A Semiotic Profile: Adam Kendon

By Cornelia Müller

Adam Kendon is a leading authority on the study of gesture but has also published pioneering studies on the organization of behaviour in face-to-face interaction. In a scholarly career that extends over nearly forty years, Kendon has published over one hundred articles and several books all of which deal, in various ways, with the role of the body in face-to-face interaction. He is, at present, a ‘scholar-at-large’, dividing his time between Philadelphia and the Island of Procida in the Bay of Naples. He is a co-editor (with Cornelia Müller) of the international journal Gesture that has been published by John Benjamins of Amsterdam since 2001 and was made an Honorary President of the International Society of Gesture Studies in 2005.

Adam Kendon was born in London in 1934, but grew up near Cambridge. His father, Frank Kendon, was a poet and journalist who was associated with Cambridge University Press and a Fellow of St. John’s College, Cambridge. At an early age, Adam Kendon developed an interest in natural history, with a special interest in social behaviour, first in birds, later in humans. By the time he was eighteen he had decided to study psychology which, however, he regarded as a branch of biology rather than philosophy. He attended St. John’s College, Cambridge, where he read for the Natural Sciences Tripos. He read Botany, Zoology and Human Physiology for Part I of the Tripos and Experimental Psychology for Part II, in which he took a First Class. In 1956 he moved to Balliol College, Oxford. Supported by a grant from the Medical Research Council, he became an Advanced Student at the Institute for Experimental Psychology (as it was then known). He worked on the temporal organization of utterances in conversation, using the methods of interaction chronography that had been developed by Eliot Chapple, an American anthropologist and pioneer in interaction studies (See Chapple 1939, 1940; Chapple and Coon 1942). After three years at Oxford, Kendon was awarded an English Speaking Union scholarship to study at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. While there he made contact with Eliot Chapple, who at that time had a laboratory at Rockland State Hospital at Rockland, New York. He was able to work with Chapple and the work he undertook was written up in his dissertation “Temporal Aspects of the Social Performance in Two-Person Encounters.” For this he was awarded the degree of D. Phil. from Oxford University in 1963.

Kendon remained at Oxford as a member of the Institute (later Department) of Experimental Psychology, and joined a research group on social skills, directed by E. R. W. F. Crossman and Michael Argyle. In this work an attempt was made to extend to the study of social interaction the ideas and methods developed at Cambridge under Professor Sir Frederick Bartlett, among others, in analyzing perceptuo-motor skills (see Saito 1999 for an overview of Bartlett’s work). It was proposed that participants in interaction could be regarded as skilled performers who, to qualify as conversationalists, must deploy various actions and monitor various sources of information in a continuous manner. In this work Kendon was influenced by the work of Erving Goffman, who had shown in “Alienation from interaction” (Goffman 1957) and “On face work” (Goffman 1955), how occasions of interaction could be studied as behavioural systems, maintained through the sustained and skillful performances of the participants.

Crossman, in studying skilled work in an industrial context, had shown the importance of understanding how workers deployed their visual attention as they carried out their manual tasks (such as making cigars). He suggested to Kendon that a study of where people looked in conversation could likewise throw light on the organization of conversational skill. The research Kendon undertook in consequence (partly in collaboration with Professor Jacques Ex who was visiting Oxford from the Catholic University of Nijmegen), was published in 1967 as “Some functions of gaze direction in social interaction” (Kendon 1967). In this paper consistencies in the relationship between where a conversationalist looked and turns at talk were demonstrated. These suggested that gaze served both monitoring and signalling functions in conversation and could, for example, play a role in the process by which the coordination of turn taking is achieved. This paper became quite famous, earning the status of a “Citation Classic” in Current Contents in 1981.

While at Oxford, Kendon became acquainted with the work of Albert Scheflen (see Scheflen 1964, 1973) and Ray Birdwhistell (see Birdwhistell 1970). This work convinced him that undertaking detailed studies of all aspects of observable behaviour in interaction was necessary for any advance in understanding how interaction is accomplished and he felt that the systematic observational methods that
Birdwhistell and Scheflen were developing within a framework inspired by the methods of structural linguistics, provided a sound basis upon which to proceed. In 1965 he was able to visit Scheflen in Philadelphia. Subsequently, Scheflen arranged for Kendon an appointment as a Research Associate under Henry Brosin at the Western Pennsylvania Psychiatric Institute in Pittsburgh. Here Kendon worked closely with William Condon, learning his methods of micro kinesic linguistic analysis (see Condon and Ogston 1967, Condon 1976). He also met Ray Birdwhistell. In 1967 Kendon went to Cornell University for one year as a Visiting Assistant Professor in Psychology and Sociology, but he then joined Albert Scheflen’s Project on Human Communication, established at Bronx State Hospital in New York with funds from the National Institutes of Health. Kendon worked with Scheflen on the study of the spatial ecology of everyday life in urban homes. In collaboration with Andrew Ferber he undertook a detailed study of the structure of human greetings, among other things (Kendon and Ferber 1973).

The series of publications that eventuated from this period, together with the work done at Oxford, were published together in a revised and updated form in 1990 by Cambridge University Press under the title Conducting Interaction (Kendon 1990). Besides re-printing his seminal papers on gaze direction in interaction and interactional synchrony, this book also includes the study of greetings, a study of a human courtship interaction and a study of the spatial-orientational arrangements that can be observed in conversational interaction. In this work Kendon offered his concept of the “F-formation” which suggests that the way in which participants in interaction dispose themselves in space and orient to one another is the ‘behavioral material’ for the processes by which what Goffman (1963) termed the ‘working consensus’ of occasions of focused interaction is established and maintained. These ideas were developed in a theoretical essay entitled “Behavioral foundations of frame attunement in face-to-face interaction” (first published in 1985), which is included in this collection (Kendon 1990, Chapter 8).

Writing in the American Anthropologist, Christian Heath described this collection of papers as “a landmark in the development of naturalistic research on social interaction. It powerfully demonstrates the analytic rewards of utilizing film and video to explicate the fine details of in situ human conduct, and provides a distinctive methodological orientation for an anthropology of social interaction”. Heath points out that although Kendon had clearly been guided by the methodological and theoretical frameworks of Goffman, Scheflen and Birdwhistell, he nevertheless developed “a unique analytic orientation to the study of social interaction.” Heath continues: “The detailed studies of interactional organization found in this collection beautifully reveal the emergence of [Kendon’s] framework, and demonstrate its ability to explicate the systematics that underlie the fine, yet fundamental, details of human sociability” (Heath 1992).

The paper that Kendon published on human greetings (originally published as Kendon and Ferber 1973) was informed by the outlook and methods of ethology (thereby reflecting Kendon’s continuing biological and natural history orientation). It attracted the attention of Derek Freeman at Australian National University. Derek Freeman was head of the Department of Anthropology in the Research School of Pacific Studies at Australian National University. He was interested in establishing a human ethology laboratory in his Department and wrote to Kendon inviting him to apply for a Research Fellowship there, which would make this possible. Accordingly, in 1974, Kendon and his family left for Australia.

The Human Ethology Laboratory that Kendon helped organize was later joined by the ethnographic film makers Timothy and Patsy Asch and the laboratory came to be known as the Human Ethology and Iconic Recording Laboratory, reflecting the emphasis on film documentation that it came to have. In his own work, however, Kendon turned, increasingly, to the study of gesture. He came to regard this as a coherent domain of human visible action, closely involved with, and sometimes functioning in place of, linguistic action. Kendon had been impressed by the observations that Birdwhistell had summarized on kinesics (see Kendon 1972b for an exposition of Birdwhistell’s kinesic project) and had, while at Cornell University, undertaken a micro-analytic study of the organization of the flow of body motion in a single speaker. This demonstrated how speech and bodily action were coordinated. The paper that resulted, “Some relationships between body-motion and speech” (Kendon 1972a), was later described by David McNeill as the true starting point for the recognition that gestures “are integral parts of the processes of language and its use” (McNeill 2005, p. 13). Kendon expressed this point of view again with great clarity in a paper published in 1980 under the title “Gesture and speech: two aspects of the process of utterance” (Kendon 1980b). Kendon came to see that the study of ‘gesture’, as a distinguishable domain of action intimately involved in utterance, could merit development as a field of study in its own right (Kendon 1986). From 1980 onwards ‘gesture’ became his main preoccupation.

As part of his work in the Department in Canberra, Kendon went on an expedition to the Enga in the highlands of New Guinea, with a view to filming various aspects of their social behaviour, including greetings. He did this in the company of Ranier Lang of the Department of Linguistics at Australian National University, who was a student of the Enga language and was particularly interested in the role of interpreters working between Enga and Tok Pisin. While there Kendon had the opportunity to make some films of a young deaf woman who used a sign language. This sign language, prevalent in the Enga valley where Kendon was working, is an example of an ‘isolated’ or ‘natural’ sign language. Apparently it had arisen following an epidemic of meningitis that left many children deaf. Thanks to the help of a hearing Enga assistant fluent in this sign language, Kendon undertook a detailed analysis of it, published in a series of three papers in Semiotica (Kendon 1980a).

Following this, Kendon was prompted to inquire about the sign languages that were said to be in use among Australian Aborigines. Kendon discovered that these sign languages, which have been elaborated not because of deafness but because of ritual speech-avoidance under certain circumstances and which belong, thus, to the class of what may be called alternate sign languages, had received almost no scientific attention. He proceeded to take up their study and obtained research support from various sources (including the National Science Foundation, the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Australian Institute for Torres Straits Islander and Aboriginal Studies and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation) and, over the course of the following ten years, examined almost every aspect of these sign languages which were still in active use among the central desert Aborigines, including the Warlpiri, among other groups. In 1988 he published a book (Kendon 1988) which remains, to this day, the only full-scale study of Australian Aboriginal sign languages. In this book, besides discussing the history of what is known of these sign
In 1988 Kendon went to live in Philadelphia and taught for two years at the Annenberg School of Communications. At the same time, he began to develop a new line of research suggested by the comparative work of David Efron (1941). Efron, in a study of immigrants in Manhattan, had shown that Southern Italians made use of an elaborate vocabulary of gestures which could be used independently of speech and that in this they differed from another cultural group, East European Jews. Efron demonstrated that this difference is the product of differences in cultural tradition, leaving open the question as to why such differences should arise. Kendon decided that a study of gesture among Southern Italians in their original settings might throw light on why gesture played such an important role for them. He proposed that the ecology of everyday social life might offer circumstances in which the elaboration of gesture might be adaptive. Accordingly, in 1991 (through the good offices of Pio Enrico Ricci Bitti of Bologna and Pina Boggi Cavallo of Salerno) he obtained an invitation to the University of Salerno as a Visiting Professor. He was also granted research funds from the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research of New York. In this way he began what became a long association with Campania, especially with the city of Naples. In 1996, thanks to Jocelyn Vincent Marrelli and Carla Cristilli, he was appointed as a Visiting Professor at the Istituto Universitario Orientale (now the Università degli Studi di Napoli “Orientale”) where he was able to collaborate with students in the collection and analysis of a great deal of video recordings of everyday interaction in Naples. At the same time (with help from the Istituto Italiano per Gli Studi Filosofici), he undertook a deep study of the work of Andrea de Jorio, a priest and pioneer of Italian archaeology who, in 1832, had published a book on Neapolitan gesture. De Jorio wrote this book as a kind of handbook for the interpretation of the images on the ancient vases, frescoes and mosaics that had come to light in the excavations of Herculaneum and Pompeii, for he believed that there was continuity in the expressive culture of present day Neapolitans with that of the ancient Greeks who had founded the city some two and a half millennia before. In effect, de Jorio had undertaken a detailed ethnographic study of Neapolitan gesture use. Kendon made a full English translation of de Jorio’s book and this, together with a lengthy discussion of de Jorio’s work and its place in the development both of gesture studies and of Neapolitan archaeology, was published in 2000 under the title *Gesture in Naples and Gesture in Classical Antiquity* (see De Jorio 2000). Rather to Kendon’s surprise, this publication received wide notice, being reviewed in the *Economist*, the *New York Review of Books*, and the *The New Republic* as well as in a number of scholarly journals.

Since 1991 Kendon has spent increasing amounts of time in southern Italy, mainly in Naples. From 2002-2005 he was a Visiting Professor at both the “Orientale” and at the University of Calabria. Both before and during these years, Kendon was able to collaborate extensively with many students in directing their graduation theses and in several cases this work resulted in significant studies of gesture use in Naples and how it is used in spoken discourse. Some of this work has been published in a number of separate papers (Kendon 1993, 1995, 2001, 2004a, Kendon and Versante 2003) but it also is prominently featured in Kendon’s most recent major publication, his book *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance* (Kendon 2004).

This book, published in 2004 by Cambridge University Press, is proably the most significant contribution to gesture studies to appear since David McNeill’s *Hand and Mind* (1992) and must be ranked among the most important books on gesture to be published in English since David Efron’s book of 1941. It makes a serious claim to establish the domain of ‘gesture’ as a coherent and separable field of study. It contains an extended and detailed history of the study of gesture, there are chapters which provide detailed descriptions of gesture use in conversation (unmatched in any other publication), an extensive study of gestures with meta-discursive or pragmatic functions, as well as chapters which discuss how gesture develops when used without speech (as in sign languages), cultural variations in gesture, and an attempt to propose an ecological theory to account for why cultures vary in gesture use.

In the three main areas of his research, Kendon has worked within an empirical framework that follows a unique style. He shows how human behaviour can best be understood through naturalistic observations and fine-grained structural studies of interactions, signs, or gestures in their everyday contexts. This work is both ethological and ethnographic in its approach and represents an ethological and ethnographic approach to the study of what is often today referred to as the multimodality of communication in human interaction.

Whoever has had the chance to analyze data with him, remains fascinated by his capacity to “see” structural patterns of behaviour in their natural contexts. And it is this combination of meticulous observations of behaviour in context, a radical clear-cut analytic style, along with in-depth knowledge of the historical literature that characterize his work in general – not only his pioneering work on human gestures.

But anyone who has had the opportunity to work with Kendon also knows that he is not just a keen observer, an acute ethologist and well versed in the literature of his chosen fields. They soon learn of some of his other interests. For example, they learn that he is a great devotee of the poetry of Edward Lear and the works of Lewis Carroll, which, given the slightest excuse, he will quote from extensively. He is accomplished at Indian cuisine, he is fond of wine and especially particular about tea. He is very devoted to cats and (over the years) has been a host to a great many. He practises photography extensively and though he has twice entered exhibitions, his works in this medium are mostly to be seen at his house. In 2005, however, the association Artefactory 41.14 of Procida published a set of 12 photographic postcards, “The Cats of Corricella – I gatti di Corricella”, a series of images showing cats as they are so often found among the brilliantly coloured fishing nets and boats of this little fishing village on the Island of Procida. Kendon also occasionally writes poetry (or rather, as he will tell you, one of his cats does this for him). An example of this poetry, entitled “The Growth Point”, has been published as an appendix to David McNeill’s book *Gesture and Thought* (McNeill 2005).

He has been married for many years to Margaret Rhoads of Philadelphia. He has three children (two live in Australia, one near Washington, D.C.) and (so far) four grandchildren.
Publications by Adam Kendon

Books as author


Books translated


Books as editor


Articles in journals and edited volumes

A. REPORTS OF ORIGINAL RESEARCH


C. SHORTER PUBLICATIONS


References


He runs the SemiotiX Bulletin which has a global readership, is a founding editor of the Public Journal of Semiotics, and was a central
Globalization has caused the development of a global consumer culture where products have similar associations, whether positive or negative, across numerous markets. Mistranslations may lead to instances of “Engrish” or “Chinglish”, terms for unintentionally humorous cross-cultural slogans intended to be understood in English.