

The International Society for Gesture Studies (ISGS)

A brief history of the origins of The International Society for Gesture Studies (ISGS)

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On June 6th, 2002, which was considered to be a cool early summer day in Austin (Texas), the International Society for Gesture Studies was officially founded. It held its first general assembly, voted upon its statutes, elected an executive board, and had its first official international conference. How did this all happen?

Over the past three decades there has been a growing recognition that the study of ‘gesture’ – visible bodily action that plays a role in explicit communication – promises to throw much light on a range of issues that are central for any understanding of language (broadly conceived), and for an understanding of communication processes in human interaction. By 1990, a number of different scholars had begun to envisage the idea of a field of ‘gesture studies.’ One step toward an explicit recognition of this field was that, in 1995, Annual Review of Anthropology commissioned an article on ‘Gesture’ (see Kendon, 1997). Even more significant, however, the Linguistic Society of America recognized the importance of the study of gesture for a general theory of language when it included in its Summer Institute at Albuquerque, New Mexico, courses on gesture as it is used by speakers, as well as courses on sign languages. In addition, David McNeill and Adam Kendon organized a conference entitled ‘Gestures Compared Cross-Linguistically’ which was held while the Linguistic Institute was in progress. This was probably the first international conference ever organized which was wholly devoted to gesture. It was widely attended. Also during the Linguistics Institute, Sherman Wilcox and David Armstrong organized a workshop on ‘Language and Gesture: Unity or Duality?’. A collection of papers from both of these conferences was edited by David McNeill and published in 2000 by Cambridge University Press under the title *Language and Gesture*. This book has established itself as an excellent survey of the current ‘state of the art’ in gesture studies. (McNeill, 2000).

Partly in response to these developments, but also independently, there emerged a group of scholars ready to take the initiative to institutionalize ‘gesture studies’ as a field. The first step towards this took place in Berlin, in the Spring of 1998, when many of those who had devoted a large part of their academic careers to gesture research gathered at the Technical University of Berlin¹ for an ‘International Symposium on The Semantics and Pragmatics of Everyday Gestures’. On this occasion Roland Posner of Berlin put forward proposals for the institutionalization of the field of gesture studies. These were greeted with unanimous and spontaneous enthusiasm. Everyone agreed that the time seemed ripe for such an effort. The four ideas Posner proposed were taken up and the group decided to join forces in creating an international network of gesture researchers through an address list, to found an international society for gesture studies which would organize regular international conferences on gesture studies, and to launch an international journal for the field. The participants present then officially asked certain individuals to explore these ideas in more detail and elected a statutes committee which declared its willingness to discuss and formulate the statutes of the future society, asked Monica Rector (Chapel Hill) to organize the next meeting of the society in 2000 in Boston, and asked Cornelia Müller (Berlin) to compile an address list of gesture

Apart from these initiatives, the symposium carried on an intense discussion of various problems for the development of a lexicography of gestures and offered important insights into different approaches and dimensions on the question of how gesture is used in different cultures. The results of these discussions are to be found in a book edited by Cornelia Müller and Roland Posner on 'The Semantics and Pragmatics of Everyday Gestures' published by Weidler Verlag in Berlin (Müller & Posner 2002).

Two years later, in April 2000, an international conference on gesture studies took place in Porto (Portugal). It was organized by Monica Rector (Chapel Hill), Salvato Trigo (Porto), and Isabella Poggi (Rome) at the University Fernando Pessoa in Porto. Although, for a number of technical reasons, this was not the occasion for the founding of the International Society for Gesture Studies as had been originally hoped in Berlin, the conference attracted a large range of gesture scholars – especially from Europe but also from the US and Asia, and provided a further very important occasion for bringing gesture researchers together and thus giving additional strength to the growing awareness that a field of 'gesture studies' is indeed emerging. The overarching theme of the conference was 'Gestures: Meaning and Use' and the many and diverse contributions to this dimension of gesture studies can be followed up in the papers of the conference to be published under the title 'Gestures. Their Meaning and Use', edited by Isabella Poggi, Monica Rector, and Nadine Trigo (Poggi et al., 2002).

At the Porto conference Cornelia Müller (Berlin) and Adam Kendon (Philadelphia/Naples) presented an outline of their plans for an international journal of gesture studies, reported on the stage reached regarding their negotiations with possible publishing houses and invited the participants of the conference to submit papers to the future journal GESTURE. A short while later the negotiations were brought to a positive conclusion and a contract was signed with John Benjamins Publishing Company (Amsterdam and Philadelphia).

In June 2000 Sotaro Kita (Nijmegen) and Cornelia Müller (Berlin) organized an informal meeting at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen to discuss further preparatory steps for the foundation of an international society and to join forces in finding a person able and willing to organize the next international conference.³ Later in the summer of the same year, Roland Posner (Berlin) brought together the statutes committee of the future ISGS at a workshop on the 'Rhetorics of Gestures' at the Semiotics Summer School in Urbino (Italy).⁴ There the aims, the structure, and the statutes of the ISGS were discussed; the aims and scope of the journal GESTURE was presented and discussed; national and international publications relevant to the field of gesture studies were sought out; and future conferences, summer schools and workshops were envisioned. After the Urbino meeting the statutes committee officially asked Jürgen Streeck (Austin, Texas) to organize 'The First Conference of the International Society for Gesture Studies'.

This effort of establishing gesture studies as a field of its own was paralleled by a powerful national initiative of a related kind: A group of mostly young French scholars had organized an impressive international conference in December 1998 in Besançon (France) and this brought together scholars from all over the world under the topic 'Oralité et Gestualité. Communication Multimodale, Interaction'. The papers given at that conference are collected in the volume 'Oralité et Gestualité. Communication Multimodale, Interaction' edited by Serge Santi, Isabelle Guaitella, Christian Cavé, and Gabrielle Konopczynski (Santi et al., 1998). On that occasion a French society for the research on gesture and voice (Geste et Voix) was announced which then was officially founded in 2000.⁵ Isabelle Guaitella (Aix-en-Provence) and Serge Santi (Aix-en-Provence, Besançon) – the heads of the research group 'Geste et Voix' and the motivating forces behind these initiatives – joined forces with the statutes committee preparing the ISGS at Urbino and subsequently supported the preparation of an international society for the study of gesture, Serge Santi becoming an interim general secretary of the ISGS in the process of being founded, until the election of the first executive

summer of Aix-en-Provence. The participants of the conference regarded this five day gathering as deeply impressive, not only because of the marvelous site and the ‘fête de la musique’ in the streets of Aix, but also because of the inspiring and open atmosphere at the conference. This conference too is documented in an impressive volume published by L’Harmattan. It is edited by Christian Cavé, Isabelle Guaitella, Serge Santi in 2001 and is entitled: ‘Oralité et Gestualité. Interactions et comportements multimodaux dans la communication’ (Cavé et al., 2001).

At the conference in Aix a further preparatory yet informal meeting regarding the foundation of the ISGS was held. The preparations of statutes committee made since Urbino received here active support from a group of young scholars willing to aid in the preparation of the general and constitutive assembly of the ISGS to be held at the Austin conference. This included preparing the procedures for the voting on the statutes of the Society, the procedures for the elections of the executive board, the preparation of the legal status of the ISGS, its membership organization, and in giving support to the ISGS website with local information from all over the world.⁷

On June 6th 2002 the International Society was officially founded. This took place during the conference organized by Jürgen Streeck under the title ‘Gesture: The Living Medium’ held at the University of Texas at Austin from June 5th-June 8th. The general assembly of the Society discussed and unanimously voted upon the proposed statutes as well as on the list of candidates proposed by the statutes committee for the executive board of the ISGS. The following persons were elected:⁸

Jürgen Streeck (Austin)	<i>President</i>
Heather Brookes (Stanford/Pretoria)	<i>Vice-President</i>
Jacques Cosnier (Lyon)	<i>Vice-President</i>
David McNeill (Chicago)	<i>Vice-President</i>
Rosa Montes (Puebla)	<i>Vice-President</i>
Asli Özyürek (Istanbul/Nijmegen)	<i>General Secretary</i>
Evelyn McClave (Northridge)	<i>Treasurer</i>
Gale Stam (Chicago)	<i>Treasurer</i>
Nick Enfield (Nijmegen)	<i>Public Relations Manager</i>

The people listed above are the members of the Executive Board of the ISGS, with the addition of the editors of the journal GESTURE (Cornelia Müller & Adam Kendon) who serve on the board *ex officio*.

The executive committee decided to set up a website for the ISGS ([http://www ???](http://www.???)) which makes available information concerning the projects and decisions taken by the executive board to the members of the society. It also contains the protocols of the meetings, the statutes, membership application forms, and provides information about activities and conferences which are relevant for the field of gesture studies.

The Society is now in being, the journal GESTURE is a going concern and it is hoped that a companion book series will soon be inaugurated. Everything is now in place for the further development of ‘gesture studies.’ This is a ‘field’ in the true sense – for it is defined by an area of concern rather than by a single set of methods or approaches. This ‘field’ is one that does not have sharp boundaries, but is an open field with those who enter it coming from many different backgrounds and bringing with them a wide range of interests and knowledge. We are looking forward to a very lively future.

References

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Rector, Monica, Poggi, Isabella, & Nadine Trigo (Eds.) (2002). *Gestures. Their meaning and Use*. Porto: University Fernando Pessoa.

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¹ Among them: Penny Boyes Bråhm (Basel), Geneviève Calbris (Paris), Peter Collett (Oxford), Adam Kendon (Philadelphia), Grigori Kreidlin (Moscow), David McNeill (Chicago), Isabella Poggi (Rome), Roland Posner (Berlin), Monica Rector (Chapel Hill), Pio Enrico Ricci Bitti (Bologna).

² For the entire list of participants and the decisions taken at the founding session see the protocol of the founding session held on April 26, 1998 in Berlin on the website of the ISGS (ISGS Berlin 1998 protocol) <[http://www ???](http://www.???)>.

³ Participants in that meeting were: Martha Alibali (Madison), Marianne Gullberg (Nijmegen), Adam Kendon (Philadelphia/Naples), Sotaro Kita (Nijmegen), Hedda Lausberg (Berlin), Stephen C. Levinson (Nijmegen), Cornelia Müller (Berlin), Herman Roodenburg (Amsterdam), Mandana Seyfeddinipur (Nijmegen), Jürgen Streeck (Austin), David Wilkins (Nijmegen).

⁴ Participants of that workshop were: Isabelle Guaitella (Aix-en-Provence), Grigori Kreidlin (Moscow), Reinhard Krüger (Berlin), Cornelia Müller (Berlin), Lluís Payrató (Barcelona), Roland Posner (Berlin), Serge Santi (Aix-en-Provence, Besançon), Massimo Serenari (Berlin). For more information about this meeting see the protocol of the 'ISGS Urbino 2000' meeting in Aix-en-Provence on the website of the ISGS. <[http://www ???](http://www.???)>

⁵ For further information concerning GeVoix please contact: gevoix@lpl.univ-aix.fr.

⁶ Orage being not only an acronym for Oralité et Gestualité but also a word for 'thunderstorm'.

⁷ Participants in that meeting were: Martha Alibali (Madison), Nobu Furuyama (Tokio), Marianne Gullberg (Nijmegen), Sotaro Kita (Nijmegen, Bristol), Evelyn McClave (Northridge), Cornelia Müller (Berlin), Shuichi Nobe (Tokio), Asli Özyürek (Istanbul), Lluís Payrató (Barcelona), Serge Santi (Aix-en-Provence). For the details of this meeting see the protocol of the 'ISGS Orage 2001' meeting in Aix-en-Provence obtainable on the website of the ISGS. <[http://www ???](http://www.???)>

⁸ For the details of all the ISGS related meetings held at the Austin conference see the protocol of the Inaugural Conference of the International Society for Gesture Studies (ISGS) held in Austin, Texas 2002 that can be found on the website of the ISGS (ISGS Austin 2002 protocol). <[http://www ???](http://www.???)>