Gestures and Responses: A Preliminary Study among Some Indian Tribes of Bolivia

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Although many groups of 'uncivilized' Indian tribes have been contacted in Bolivia during the last few decades, there remain a few isolated vestiges of tribes which apparently have no contact with the modern world. During a recent conference of the Bolivian branch of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, discussions took place about methods of contacting these tribes. The discussion groups attempted to collect data on gestures and responses and to determine what part they might have in contacting a group of people when no mutual language is known.

At the time of our meetings we were fortunate to have visitors from other organizations who have had experience with different cultures (Mr. and Mrs. Henrick Erickson of the World Mission Prayer League; Charles Johnson, Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mason, Bruce Porterfield, and Mr. and Mrs. Richard Wyma, all of New Tribes Mission; members of the Summer Institute of Linguistics included: Marion Heaslip, Mr. and Mrs. William Jackson, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Judy, Frances MacNeill, Mr. and Mrs. Perry Priest, Mr. and Mrs. Jack Shoemaker, Mr. and Mrs. Donald Van Wynen; Harold Key was chairman of the meetings; Eunice Pike gave constructive suggestions in presenting the material). All of the members who took part in the discussions were field workers who had actual experience in working with or living in Indian groups. Some had had a great deal of experience or several years living with Indians; others had varying degrees of experience down to a few months or just a few contacts.

The tribes represented were: Aymara, Ayoreo, Chama, Guarayo, Movima, Pacas Novas (actually of Brazil), Siriono, Tacana, and Yuqui. All, except the Yuqui, are tribes which have constant contact with outsiders and are friendly. The Yuqui tribe (quite possibly a member of the Guaraní family) has been contacted but remains very unfriendly, and it is not certain that contact can be resumed. We also had information on what we think is the Pacahuara tribe (as yet uncontacted, though the people have been seen from a distance), and on a group which is thought to be the Toromono tribe in the northwest corner of Bolivia. The information given on the latter was not specifically on gestures because no face-to-face contact has

been made, but ethnographical notes were made, for example: how the Indians (unseen) treated the gifts which were left on a gift rack and what things they left in return.

Besides discussions with separate individuals, two meetings were conducted in an informal manner so that any person might speak when an idea occurred to him or when he suddenly remembered information which might be pertinent to the subject.

The study of gesture has barely been touched, though mention should be made of an important work, which, unfortunately I do not have here in the jungle: Ray L. Birdwhistell, Introduction to kinesics: an annotation system for analysis of body motion and gesture, Louisville, Ky., University of Louisville, 1952; 75p. We realized that we could only begin to explore the area. Lists were made to suggest areas in which information could be elicited from the members of the discussion groups. Making the lists showed the difficulty in isolating for discussion any one facet of the intricately woven system of gestural communication. The inter-woven layers and overlapping categories defied a neat classification. Gestures may be meaningful or non-meaningful; they may be emotional or they may be used in unemotional contexts; they may be intentional or unintentional, simply conveying characteristics of a certain tribe or a person. Participating members were invited to make a chart which they themselves would fill in during the meetings and also use to guide them in further research as they return to live in the Indian tribes. Down one side were listed main discussion points that might involve a gesture or response: emotions (with subheads such as anger, joy, etc.), attitudes (approval, gratitude), actions (sitting, pointing). Along the top were listed the parts of the body which might be involved in a gesture or response: facial expressions (with subheads which included forehead, eyes, nose, and mouth), hand movements, arm movements, leg movements, torso. Also such items as interpersonal reactions, use of clothing, voice quality and pitch were suggested as perhaps relevant along with a gesture. On large sheets of paper a composite chart was made to record information on all the tribes represented.

Since the discussion was not intended to be of a linguistic nature we did not discuss languages as such, but agreed to include mention of vocables when they were inseparable from a gesture. We also tried to keep from describing the ethnology of the tribes as much as possible because there were so many tribes represented with so much information at hand that the discussions would have become unwieldy.

Our purpose was to isolate basic gestures and responses which would indicate specific emotions or attitudes.

Certain gestures which I shall call lexical gestures carry a meaning in themselves. They may be descriptive: 'like this', 'it's round'; or directional: 'where?' 'over there', 'that one'. They may be responses to the spoken language: 'so big', 'no'; or they may substitute for the spoken language: 'Let's eat', 'Hello!', 'goodbye'.

The Latin American gestural language is rich. For example, in Mexico some rural people have three ways of gesturing to indicate measurement. The hand outstretched with palm down indicates that the measurement refers to an inanimate object; such as the table; the hand outstretched with palm vertical (fingers horizontal) refers to an animal; the index finger reaching upwards refers to a person. Also in Mexico the gesture of the right palm hitting the left elbow means that the person referred to is very stingy. The gesture of the fingers of the right hand grouped together and motioning towards the mouth means eating. Those of us who have associated with Latin American people are aware of the intricacies of hand movement in greetings and farewells as well as in accompaniment to their speech.

Many Indian tribes point with their lips; we recorded the Movima, Tacana, and the Ayoreo as using this gesture. But there were differences in executing this gesture; the Movimas do not accompany it with a thrust of the head as the other tribes do, but simply protrude their lips to point out an object. To indicate direction they thrust their hand straight out with the palm held sideways.

The Sirionó and the Chama point with a nod of the head and movement of the eyes indicating the location. The Pacas Novas try to avoid being pointed at, much in the same way that they avoid a camera.

Each of these lexical gestures can be made with slight variation depending on the speaker, status, sex, age, etc. Yet there is a norm around which variations center, much the same as variations of sounds center around a norm making up a phoneme in sound systems.

Then there are nonlexical gestures. These carry no particular meaning but convey characteristics implicit in a certain tribe. They may involve such actions as sitting or walking. While Movimas sprawl as they sit at ease, the Aymaras sit cross-legged. The Sirionós, particularly the women, sit on their hauches.

Emotional gestures show the attitude of the speaker. These gestures are to

accompanying actions what intonation is to an utterance. They carry overtones of emotion at the same time that other actions (or gestures) are taking place. They may even override the other actions.

The Aymara people were considered by the participants to be 'very emotional' and the Chama people 'unemotional'. Although the Aymara people are thought to be very emotional, at the same time it was noted that they are slow moving with little hand movement; their hands are tucked under shawls and blankets most of the time.

It was generally agreed that the field workers could recognize when the Indians felt joy, even when there didn't seem to be any obvious gestures involved. There were several attempts to describe this joy as reflected 'around the eyes' or 'the eyes just show it'.

One very surprizing observation was recorded about the Yuqui Indians. It was noted that in both anger and joy the Yuquis slapped the back of their heads and the pitch of their voices rose considerably. When the Indians were given sugar they expressed their delight with this gesture, and murmured 'Mmmmmmmm'. There were differences in their facial expressions, however, when they were displeased or angry. When displeased they repeatedly uttered a whining, moaning sound, as they stroked or slapped the back of their heads.

In anger an Aymara Indian speaks very rapidly and intensely, hardly stopping for breath. A Chama Indian appears to 'spit out the words' and after this fit of speech his body gives a convulsive jerk, as a kind of conclusion to the speech he (or she) has just spilled out. The Sirionó people sound very fussy when they are angry with each other, and their intonation rises. When they are angry with their patron or a superior they control themselves and are practically expressionless and very quiet. When a Sirionó is unable to talk back (to a superior for instance) he will pout and be sullen. The Movima people drop their eyes and even their heads when they are displeased. In a time of resentment or injured dignity the Movimas try to keep control of themselves. They throw their shoulders back and appear to be well disciplined. The Aymara people show their displeasure by sulking and avoiding a direct look in the eyes.

When the Yuquis disapproved of something the foreigner did they viciously hit the foreigner between the shoulder blades with their sharp fists. The Yuquis showed the most violent reactions of any of the Indian tribes represented. They often acted with uncontrolled anger. With the slightest provocation (since there

was no language communication it was impossible to determine what they were thinking) they had flashes of anger which were violent. This is part of the total picture of their unfriendliness and the reason that attempts to contact them have been stymied for the present. When this tribe and other monolingual tribes were discussed, it was pointed out that any interpretation of their gestures and reactions was only tentative since the field worker did not know what was being said at the moment and what the emotion really was. While most of the observations of the Yuquis were given rather tentatively, it was also obvious that some of the observations were valid. For instance their enjoyment of the sugar was probably quite correctly reported.

In sorrow not all people cry. When tears do express sorrow it is usually the women who shed them. The Pacas Novas men wail as they eat their dead. The Aymara people hire wailers. They are known to cry about things which don't seem to be sorrowful to us. They will cry freely when they ask for some favor. At a death the Chama people wail until the body is buried. They hold on to the poles of the roof (their houses are low) and stomp their feet all night while they are wailing. This emotional display accompanies the customary burial rites of breaking bottles of oil and the possessions of the dead one (for example pottery), killing the dead one's dog, and burying his arrows with him. On one occasion the Siriono people seemed heartbroken over the death of a dog, even crying about it. It should be remembered that a dog is a valuable asset to them in their hunting; without a dog the cupboard may really get bare, which may indeed be a sorrowful event. The Movima women control their wailing to take place only at certain stated times during a burial ceremony. At other times when they seem to be genuinely sorrowful, they talk while they are crying; they do not seem to just sit and sob. It is difficult to say what tears mean to Indian people; in some cases they may be associated with sorrow, but in many cases they are not. It seems quite certain that the Indians do not look upon tears in the same way we do.

Fear is expressed in different ways among Indians. The Movimas remain stony-faced. The Chamas talk fast and act excited. On one occasion when the field worker was present, the people became very fearful because of the presence of a small, grey-colored bird. They seemed to petrify with a silly grin on their faces; however, it wasn't certain whether the grin was a natural reaction or an evidence of embarrassment for having shown their fear before a foreigner. The

Aymara people distinctly show fear in their faces; they are not ashamed, but admit it freely. When afraid they move quickly—compare the characteristic slow movement mentioned above. The Pacahuaras were tense and excited during a time of fear and spoke with high-pitched voices, gesturing with their arms and bows and arrows.

The emotion of love among the Indians was discussed. Since Indians do not express their love or affection in the same ways that we do our first reaction is to claim that they do not possess this emotion. By prying into our memories we began to see that Indians do have ways of showing preference for certain persons and seem to enjoy certain persons more than others. Movima men take their favorite wife to bathe at the new moon. The Sirionó people have overt expressions of affection. A person may lightly touch or tap someone he likes. Sirionó people who like each other will pick lice from each other. A husband will give 'number one wife' her part of the catch first. A wife expresses her belonging to a man by resting her hand on his knee or leaning against him.

Intentional gestures are used to elicit a response or control a relationship. We noted that Indians do have ways of control in human relationship. If a Chama wife is not receiving consideration and esteem from her husband she runs away. If he really wants her (and certainly some attachment is involved, but whether it is love or not is difficult to say) he will hunt her down, even though this is an excruciatingly humiliating experience for him. That she does not want to be abandoned by him is evident in her triumphant face when she knows he is hunting for her or when she is found.

The giving of gifts is another intentional way of controlling or directing a relationship. It is doubtful that the giving of gifts is a part of the lives of all Indians, but since gifts play an important part in contacting isolated peoples we discussed what possessions the Indians cherished. A significant gift among the Aymara people is a stick of fire wood. The Sirionó may give such things as a bow, an arrow, or a ball of string they have spun out and twisted themselves from their native cotton plants. All of the jungle tribes mentioned cherish their pets of monkeys, parrots, and other birds.

It appears to be a universal trait that Indian people do not overtly express gratitude for a gift. Their unexpressive acceptance and even avoidance of mentioning the gift is a shock to North Americans. The Movima people even put the gift out of sight. There are responses nevertheless; the most usual responses are to pay a visit, return another gift, or simply to show friendship.

After two sessions of questioning and discussing we felt that we had reached the point of diminishing returns. We had not finished all our lists of possibilities but time was running out (some of the participants had other schedules to meet) and we felt that we had almost exhausted our information channels. We hoped that the discussions had alerted the field workers to an area almost unexplored but potentially as valuable as verbal language itself, and would stimulate research to give data for later seminars in this area in the future.

The most obvious conclusion was that emotions are not expressed in the same ways in different cultures. Our gesture language which is meaningful to us is as unintelligible to another culture as our verbal language is.

The first impressions we have of Indian cultures are probably from an etic viewpoint. We realized that at best we can only make guesses as to what might be emic in a culture different from our own. (See Kenneth L. Pike, Language: in relation to a unified theory of the structure of human behavior, Glendale, California, Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1954, chapter 2, p.8-28.) We can not expect a one to one correspondence or 100 percent overlap of areas of meaning of emotions between languages any more than we can expect a 100 percent overlap between meaning of words.

That different cultures do not respond to the same stimuli was shown very dramatically in experiences with the Yuqui Indians in recent years. Upon first contact with the Indians the field workers wanted to express their friendliness by such gestures as a hand shake or an embrace. This physical contact brought immediate response from the Indians! They thought it was a challenge to wrestle so they entered in with enthusiasm, sometimes throwing the field workers on the ground or choking them by pinching the vocal cords. (There were also other instances in which they reacted in this manner.)

The influence of a contiguous foreign culture is difficult to measure but it is evident that Indian tribes which have had contact with another culture respond differently from Indians who had had no contact. The former more readily accept a strange gesture and appear to attempt to interpret it. On the other hand, tribes without much experience with other cultures seemed not so aware of variant interpretation of their own gestures.

While there are a great many differences in gestures and responses between Indian tribes, it is also true that there are perhaps more similarities. We might presume then that one who is well acquainted with the cultural items and

gesture language of one jungle tribe is more apt to understand (and to be understood by) another jungle tribe, even though the verbal language may be entirely different.

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