speculate that there is a limited emblematic repertoire which develops between mother (or caretaker) and infant. These emblems are likely to be iconically coded. It should be possible to study how intention movements and other instrumental acts become abbreviated and stylized as they become employed as communicative signals. We do not know who teaches whom, mother or infant, or precisely when this becomes evident. We suspect that there may be considerable similarity across members of our species in this pre-verbal emblem repertoire, given the commonality in communication problems between caretaker and infant and in infant capability.

Another aspect of emblems related to age is the possibility that certain emblems are only appropriate when there is a substantial age difference between sender and receiver. The instance which suggested this possibility is the fingerwag "no" (Figure 3), which can only be properly performed by adult to child. If done by adult to adult, it would be an insult or a joke. Are there emblems which reverse this, ones used by children to adults? The "shame on you" (Figure 3) is an example of an emblem which is only used among children but is not part of the adult repertoire. Kumin and Lazar (24) recently reported that four-year-old American children know how to decode more emblems than three-year-old children. But they did not study the range of American emblems. We do not yet know when specific emblems emerge in the child's repertoire, how they relate to language acquisition, or what the relationship is between the age at which an emblem is decoded and the age when it is encoded by the child.

Trupin, in her analysis of Iranian emblems, has shown the utility of applying Stokoe's formulations to understanding the differences among emblems. She has shown how performances with the same configuration signify different matters in different locations and how performances with the same location signify different matters when there is a different action. For example, if the forefinger is extended with the rest of the fingers and thumb in a fist, and that position is held without movement in the shoulder area a foot or two in front of the person

it signifies "just a minute." If the location is shifted to finger perpendicular to and touching the lips, it signifies "be quiet." If location is held constant in the area about shoulder height in front of a person, but the action is added in which the finger beats down in space repeatedly, the message now becomes "making a point emphatically" or "bawling out." While this work is not yet complete and has not been applied systematically to the emblem repertoires of other groups, it seems that it will be fruitful in understanding the nature of emblems.

*Are emblems a language?*

I don't think this is a useful question. Instead I follow the lead of Counts (3) and Sebeok (30) in believing that what is important is to illuminate the nature of this type of communication, explaining how it differs from other types of conversational behavior, verbal or, to use that discredited label, nonverbal. Elsewhere, (10, 12) we have argued that emblems are very different in a host of ways from the body manipulations which we have termed "adaptors." Earlier I outlined the more subtle differences between emblems and illustrators, and between emblems about emotion and facial expressions of emotion. Now, let me discuss the usage of emblems which will make more clear their special properties. These remarks are based on study of American emblems in a limited number of conversations, although I know of no reasons, as yet, to suggest that what has been found is specific to that culture or those conversations.

Words are typically employed during conversation in strings or sequences, governed by a syntax. American sign language and Indian sign language also usually involve the emission of a string of signs. Emblems are usually not employed during conversation in strings, but singly. We have only seen emblems employed in strings of three or four in a sequence when verbal conversation is in some way constrained. For example, if while taking on the phone you notice a person come to the door of your office due for his appointment, you may emblematically signal that he will have to wait just a minute, and may follow this with an emblem that requests he come in, and another emblem that directs him to be seated. When two people are not constrained about the use of words, however, we have rarely observed such a sequence of emblems.<sup>5</sup>

When single emblems occur during conversation, their placement in relation to the verbal behavior is far from random. Some emblems occur as what Dittman (4) called "listener responses." The listener may indicate agreement (head nod), disagreement (head shake), questioning or exclamation (eyebrow-raise), or general encouragement (smile). When the listener emits these emblems should be related, as Dittman has suggested, to the speaker's speech, most often in juncture pauses at the end of a phonemic clause.

<sup>5</sup> Umberto Eco (5) says Italians often use emblematic strings during conversation and, if so, this would be a difference from Americans, English, and probably some other language groups as well. Trupin reports Iranians rarely emit strings of emblems.

Emblems also are shown by the speaker during his talk. One common location is at the beginning or end of a conversational turn. In response to a question, the person taking the floor may initiate his reply with an emblem and then proceed with his verbal statement. Similarly, in giving up the floor to the other conversant, the speaker may terminate his words with an emblem. Emblems also can occur within the speaking turn. They more often occur during unfilled pauses than during filled pauses or speech disruptions. Emblems which repeat a spoken word more often precede or accompany the word than follow the word, but our data on this is very sparse. In these examples where emblems are emitted as single acts by either listener or speaker in conversation, we can not talk of a syntax of emblems, even though emblems are placed in specific locations within the verbal conversation.

*If emblematic strings occur when there is not conversation, is there a syntax?*<sup>2</sup>

There should be, but we do not have any observations on such naturally occurring strings of emblems and can only venture some guesses. Strings of emblems are very infrequent among Americans, unless one focuses upon special vocations, such as pilots and landing crews. Perhaps the rarity of emblem strings may indicate that no rule structure is developed or known. Another possibility is that the temporal sequence of emitting the emblems provides the syntax. The sequence of emblems might parallel the sequence of events referred to, akin to a "path expression" (18).<sup>6</sup> The sequence could also parallel what the word order would be if the emblems were translated into words. The choice among these alternatives requires empirical study.<sup>7</sup> Research would be of most interest if the occurrence of strings of emblems was examined in situations where there has not been specific vocational instruction about how to signal, as there is for pilots and landing crews. Also of interest would be the possible syntax in emblematic strings in communication between child and mother before verbal language begins.

Another question is whether there are many emblems which are compounds, containing two or more emblems each of which has a different meaning. There are few such American emblems and more compounds in Iranian emblems. A related question is whether there are complex emblems, containing two or more emblems each of which has the same meaning as the complex emblem. There are few of these. The shrug emblem is a notable exception,

<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to T. A. Sebeok for mentioning this to me.

<sup>7</sup> Stokoe brought Meisner and Philpott's study of emblem communication among men working in sawmills in British Columbia to my attention (*Sign Language Studies*, 9, 1975, pp. 291-347). Among these workers where there is too much noise to communicate in words emblems typically occur in strings, and the order of performance of the emblems roughly parallels what the word order would be if spoken.



since the shoulder version and the hand version each signify the message, as does the combination of the two.

Emblem messages can be qualified by the performance of the emblem, the



Figure 4: Emblem for "the finger"  
(United States)

rate of movement, and the amount of area covered. Social context also modifies the emblem message. Context includes not only the words spoken before, during, or afterwards, but also voice intonations, pitch, etc. We are also impressed at the great importance that facial expression can have on contextually modifying the import of an emblem. For example, take the "finger," an emblem for quite a severe insult (Figure 4). Accompanied by one type of smile, the "fuck-you" message is a joke; accompanied by another type of smile or used with an anger, disgust,

or contempt face, it is likely to lead to a fight. We have only begun to look at contextual modifiers of emblems.

*Let me note a few applications  
of research on emblems.*

Miscommunication between people from different cultures can unwittingly occur when an emblem performance symbolizes different messages in two cultures. When Brezhnev visited the United States he and Nixon would use emblems in their public appearances to communicate the "spirit of detente." Nixon typically would use the American hand-wave, a greeting emblem. Brezhnev in these appearances would clasp his hands together with arms extended, raising his clasped hands up to the region in front of his face. This is a Soviet emblem for friendship. Unfortunately, he did not know, I presume, that this performance is an American emblem for "I am the winner," employed almost exclusively in the context of boxing matches. Research on the emblem repertoire and cross-national contrasts could help eliminate such miscommunications.

In a city such as San Francisco, there are large numbers of people who speak little or no English, but instead speak Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Samoan, or Tagalog. It is not reasonable to expect that the customs officials, or those who staff the hospital wards and clinics, will acquire proficiency in all these languages. They could, however, master the emblem repertoires of all those groups (probably about 1000 items in all) and be capable of rudimentary communication with the foreign clients they serve. It might be useful to devise some pantomimic performances to add essential messages covering matters relevant to the intended transaction where there are gaps in the emblem repertoire.

Another application is the possibility that the assessment of a child's emblem repertoire may aid an early diagnosis of neurological deficits. If I am correct in speculating that certain emblems regularly make their first appearance at specifiable ages, then their failure to appear may be of medical significance. Perhaps lags in the development of the emblem repertoire could alert the physician to specific neurological deficits which until now were not obvious until a later period in language acquisition. Related to this possibility is the chance that emblems might be successfully used in communicating with autistic children.

The last application I will suggest is paradoxical. In defining emblems I emphasized that these are actions which the receiver believes were performed by the sender specifically to transmit a message. If I scratch my cheek, you may derive information from that act. You may infer I have eczema or that I am nervous, but you would not be likely to assume that I scratched my cheek to tell you that. The scratch of the cheek is not, in the cultures I have studied, an emblem. While emblems are the most deliberate of the body movements and facial expressions, the paradox is that there can be emblematic equivalents to slips-of-the-tongue. In my first study of body movement in 1955, I observed such an emblematic slip. I had arranged for the director of the graduate program to subject one of my fellow students to a stress interview. He attacked and criticized her abilities, ethics, motives, etc. While she had volunteered for some abuse, it seemed clear that he succeeded in upsetting her. Importantly, the power relationship was such that the student could not fight back and had to contain her anger and resentment. My film record showed that she held the "finger" emblem on one hand for a few minutes during the interview. Both the student and the professor were unaware of this emblem until I showed it to them on the film. We have found similar emblematic slips in our current studies of deceptive interactions (17). When there are social or contextual constraints inhibiting the transmission of a message but that message is quite salient nevertheless, emblematic slips can occur without awareness.

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