Gesture As Sign: A Semiotic Analysis of Bengali Everyday Emblematic Hand Gesture

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Emblematic hand gestures or emblems always possess human beings' communicative intentions. As signs, people worldwide use this gesture category in their everyday communicative contexts instead of words or phrases. Bengali Everyday Emblematic BEE hand gestures, a regional form of emblem, are also potentially enough for this purpose. This article examines the nature of BEE hand gestures as tools of communication in the context of Bengali-speaking areas. Seventeen (17) university students participated in this study to decode images of selected BEE hand gestures. The result of this study states that though all BEE hand gestures are used as dedicated communicative tools, some of these are identified as 'absolute emblems', and a few of these as 'deviated emblems'. Additionally, individuals from the Bengali gesture community feel comfortable using these BEE hand gestures in their everyday communication.

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A gesture is a form of communication. A gesture performed by a human body part is used to accomplish the purpose of human communication. Like speech, gestures possess a huge potential to be used as a means of communication. Emblematic hand gesture, a special type of gesture, is frequently used in different cultural contexts to fulfill the communication needs of human beings to the full extent. Since every emblematic hand gesture contains a specific cultural meaning equivalent to that of the traditional dictionary meaning, it might be identified as a sign from the perspective of the Saussurean semiotic view. The present article provides a semiotics analysis of Bengali Everyday Emblematic (BEE) Hand Gestures used by the Bengali gesture community for a long time to perform their communication needs.

Gesture: Feature and Function
Gesture: basic features and functions

Human gesture is a type of body movement frequently applied in the context of communication. Since most of the gestures are created by human beings in a communication setting in every culture, they are used as a means of communication. Although every human being applies different body parts to produce gestures, the most active organ in this regard is the hand. This is because more than 80% of human gestures are hand gestures (Arif 2015). Hence, Matsumoto et al. (2013) regard gestures are primarily hand movements. Here, a naïve definition of hand gesture can be provided as the movement of the hands that serves everyday human communication needs.

Hand gestures are of two types – a) co-speech hand gestures and b) speech-neutral hand gestures (Arif 2011 & 2015). The name 'co-speech' hand gesture implies that human beings produce this hand gesture along with speech while performing a communicative event. More specifically, co-speech hand gestures always accompany speech when the gesturer begins speaking. This form of hand gestures does not consist of dictionary meanings, but certainly with some exceptions. On the other hand, a speech-neutral gesture is a type of communicative hand movement or sign produced mainly in the absence of speech to denote a specific meaning. This hand gesture expresses specific cultural meanings to accomplish the communicative intentions of the gesture performer. Since a speech-neutral hand gesture consists of traditional meanings identical to those of a dictionary, every human being exhibits this gesture as a word or a syntactic phrase, usually in the absence of speech. A speech-neutral gesture is also identified as a 'symbolic gesture' (Ricci Bitti & Poggi, 1991), since it substitutes the word that is regarded as a symbol.

Nowadays, speech-neutral hand gesture or symbolic gestures is commonly known as emblematic gestures. Efron first coined the term 'emblematic gesture' in 1941 in his seminal book *Gesture and Environment* to indicate a culturally codified gesture that,

like a word, maintains an arbitrary relationship with its meaning. Later in their article entitled "The repertoire of non-verbal behavior: categories, origins, usage and coding," Ekman and Friesen (1969) renamed this gesture as only an 'emblem'. Following Efron and Ekman, and Friesen, later Johnson et al. (1975: 336) provide a representative definition of emblem, such as "Emblems are those nonverbal acts (a) which have a direct verbal translation usually consisting of a word or two, or a phrase". Accordingly, they also mention that since in every gesture community's emblematic hand gesture acts like a word, the users are familiar with the precise meaning of this gesture.

BEE hand gesture: Preliminary Understanding

The Bengali gesture community—where gesturers use specific emblems with the same dictionary meanings in different contexts—includes numerous symbolic hand gestures to meet communicative needs. In his study, Arif (2011) first identified over 40 emblems and called them Bengali Everyday Emblematic (BEE) hand gestures. He also explains that Bengali people within this community use these symbolic gestures either alone or as part of syntactic structures to convey a specific meaning during communication. In detail, like users of other communities, Bengali people see BEE hand gestures as words to express messages, emotions, love, feelings, hate, desire, and more. This paper discusses 16 BEE hand gestures to analyze their communicative features from the perspective of Saussurean semiotics.

Gesture as a Sign: A Saussurean View

As every emblematic hand gesture contains a certain dictionary meaning and acts like a word in a specific communicative context, it can be isolated from the point of view of Saussurean semiotics. Saussure (1959 [1916]) considers every word as a sign since it comprises two internal structures – the signifier and the signified. For example, to Saussure, the word 'pen' is a sign because anyone using this sign can extract its signifier and signified, which are part of this word. Here, the signifier is either the external image (⬂) or the letter form of this word, 'p-e-n', or even the sound form of this word. On the other hand, the signified of this word is the user's mental concept of this object.

The above semiotic interpretation by Saussure can also be applied to elicit the inherent signifier and signified of any emblematic hand gesture. For instance, the universal "thumps up" emblem consists of a signifier and a signified. More specifically, users of this emblematic hand gesture, belonging to all gesture communities, consider the visual form (👍) as a signifier, whereas the internal meaning of this gesture "okay" is represented as the signified. Alongside, according to the Saussurean view, the

alphabetic letter form 't-h-u-m-p-u-p' or its sound image can be regarded as a signifier. It is worth mentioning that the Saussurean view of semiotics isolates two following global aspects of emblematic hand gestures. In different cross-cultural studies—

A. One signifier of an emblem can provide two different meanings (for example, "thump up").

B. Two different signifiers of an emblem can express a single meaning (for example, "taking oath").

After all, the Saussurean semiotic view concludes that every emblematic hand gesture comprises two internal sign structures, like a sign - signifier and signified, hence an authentic tool of communication.

Emblematic Hand Gestures Possess Communication Intention

Nowadays, everyday emblematic hand gestures, irrespective of cultural identity, are being used to extract the underlying nature of communicative intentions. More specifically, researchers all over the world are trying to find out to what extent these gestures fulfill the nature of communication between the sender and the receiver; or how these gestures retrieve the relevant words matched with the target meanings. For example, Krauss et al. (2001) conducted a study where the main goal was to examine how lexical gestures (another name for 'emblem') helped to facilitate lexical retrieval. The findings provided a positive outcome in this regard because a big portion of lexical gestures used in this study elicited the target meanings. In another study, Tellier (2010) identified that the meanings of emblematic hand gestures are exclusively culturally codified, which reflects the view that the target meanings vary from culture to culture.

Arif (2011) conducted a study to identify the pragmatic meanings of 40 Bengali emblematic hand gestures used in the Bengali gesture community elicited by non-resident Bengalis living in Germany. The result of this study stated that many Bengali emblems gave rise to two or more meanings, though there was a prominent one. Since the subjects of the study were non-resident Bengalis settled in Germany and influenced by the all-European cultural practice, one signifier of an emblem exhibited more than one codified meaning.

Matsumoto and Hwang (2012) organised a study and published in the same year titled "Cultural Similarities and Differences in Emblematic Gestures" to investigate the cultural relatedness of emblems. The result of this study concludes that the decoders of emblematic gestures were able to extract 70% of the target meanings encoded by persons living in identical regions. The result of this argues that the hidden meaning of emblematic hand gestures is exclusively culture-specific. In the article entitled "A STUDY ON HOW TURKISH EMBLEMATIC HAND GESTURES CONVEY MEANING" (2015), DENİZCİ mentioned that Turkish emblematic hand gestures

took iconic characters in shaping the size, form, and quantity of objects that these denoted.

Considering the above findings, the present study intends to extract the target meanings of different BEE hang gestures used in the Bengali community for a long time. At the same time, if any selected BEE hand gesture provides more than one meaning, this will identify the prominent one too.

Method

To get the expected data, the present study follows a qualitative approach that includes participants with specific categories and age ranges, a special type of stimulus used by the participants, and an event of gesture performance. The details of this method are as follows.

Participants

Seventeen (17) university students who decoded the meanings of BEE hand gestures took part in this study as participants. The age range was 20 to 22. They were students at Dhaka University studying in different departments of the Faculty of Social Sciences. They were healthy without any neurological problems and belonged to the Bengali gesture community.

Stimuli

Sixteen (16) pictures with different BEE hand gestures were used as the stimuli of this study. After all, frequently used pictures of BEE hand gestures were selected (*Please see Annex 1*).

Data collection techniques

Every participant was given all sixteen BEE hand gestures and asked to decode the communicative meanings. Their performance was recorded with a mobile camera for further manipulation and counting. Every participant was interviewed individually at different times.

Data analysis

The data collected from every individual session was manually counted and arranged systematically to make them suitable for further investigation.

Results and Findings

The result reflects the overall view of young Bengali generations, especially how they identify the pragmatic meanings of selected BEE hand gestures. It also unveils how they interpret BEE hand gestures used in their various communicative contexts, and why

some of these gestures are regarded as genuine emblematic hand gestures, and others get deviated forms, although both senders and receivers fully communicate these.

Having manually calculated the data gathered from the session of the gesture decoding process by the subjects of this study, the following table is presented below to provide the overall gestural behaviors of the Bengali young generation, especially their performances in identifying the typicality of BEE hand gestures and the nature of variations as well.

Table 1. Identification of BEE hand gestures by young Bengali people

Serial no.	Name of the BEE hand gesture	Correct Answer	Deviation (with different meanings)	Didn't Answer
1.	Hello, Political	17		
2.	Hello, Informal	9	5 ('seeking attention') + 2 (saying 'goodbye')	1
3.	Salam	17		
4.	Formal greeting with respect	11	4 (salam) + 2 (patriotism)	
5.	Salute	11	4 (salam) + 1 (demanding)+ 1 (pride)	
6.	Raising a hand to ask a question	7	5 (attendance) + 5 (showing interest)	
7.	Munazat	17		
8.	Namaskar	17		
9.	Asking Pardon	9	2 (requesting) + 4 (discussing) + 1 (repent)+ 1 (friend)	
10.	Keeping Silent	17		
11.	Begging	17		
12.	Feeling Ashamed	9	3 (grief) + 2 (frustration) + 2 (tired) + 1 (hiding pain)	
13.	Blessing sign	12 (6 Affection)	2 (adoring) + 2 (consolation) + 1 (appreciation)	
14.	Victory Sign	17		
15.	'Well done' sign	17		
16.	'Okay' sign	17		

The above table mentions that among the selected 16 BEE hand gestures, 9 were fully identified as absolute emblems. All (17) participants recognized the signifiers of these Bengali everyday signs to provide a specific traditional meaning. On the contrary, 6 of the rest 7 gestures were also identified as deviated emblems with some alternative meanings. Finally, only one emblem (*See no. 6 of the table*) failed to be identified as a solid BEE hand gesture, since less than 51% of participants specified a single meaning to this sign. So, the graphical representation of the above is provided in the following.

Figure 1: A comparative view of the emblems of BEE hand gestures
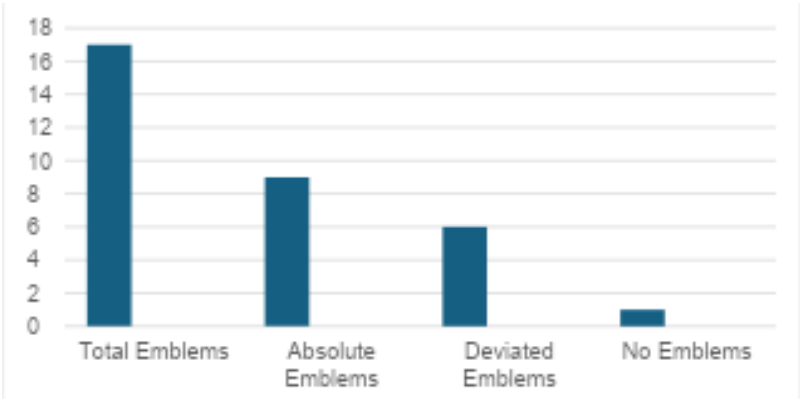
Now, the issue of 'deviated emblems' can be pointed out here. First of all, certainly, these are BEE hand gestures because more than 51% of participants provided a specific dictionary meaning for these emblems. But there appeared other meanings too. For example, for no. 2 ('Hello, Informal'), 5 participants considered it a 'seeking attention' emblem, and 2 of them recognized it as a 'goodbye' sign. So, this BEE hand gesture is potentially enough to be identified as a 'seeking attention' sign in the young Bengali gesture community. Gesture no. 4 ('Formal greeting with respect') was also identified as 'salam' and patriotism' by 4 and 2 participants, respectively. Gesture no. 5 ('Salute') got three different meanings from the participants, such as 'salam', 'demanding', and 'pride', by 4, 1, and 1 participant, respectively, in addition to having a prominent meaning. Importantly, the result of gesture no. 6 seeks special attention here. Although the researcher identified it as 'Raising a hand to ask a question', BEE hand gesture, a big portion of the participants considered this an 'attendance' and 'showing interest' (5 for each category) emblem. Lastly, gestures no. 9 and 12 got the highest 4 different meanings (*Please see the above table*).

Discussion

This study presents a view of gestural performance, especially the identification of BEE hand gestures by a group of Bangladeshi students. Since all participants belong

to a modern and young Bengali-speaking community living in urban areas, this result reflects a partial picture of their gestural behavior.

Although all BEE hand gestures included in this study have been decoded by Bangladeshi origin Bengali people, the result of the decoding phase provides two different identities of the emblems – absolute BEE hand gesture and deviated BEE hand gesture.

Firstly, nine of the total emblems included in the study achieved the title 'absolute emblems'. This is because all participants provided these emblems as a single- name entity. It indicates that there was no confusion among the participants to give an all-agreed name for these emblems since these have been used in the Bengali gestural community from time immemorial. At the same time, the context and the surroundings of these BEE hand gestures did not pose any obstacle to giving identical meanings. Importantly, among these nine BEE hand gestures, three were new ones, especially with global orientation; these emblems have been entered recently in this gestural community. But surprisingly, the participants did not feel any hesitation to provide a single meaning for these three emblems. As all participants who attended this study belong to a modern as well as young Bengali community, they are quite familiar with these signs and regularly practice these BEE hand gestures to perform their interpersonal communications. However, the result might be different if these are checked by the members of the old Bengali community.

In identifying the category 'deviated BEE hand gestures', there appeared to be some potential obstacles that could be mentioned here. More specifically, regarding identifying these signs, participants faced the 'same signifier effect', 'surrounding effect', 'contextless effect', etc. For example, in the Bengali gestural community, there are almost identical hand movements to show the 'Salam' and 'Salute' BEE hand gestures. So, participants felt hesitant to recognize the 'Salute' sign and were confused by the 'Salam' emblem. Accordingly, in identifying the 'Salam' signifier, they were accurate enough because compared to the 'Salute', the 'Salam' emblem is frequently performed as a form of socio-religious greeting in this community.

To recognize the BEE hand gesture no. 2, 'Hello, Informal', the participants were influenced by the 'surrounding effect'. Put elaborately, the context or the surroundings of this sign made the participants confused to settle the exact hidden meaning since to say 'goodbye', and to 'seek attention', the identical context and surroundings are also used. The same aspect applied to sign no. 9 with the meaning 'Asking pardon' and no. 13 with the meaning 'Blessing Sign', BEE hand gestures. In these two emblems, the surroundings or backgrounds did not give any concrete clues to provide a single meaning. Finally, in identifying the sign of the BEE hand gesture no. 12, 'Feeling Ashamed', the

participants were heavily influenced by a 'contextless effect'. Since this sign lacked a background context along with the gesturer's performance, they were puzzled to provide any single meaning of this BEE hand gesture. The above discussion indicates that specific surroundings, background, and context, and sameness of signifiers seriously affect the participants to recognize the exact meaning of any emblem, especially the BEE hand gesture. This is because the same signifier with different backgrounds and contexts is used to signify different meanings of some BEE hand gestures.

The result of the present study exclusively supports the findings of some similar studies conducted earlier. For example, like Krauss et al. (2001), this present study states that symbolic gestures or emblematic hand gestures are a form of lexical gestures that help to retrieve the dictionary meanings used in a specific gesture community. Following Tellier (2010) and Matsumoto and Hwang (2012), the present study strongly expresses the view that the hidden meanings of BEE hand gestures are culturally codified, and these meanings are changed by the contexts and surroundings. Finally, in terms of getting various meanings from the single signifier of a specific BEE hand gesture, this study is matched with Arif (2011). However, the main difference between these two studies lies in the selection of participants. Arif (2011) chose non-resident Bengali people as the participants who settled in Germany for a long time, whereas the present study includes young Bangladeshi university students who were born and brought up in Bangladesh. Thus, the results of these two studies conclude that Bengali people with different age ranges living in two separate linguistic surroundings belong to an identical gestural community.

Conclusion

The Bengali linguistic community is a vibrant gesture community in the world nowadays. Members of this community regularly perform a huge number of hand gestures to accomplish their everyday communication. The gestural activities performed by them include both co-speech and speech-neutral gestures. Speech-neutral gestural performance identified as BEE hand gestures is the active one in this regard. The above result helps to visualize that although this group of gestures sometimes takes different names with meaning variations, these are very useful ones in their daily communicative settings.

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Appendix 1

Selected BEE Hand Gestures
(Some selected gestures included here were first used by Arif, 2011)

| 1. Hello, formal | 2. Hello, informal |

3. Salam

4. Formal greeting with respect

5. Salute

6. Raising a hand to ask a question
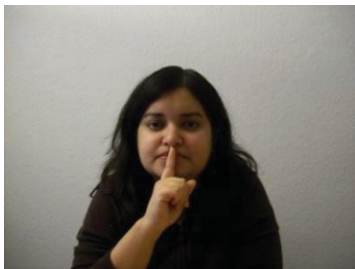

7. Munazat

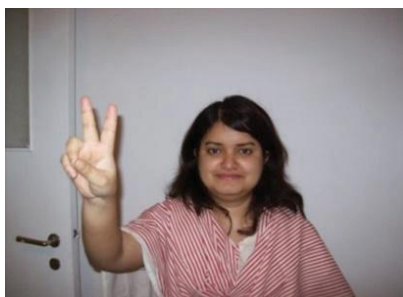Namaskar

Asking Pardon

Keeping Silent

Begging

12. Feeling Ashamed

13. Blessing Sign

14. Victory Sign

15. Well done

16. 'Okay' Sign