GARRICK MALLERY

SIGN LANGUAGE AMONG NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS

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Sign Language Among North American Indians

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Introductory

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During the past two years the present writer has devoted the intervals between official duties to collecting and collating materials for the study of sign language. As the few publications on the general subject, possessing more than historic interest, are meager in details and vague in expression, original investigation has been necessary. The high development of communication by gesture among the tribes of North America, and its continued extensive use by many of them, naturally directed the first researches to that continent, with the result that a large body of facts procured from collaborators and by personal examination has now been gathered and classified. A correspondence has also been established with many persons in other parts of the world whose character and situation rendered it probable that they would contribute valuable information. The success of that correspondence has been as great as could have been expected, considering that most of the persons addressed were at distant points sometimes not easily accessible by mail. As the collection of facts is still successfully proceeding, not only with reference to foreign peoples and to deaf-mutes everywhere, but also among some American tribes not yet thoroughly examined in this respect, no exposition of the subject pretending to be complete can yet be made. In complying, therefore, with the request to prepare the present paper, it is necessary to explain to correspondents and collaborators whom it may reach, that this is not the comprehensive publication by the Bureau of Ethnology for which their assistance has been

solicited. With this explanation some of those who have already forwarded contributions will not be surprised at their omission, and others will not desist from the work in which they are still kindly engaged, under the impression that its results will not be received in time to meet with welcome and credit. On the contrary, the urgent appeal for aid before addressed to officers of the Army and Navy of this and other nations, to missionaries, travelers, teachers of deaf-mutes, and philologists generally, is now with equal urgency repeated. It is, indeed, hoped that the continued presentation of the subject to persons either having opportunity for observation or the power to favor with suggestions may, by awakening some additional interest in it, secure new collaboration from localities still unrepresented.

It will be readily understood by other readers that, as the limits assigned to this paper permit the insertion of but a small part of the material already collected and of the notes of study made upon that accumulation, it can only show the general scope of the work undertaken, and not its accomplishment. Such extracts from the collection have been selected as were regarded as most illustrative, and they are preceded by a discussion perhaps sufficient to be suggestive, though by no means exhaustive, and designed to be for popular, rather than for scientific use. In short, the direction to submit a progress-report and not a monograph has been complied with.

Divisions of Gesture Speech

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These are corporeal motion and facial expression. An attempt has been made by some writers to discuss these general divisions separately, and its success would be practically convenient if it were always understood that their connection is so intimate that they can never be altogether severed. A play of feature, whether instinctive or voluntary, accentuates and qualifies all motions intended to serve as signs, and strong instinctive facial expression is generally accompanied by action of the body or some of its members. But, so far as a distinction can be made, expressions of the features are the result of emotional, and corporeal gestures, of intellectual action. The former in general and the small number of the latter that are distinctively emotional are nearly identical among men from physiological causes which do not affect with the same similarity the processes of thought. The large number of corporeal gestures expressing intellectual operations require and admit of more variety and conventionality. Thus the features and the body among all mankind act almost uniformly in exhibiting fear, grief, surprise, and shame, but all objective conceptions are varied and variously portrayed. Even such simple indications as those for "no" and "yes" appear in several differing motions. While, therefore, the terms sign language and gesture speech necessarily include and suppose facial expression when emotions are in question, they refer more particularly to corporeal motions and attitudes. For this reason much of the valuable contribution of Darwin in his *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* is not

directly applicable to sign language. His analysis of emotional gestures into those explained on the principles of serviceable associated habits, of antithesis, and of the constitution of the nervous system, should, nevertheless, always be remembered. Even if it does not strictly embrace the class of gestures which form the subject of this paper, and which often have an immediate pantomimic origin, the earliest gestures were doubtless instinctive and generally emotional, preceding pictorial, metaphoric, and, still subsequent, conventional gestures even, as, according to Darwin's cogent reasoning, they preceded articulate speech.

While the distinction above made between the realm of facial play and that of motions of the body, especially those of the arms and hands, is sufficiently correct for use in discussion, it must be admitted that the features do express intellect as well as emotion. The well-known saying of Charles Lamb that "jokes came in with the candles" is in point, but the most remarkable example of conveying detailed information without the use of sounds, hands, or arms, is given by the late President T.H. Gallaudet, the distinguished instructor of deaf-mutes, which, to be intelligible, requires to be quoted at length:

"One day, our distinguished and lamented historical painter, Col. John Trumbull, was in my school-room during the hours of instruction, and, on my alluding to the tact which the pupil referred to had of reading my face, he expressed a wish to see it tried. I requested him to select any event in Greek, Roman, English, or American history of a scenic character, which would make a striking picture on canvas, and said I would endeavor to communicate it to the lad. 'Tell him,' said he, 'that Brutus (Lucius Junius) condemned his two sons to death for resisting his authority and violating his orders.'

"I folded my arms in front of me, and kept them in that position, to preclude the possibility of making any signs or gestures, or of spelling any words on my fingers, and proceeded, as best I could, by the expression of my countenance, and a few motions of my head and attitudes of the body, to convey the picture in my own mind to the mind of my pupil.

"It ought to be stated that he was already acquainted with the fact, being familiar with the leading events in Roman history. But when I began, he knew not from what portion of history, sacred or profane, ancient or modern, the fact was selected. From this wide range, my delineation on the one hand and his ingenuity on the other had to bring it within the division of Roman history, and, still more minutely, to the particular individual and transaction designated by Colonel Trumbull. In carrying on the process, I made no use whatever of any arbitrary, conventional look, motion, or attitude, before settled between us, by which to let him understand what I wished to communicate, with the exception of a single one, if, indeed, it ought to be considered such.

"The usual sign, at that time, among the teachers and pupils, for a Roman, was portraying an aquiline nose by placing the forefinger, crooked, in front of the nose. As I was prevented from using my finger in this way, and having considerable command over the muscles of my face, I endeavored to give my nose as much of the aquiline form as possible, and succeeded well enough for my purpose....

"The outlines of the process were the following:

"A stretching and stretching gaze eastward, with an undulating motion of the head, as if looking across and beyond the Atlantic Ocean, to denote that the event happened, not on the western, but eastern continent. This

was making a little progress, as it took the subject out of the range of American history.

"A turning of the eyes upward and backward, with frequently-repeated motions of the head backward, as if looking a great way back in past time, to denote that the event was one of ancient date.

"The aquiline shape of the nose, already referred to, indicating that a Roman was the person concerned. It was, of course, an old Roman.

"Portraying, as well as I could, by my countenance, attitude, and manner an individual high in authority, and commanding others, as if he expected to be obeyed.

"Looking and acting as if I were giving out a specific order to many persons, and threatening punishment on those who should resist my authority, even the punishment of death.

"Here was a pause in the progress of events, which I denoted by sleeping as it were during the night and awakening in the morning, and doing this several times, to signify that several days had elapsed.

"Looking with deep interest and surprise, as if at a single person brought and standing before me, with an expression of countenance indicating that he had violated the order which I had given, and that I knew it. Then looking in the same way at another person near him as also guilty. Two offending persons were thus denoted.

"Exhibiting serious deliberation, then hesitation, accompanied with strong conflicting emotions, producing perturbation, as if I knew not how to feel or what to do.

"Looking first at one of the persons before me, and then at the other, and then at both together, *as a father would look*, indicating his distressful parental feelings under such afflicting circumstances.

"Composing my feelings, showing that a change was coming over me, and exhibiting towards the imaginary persons before me the decided look of the inflexible commander, who was determined and ready to order them away to execution. Looking and acting as if the tender and forgiving feelings of *the father* had again got the ascendency, and as if I was about to relent and pardon them.

"These alternating states of mind I portrayed several times, to make my representations the more graphic and impressive.

"At length the father yields, and the stern principle of justice, as expressed in my countenance and manners, prevails. My look and action denote the passing of the sentence of death on the offenders, and the ordering them away to execution.

"He quickly turned round to his slate and wrote a correct and complete account of this story of Brutus and his two sons."

While it appears that the expressions of the features are not confined to the emotions or to distinguishing synonyms, it must be remembered that the meaning of the same motion of hands, arms, and fingers is often modified, individualized, or accentuated by associated facial changes and postures of the body not essential to the sign, which emotional changes and postures are at once the most difficult to describe and the most interesting when intelligently reported, not only because they infuse life into the skeleton sign, but because they may belong to the class of innate expressions.

The Origin of Sign Language

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In observing the maxim that nothing can be thoroughly understood unless its beginning is known, it becomes necessary to examine into the origin of sign language through its connection with that of oral speech. In this examination it is essential to be free from the vague popular impression that some oral language, of the general character of that now used among mankind, is "natural" to mankind. It will be admitted on reflection that all oral languages were at some past time far less serviceable to those using them than they are now, and as each particular language has been thoroughly studied it has become evident that it grew out of some other and less advanced form. In the investigation of these old forms it has been so difficult to ascertain how any of them first became a useful instrument of inter-communication that many conflicting theories on this subject have been advocated.

Oral language consists of variations and mutations of vocal sounds produced as signs of thought and emotion. But it is not enough that those signs should be available as the vehicle of the producer's own thoughts. They must be also efficient for the communication of such thoughts to others. It has been, until of late years, generally held that thought was not possible without oral language, and that, as man was supposed to have possessed from the first the power of thought, he also from the first possessed and used oral language substantially as at present. That the latter, as a special faculty, formed the main distinction between man and the brutes has been and still is the prevailing doctrine.

In a lecture delivered before the British Association in 1878 it was declared that "animal intelligence is unable to elaborate that class of abstract ideas, the formation of which depends upon the faculty of speech." If instead of "speech" the word "utterance" had been used, as including all possible modes of intelligent communication, the statement might pass without criticism. But it may be doubted if there is any more necessary connection between abstract ideas and sounds, the mere signs of thought, that strike the ear, than there is between the same ideas and signs addressed only to the eye.

The point most debated for centuries has been, not whether there was any primitive oral language, but what that language was. Some literalists have indeed argued from the Mosaic narrative that because the Creator, by one supernatural act, with the express purpose to form separate peoples, had divided all tongues into their present varieties, and could, by another similar exercise of power, obliterate all but one which should be universal, the fact that he had not exercised that power showed it not to be his will that any man to whom a particular speech had been given should hold intercourse with another miraculously set apart from him by a different speech. By this reasoning, if the study of a foreign tongue was not impious, it was at least clear that the primitive language had been taken away as a disciplinary punishment, as the Paradisiac Eden had been earlier lost, and that, therefore, the search for it was as fruitless as to attempt the passage of the flaming sword. More liberal Christians have been disposed to regard the Babel story as allegorical, if not mythical, and have considered it to represent the disintegration of tongues out of one which was primitive. In accordance with the advance of linguistic science they have successively shifted back the

postulated primitive tongue from Hebrew to Sanscrit, then to Aryan, and now seek to evoke from the vasty deeps of antiquity the ghosts of other rival claimants for precedence in dissolution. As, however, the languages of man are now recognized as extremely numerous, and as the very sounds of which these several languages are composed are so different that the speakers of some are unable to distinguish with the ear certain sounds in others, still less able to reproduce them, the search for one common parent language is more difficult than was supposed by mediæval ignorance.

The discussion is now, however, varied by the suggested possibility that man at some time may have existed without any oral language. It is conceded by some writers that mental images or representations can be formed without any connection with sound, and may at least serve for thought, though not for expression. It is certain that concepts, however formed, can be expressed by other means than sound. One mode of this expression is by gesture, and there is less reason to believe that gestures commenced as the interpretation of, or substitute for words than that the latter originated in, and served to translate gestures. Many arguments have been advanced to prove that gesture language preceded articulate speech and formed the earliest attempt at communication, resulting from the interacting subjective and objective conditions to which primitive man was exposed. Some of the facts on which deductions have been based, made in accordance with well-established modes of scientific research from study of the lower animals, children, idiots, the lower types of mankind, and deaf-mutes, will be briefly mentioned.

Gestures of the Lower Animals

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Emotional expression in the features of man is to be considered in reference to the fact that the special senses either have their seat in, or are in close relation to the face, and that so large a number of nerves pass to it from the brain. The same is true of the lower animals, so that it would be inferred, as is the case, that the faces of those animals are also expressive of emotion. There is also noticed among them an exhibition of emotion by corporeal action. This is the class of gestures common to them with the earliest made by man, as above mentioned, and it is reasonable to suppose that those were made by man at the time when, if ever, he was, like the animals, destitute of articulate speech. The articulate cries uttered by some animals, especially some birds, are interesting as connected with the principle of imitation to which languages in part owe their origin, but in the cases of forced imitation, the mere acquisition of a vocal trick, they only serve to illustrate that power of imitation, and are without significance. Sterne's starling, after his cage had been opened, would have continued to complain that he could not get out. If the bird had uttered an instinctive cry of distress when in confinement and a note of joy on release, there would have been a nearer approach to language than if it had clearly pronounced many sentences. Such notes and cries of animals, many of which are connected with reproduction and nutrition, are well worth more consideration than can now be given, but regarding them generally it is to be questioned if they are so expressive as the gestures of the

same animals. It is contended that the bark of a dog is distinguishable into fear, defiance, invitation, and a note of warning, but it also appears that those notes have been known only since the animal has been domesticated. The gestures of the dog are far more readily distinguished than his bark, as in his preparing for attack, or caressing his master, resenting an injury, begging for food, or simply soliciting attention. The chief modern use of his tail appears to be to express his ideas and sensations. But some recent experiments of Prof. A. Graham Bell, no less eminent from his work in artificial speech than in telephones, shows that animals are more physically capable of pronouncing articulate sounds than has been supposed. He informed the writer that he recently succeeded by manipulation in causing an English terrier to form a number of the sounds of our letters, and particularly brought out from it the words "How are you, Grandmamma?" with distinctness. This tends to prove that only absence of brain power has kept animals from acquiring true speech. The remarkable vocal instrument of the parrot could be used in significance as well as in imitation, if its brain had been developed beyond the point of expression by gesture, in which latter the bird is expert.

The gestures of monkeys, whose hands and arms can be used, are nearly akin to ours. Insects communicate with each other almost entirely by means of the antennæ. Animals in general which, though not deaf, can not be taught by sound, frequently have been by signs, and probably all of them understand man's gestures better than his speech. They exhibit signs to one another with obvious intention, and they also have often invented them as a means of obtaining their wants from man.

Gestures of Young Children

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The wishes and emotions of very young children are conveyed in a small number of sounds, but in a great variety of gestures and facial expressions. A child's gestures are intelligent long in advance of speech; although very early and persistent attempts are made to give it instruction in the latter but none in the former, from the time when it begins *risu cognoscere matrem*. It learns words only as they are taught, and learns them through the medium of signs which are not expressly taught. Long after familiarity with speech, it consults the gestures and facial expressions of its parents and nurses as if seeking thus to translate or explain their words. These facts are important in reference to the biologic law that the order of development of the individual is the same as that of the species.

Among the instances of gestures common to children throughout the world is that of protruding the lips, or pouting, when somewhat angry or sulky. The same gesture is now made by the anthropoid apes and is found strongly marked in the savage tribes of man. It is noticed by evolutionists that animals retain during early youth, and subsequently lose, characters once possessed by their progenitors when adult, and still retained by distinct species nearly related to them.

The fact is not, however, to be ignored that children invent words as well as signs with as natural an origin for the one as for the other. An interesting case was furnished to the writer by Prof. Bell of an infant boy who used a combination of sounds given as "nyum-nyum," an evident

onomatope of gustation, to mean "good," and not only in reference to articles of food relished but as applied to persons of whom the child was fond, rather in the abstract idea of "niceness" in general. It is a singular coincidence that a bright young girl, a friend of the writer, in a letter describing a juvenile feast, invented the same expression, with nearly the same spelling, as characteristic of her sensations regarding the delicacies provided. The Papuans met by Dr. Comrie also called "eating" *nam-nam*. But the evidence of all such cases of the voluntary use of articulate speech by young children is qualified by the fact that it has been inherited from very many generations, if not quite so long as the faculty of gesture.

Gestures in Mental Disorder

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The insane understand and obey gestures when they have no knowledge whatever of words. It is also found that semi-idiotic children who cannot be taught more than the merest rudiments of speech, can receive a considerable amount of information through signs, and can express themselves by them. Sufferers from aphasia continue to use appropriate gestures after their words have become uncontrollable. It is further noticeable in them that mere ejaculations, or sounds which are only the result of a state of feeling, instead of a desire to express thought, are generally articulated with accuracy. Patients who have been in the habit of swearing preserve their fluency in that division of their vocabulary.

Uninstructed Deaf-mutes

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The signs made by congenital and uninstructed deaf-mutes to be now considered are either strictly natural signs, invented by themselves, or those of a colloquial character used by such mutes where associated. The accidental or merely suggestive signs peculiar to families, one member of which happens to be a mute, are too much affected by the other members of the family to be of certain value. Those, again, which are taught in institutions have become conventional and designedly adapted to translation into oral speech, although founded by the abbé de l'Épée, followed by the abbé Sicard, in the natural signs first above mentioned.

A great change has doubtless occurred in the estimation of congenital deaf-mutes since the Justinian Code, which consigned them forever to legal infancy, as incapable of intelligence, and classed them with the insane. Yet most modern writers, for instance Archbishop Whately and Max Müller, have declared that deaf-mutes could not think until after having been instructed. It cannot be denied that the deaf-mute thinks after his instruction either in the ordinary gesture signs or in the finger alphabet, or more lately in artificial speech. By this instruction he has become master of a highly-developed language, such as English or French, which he can read, write, and actually talk, but that foreign language he has obtained through the medium of signs. This is a conclusive proof that signs constitute a real language and one which admits of thought, for no one can learn a foreign language unless he had some language of

his own, whether by descent or acquisition, by which it could be translated, and such translation into the new language could not even be commenced unless the mind had been already in action and intelligently using the original language for that purpose. In fact the use by deaf-mutes of signs originating in themselves exhibits a creative action of mind and innate faculty of expression beyond that of ordinary speakers who acquired language without conscious effort. The thanks of students, both of philology and psychology, are due to Prof. Samuel Porter, of the National Deaf Mute College, for his response to the question, "Is thought possible without language?" published in the *Princeton Review* for January, 1880.

With regard to the sounds uttered by deaf-mutes, the same explanation of heredity may be made as above, regarding the words invented by young children. Congenital deaf-mutes at first make the same sounds as hearing children of the same age, and, often being susceptible to vibrations of the air, are not suspected of being deaf. When that affliction is ascertained to exist, all oral utterances from the deaf-mute are habitually repressed by the parents.

Gestures of the Blind

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The facial expressions and gestures of the congenitally blind are worthy of attention. The most interesting and conclusive examples come from the case of Laura Bridgman, who, being also deaf, could not possibly have derived them by imitation. When a letter from a beloved friend was communicated to her by gesture-language, she laughed and clapped her hands. A roguish expression was given to her face, concomitant with the emotion, by her holding the lower lip by the teeth. She blushed, shrugged her shoulders, turned in her elbows, and raised her eye-brows under the same circumstances as other people. In amazement, she rounded and protruded the lips, opened them, and breathed strongly. It is remarkable that she constantly accompanied her "yes" with the common affirmative nod, and her "no" with our negative shake of the head, as these gestures are by no means universal and do not seem clearly connected with emotion. This, possibly, may be explained by the fact that her ancestors for many generations had used these gestures. A similar curious instance is mentioned by Cardinal Wiseman (*Essays*, III, 547, *London*, 1853) of an Italian blind man, the appearance of whose eyes indicated that he had never enjoyed sight, and who yet made the same elaborate gestures made by the people with whom he lived, but which had been used by them immemorially, as correctly as if he had learned them by observation.

Loss of Speech by Isolation

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When human beings have been long in solitary confinement, been abandoned, or otherwise have become isolated from their fellows, they have lost speech either partially or entirely, and required to have it renewed through gestures. There are also several recorded cases of children, born with all their faculties, who, after having been lost or abandoned, have been afterwards found to have grown up possessed of acute hearing, but without anything like human speech. One of these was Peter, "the Wild Boy," who was found in the woods of Hanover in 1726, and taken to England, where vain attempts were made to teach him language, though he lived to the age of seventy. Another was a boy of twelve, found in the forest of Aveyron, in France, about the beginning of this century, who was destitute of speech, and all efforts to teach him failed. Some of these cases are to be considered in connection with the general law of evolution, that in degeneration the last and highest acquirements are lost first. When in these the effort at acquiring or re-acquiring speech has been successful, it has been through gestures, in the same manner as missionaries, explorers, and shipwrecked mariners have become acquainted with tongues before unknown to themselves and sometimes to civilization. All persons in such circumstances are obliged to proceed by pointing to objects and making gesticulations, at the same time observing what articulate sounds were associated with those motions by the persons addressed, and thus vocabularies and lists of phrases were formed.

Low Tribes of Man

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Apart from the establishment of a systematic language of signs under special circumstances which have occasioned its development, the gestures of the lower tribes of men may be generally classed under the emotional or instinctive division, which can be correlated with those of the lower animals. This may be illustrated by the modes adopted to show friendship in salutation, taking the place of our shaking hands. Some Pacific Islanders used to show their joy at meeting friends by sniffing at them, after the style of well-disposed dogs. The Fuegians pat and slap each other, and some Polynesians stroke their own faces with the hand or foot of the friend. The practice of rubbing or pressing noses is very common. It has been noticed in the Lapland Alps, often in Africa, and in Australia the tips of the noses are pressed a long time, accompanied with grunts of satisfaction. Patting and stroking different parts of the body are still more frequent, and prevailed among the North American Indians, though with the latter the most common expression was hugging. In general, the civilities exchanged are similar to those of many animals.

Gestures as an Occasional Resource

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Persons of limited vocabulary, whether foreigners to the tongue employed or native, but not accomplished in its use, even in the midst of a civilization where gestures are deprecated, when at fault for words resort instinctively to physical motions that are not wild nor meaningless, but picturesque and significant, though perhaps made by the gesturer for the first time. An uneducated laborer, if good-natured enough to be really desirous of responding to a request for information, when he has exhausted his scanty stock of words will eke them out by original gestures. While fully admitting the advice to Coriolanus—

> Action is eloquence, and the eyes of the ignorant
> More learned than the ears—

it may be paraphrased to read that the hands of the ignorant are more learned than their tongues. A stammerer, too, works his arms and features as if determined to get his thoughts out, in a manner not only suggestive of the physical struggle, but of the use of gestures as a hereditary expedient.

Gestures of Fluent Talkers

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The same is true of the most fluent talkers on occasions when the exact vocal formula desired does not at once suggest itself, or is unsatisfactory without assistance from the physical machinery not embraced in the oral apparatus. The command of a copious vocabulary common to both speaker and hearer undoubtedly tends to a phlegmatic delivery and disdain of subsidiary aid. An excited speaker will, however, generally make a free use of his hands without regard to any effect of that use upon auditors. Even among the gesture-hating English, when they are aroused from torpidity of manner, the hands are involuntarily clapped in approbation, rubbed with delight, wrung in distress, raised in astonishment, and waved in triumph. The fingers are snapped for contempt, the forefinger is vibrated to reprove or threaten, and the fist shaken in defiance. The brow is contracted with displeasure, and the eyes winked to show connivance. The shoulders are shrugged to express disbelief or repugnance, the eyebrows elevated with surprise, the lips bitten in vexation and thrust out in sullenness or displeasure, while a higher degree of anger is shown by a stamp of the foot. Quintilian, regarding the subject, however, not as involuntary exhibition of feeling and intellect, but for illustration and enforcement, becomes eloquent on the variety of motions of which the hands alone are capable, as follows:

"The action of the other parts of the body assists the speaker, but the hands (I could almost say) speak themselves. By them do we not demand, promise, call,

dismiss, threaten, supplicate, express abhorrence and terror, question and deny? Do we not by them express joy and sorrow, doubt, confession, repentance, measure, quantity, number, and time? Do they not also encourage, supplicate, restrain, convict, admire, respect? and in pointing out places and persons do they not discharge the office of adverbs and of pronouns?"

Voss adopts almost the words of Quintilian, "*Manus non modo loquentem adjuvant, sed ipsæ pene loqui videntur*," while Cresollius calls the hand "the minister of reason and wisdom ... without it there is no eloquence."

Involuntary Response to Gestures

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Further evidence of the unconscious survival of gesture language is afforded by the ready and involuntary response made in signs to signs when a man with the speech and habits of civilization is brought into close contact with Indians or deaf-mutes. Without having ever before seen or made one of their signs, he will soon not only catch the meaning of theirs, but produce his own, which they will likewise comprehend, the power seemingly remaining latent in him until called forth by necessity.