Some Popular and Quotable Ethiopian Emblems in Their Communicative Situations

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Abstract

This ethnographic paper explores the role of emblematic gestures in urban Ethiopian communication, offering an in-depth analysis of hand, head, and facial actions within socially defined contexts. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, the paper examines how these non-verbal signs are culturally situated, reflecting shared social practices and adaptive responses to changing social dynamics. By identifying and annotating popular gestures, the study highlights the interpretive frameworks that underpin their meanings, emphasizing their cultural rootedness and situational variability. The analysis also cross-references Ethiopian emblems with analogous gestures from Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, identifying areas of pragmatic overlap and cultural divergence. This comparative approach underscores the polysemous nature of non-verbal signs, illustrating how meaning is co-constructed in communicative events and shaped by context. The paper proposes that these gestures, as part of the people's habitude, are context-dependent forms of communication that reflect deeper cultural values and social practices, offering insights into how meaning is produced, interpreted, and adapted in everyday life. In doing so, it offers a more nuanced understanding of how embodied practices contribute to interactional dynamics within urban Ethiopian settings.

Key terms: Popular Ethiopian emblems, gestures, language and culture

Introduction

Gestures, whether used in tandem with spoken language or as an unverbalized means of communication, hold universal interactional significance. Emblematic gestures, rich in semiotic functions, are intricately linked to the culture and history of their users. Given their cross-cultural heterogeneity, a comprehensive understanding necessitates meticulous documentation and elucidation within specific contexts of their usages. Scholarly interests in gestures within the African continent date back at least to the observations made by Sibree (1884:177) while traveling in Madagascar, "[O]ne can hardly

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be long in Madagascar without observing that the people use a different motion of the hand in beckoning another to come near than we employ in similar cases…" Various disciplines such as anthropology, linguistics, and psychology have explored the form + meaning, informational content, cultural underpinnings, and communicative roles of gestures as well as their typology, and possible roles in the origin and development of language.

There have been such basic descriptive works as Glauning and Huber (1904) that described the greeting gestures in East Africa; Fletcher (1912), which compiled some Hausa gestures; and Olofson (1974), in the context of written plays, which provided additional information on Hausa gestures focusing on facial expressions, gaze, and hand gestures. Baduel-Mathon (1971) contributed descriptions of gestures for Ashanti (Ghana), Manding (Liberia), and Yoruba (Nigeria) peoples. More recently, there is a growing trend towards more systematic documentation of gesture repertoires. For instance, Brookes (2001, 2004) described notable gestures of urban youths and artfully compiled and illustrated the repertoire of gestures found among urban Bantu speakers in South Africa. McClave (2007) studied head movements among the Turkana people of Kenya, while Agwuele (2014) collected a repertoire of hand and face gestures among the Yoruba of Nigeria, while Barasa and Agwuele (2021) documented nonverbal communicative gestures among the Bukusu of Kenya, highlighting gender differences in their usage.

Complementing the growing lists of such ethnographies as mentioned above are comparative studies. Creider (1977), for instance, undertook a field observation comparing gestures used in dyadic conversations among Luo, Kipsigis, Samburu, and Gusii people in Kenya. Omondi's (1979) comparative study on gesture (paralanguage) transcended linguistic and national boundaries, encompassing three groups in Kenya and nine groups in Zambia. A subsequent study by Omondi (1988) compared seven different Bantu languages within Zambia. Claessen (1984) conducted a comparative ethnographic study on the form and meaning of communicative gestures among Swahili speakers in Mombasa, Mambrui, and Shimoni in northeastern Kenya. Beyond Africa, Nyst (2016) conducted an intercontinental and cross-linguistic study comparing gestures depicting size and shape between Anyi people in Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire and Dutch people in the Netherlands.

In addition to ethnographic and comparative studies are those analytical works that elucidate specific themes drawing gestural data from different African peoples. For example, Kita and Essegbey (2001) focused on the taboos associated with left-hand pointing practices among the Ewe people of Ghana.

Similarly, Orie (2009) discussed the cultural implications of left-hand deictics in interactional situations among the Yoruba of Nigeria, exploring associated socio-cultural regulatory factors. Sanders (2015) explored the pragmatic and semantic values of handedness in spontaneous activities among the CiTonga of Malawi, highlighting entailed cultural values such as respect and inclusiveness. Agwuele (2016) explored the diverse perceptions of the dreadlock hairstyle among the Yoruba people, unveiling the various real-life consequences that are informed by a core belief associated with unkempt hair. Examining bodily movement, hand gestures, and dancing, Covington-Ward (2018) showed how gestures interact with cultural, religious, and political identities and implicate power struggles in Congo. Collectively, these studies, among many others, broaden the scope of the populations studied, expand the different related themes, and increase the dataset. The present study adds to these existing works by offering descriptions of extant Ethiopian gestures, cross-referencing, where possible, some of the observed gestures with those found in published works, and emic views of consultants in Kenya and Nigeria.

In the context of Ethiopia, the focus of this paper, there are diverse investigations of nonverbal gestures. For instance, Lydall et al. (2000) examined ideophones in the Hamar language and provided a linguistic analysis of these ‘affecto-imagistic’ (Kita, 1997) words, exploring their nuances based on information from different narratives. Salamon (2019) examined the ‘Gursha’, a tradition where one hand-feeds a companion during meals as a gesture of hospitality, elucidating its social, historical, and religious connotations within Ethiopian culture. Messing (1960) examined the draping of togas among Amhara people, revealing how this nonverbal gesture communicates distance, mood, and social status and shows how the materiality of the toga reflects regional and urban-rural distinctions and symbolic values. Noting diachronic changes in greeting gestures, Dammers (2010) employed a naturalistic and ethological approach to catalog informal greetings and departure salutations in Addis Ababa. Yigezu (2015) explored the nonverbal communication system among the Hamar. Focusing on body decoration and object language, he unveiled their structural functions and meanings. Additionally, Rubinkowska-Aniol (2016) investigated the 'gestures of power' as used by the Emperor, Haile Selassie. This present paper contributes to this growing list by documenting the extant repertoire of gestures in use among Amharic speakers in Ethiopia, focusing particularly on the most visibly movable parts of the body during interactions: head, hand, and facial movements. It aims to identify some of those conventionalized, habitually

meaningful signals that are recognizable, definable, and contextually anchored into the social-cultural history of the Ethiopian users in order to shed light on their nuanced interactional dynamics. These emblems, i.e., acts for which a precise meaning is known by most or all members of a group' (Ekman & Friesen 1972: 367), termed "quotable gestures" by Kendon (1992), form a shared coding system among members of a community. They are typically sent with intent, interpreted as intentional, and are used with regularity among members of a speech community and have consensually recognizable interpretations (Burgoon 1994).

Kendon (1992: 93) observed a deficiency in our understanding of emblems, pointing out that the expanding repertoire of these gestures contrasted with a paucity of information about "how these gestures are used, or by who. Most lists include drawings or photographs of the gestures and some kind of verbal gloss; it is rare to be told how this gloss was arrived at, how widely the gloss is shared.". Kendon referenced Creider's catalog of Kenyan gestures to illustrate this issue. As a solution, Kendon proposed that studies on gestures should originate from their observation in real-life contexts of usage, emphasizing that they are integral communicative tools within a culture. This intracultural Ethiopian communication study further addresses Kendon's concerns by examining these recognizable emblems in their everyday use by Amharic speakers in Ethiopia, analyzing contextually their forms and their informational and pragmatic contents.

Approach and Focus

A reaction to structuralism, among other theories, is the perspective that culture functions as a system of practices, with language itself being a cultural practice. Poststructuralists, with respect to language, move away from focusing mainly on describing the structure of a language and on the way its constituting elements interact to looking at how interactive usage of language co-participates in the structuring of everyday life across speakers and contexts. In addition, aside from their representation of meaning, poststructuralists examine how language performs diverse social functions, including sociality. This shift in approach, starting especially in the 1960s, also challenges essentialism—the idea that there is a direct, one-to-one correspondence between a linguistic signal and its meaning. Instead, it emphasizes a dialogic, situational, and co-constructed understanding of meaning and interpretation, doing this in part due to the polysemous nature of a linguistic sign and its context—"the "concrete or ideal field of a sign-meaning unit that supports

specification of meaning at a given moment in time" (van Oers 1998: 475). In other words, rather than seeing meaning as fixed and constant, the historicity, cultural specificity, and dynamism involved are acknowledged. It is therefore skeptical of 'universalism', privileging a balanced explication of interactants within the social structures of their environment. Thus, this paper adopts a dynamic, rather than a static, approach to explicate extant emblems in Ethiopia and emphasizes their interactive context (see Duranti & Goodwin 1992) or 'discourse', that is, a social system that informs knowledge and meaning that allow users to perform a range of every day-to-day activities, per Foucault (1971). By focusing on emblematic gestures obtained interactionally from the contexts of their usage, emic inferences and local ideologies emerge.

Many scholars have engaged with this post-structural perspective, but Pierre Bourdieu's approach is particularly relevant to this paper's discussion. Bourdieu's (1970) theory of practice highlights that in daily interaction, language is encountered in its pragmatic situatedness. He argues that linguistic signals should not be isolated from their historical and social contexts, as they are intertwined with past and present conditions. In proposing his theory of practice, Bourdieu suggested "that the objects of knowledge are constructed, not passively recorded, and... that the principle of this construction is the system of structured, structuring disposition, the habitus, which is constituted in practice and is always oriented towards practical functions" (Bourdieu 1990:52). Thus, the competence users acquired during their socialization imbued them with certain dispositions and expectations about their world, and this guides them on how to navigate it. Habitus, as Bourdieu further clarifies, "embodies history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history—is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product. As such, it is what gives practices their relative autonomy with respect to external determination of the immediate past" (Bourdieu 1990:56). Thus, emblems, as part of language, are not autonomous systems; they are dynamically informed by social institutions and are embedded within a people's linguistic habitus. Furthermore, the system of shared disposition and expectations that underlie shared meaning are products of socialization, itself, contingent on language, through which they are reproduced (Bourdieu 2014). Continuous exposure to these emblematic gestures helps establish reference frames that allow their intended meanings to be fully cognized and realized by users.

To summarize, this ethnographic (i.e., "descriptions that take into account the perspective of members of a social group, including beliefs and values that underlie and organize their activities and utterances.") Ochs and Schieffelin

(2009: 300) study provides annotations to some extant emblems common to Ethiopian Amharic speakers residing in urban settings, analyzing them semiotically and pragmatically through the lens of Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Emphasizing the interactive and goal-oriented nature of these gestures, the study (1) elucidates forms + associated communicative meanings, (2) describes the settings of their use, and (3) illustrates the interconnectedness of 'abstract' emblems and specific 'utterances,' while underscoring the underlying dispositions and expectations. To show that these situated practices and ideas, as currently held, are culturally constructed, the study draws parallels between Ethiopian and Kenyan, Nigerian, and South African emblems, highlighting shared elements and distinct variations in how bodily movements are adapted to convey different messages across cultures. Note that the etymology behind the observed form+meaning correlation transcends this paper's ethnographic scope.

Data- elicitation and Interpretation

The data consists of naturally occurring emblems gleaned from real-life interactive situations. Often, scholars decry the disparities in the elicitation of information on gestures (Kendon 1992). Barring psychological studies where individuals or groups of individuals can be brought into a lab to be recorded performing some manipulated tasks, the observation of unpremeditated real-life interactions in unfiltered naturalistic settings comes with great limitations, sometimes danger, and would rarely be uniform. The everyday life of humans as focal subjects would not habituate to one standardized method of observation. Each scholar interested in them creatively approximates reality as much as practically possible in data elicitation.

Gesture studies employ vastly diverse methods of data collection, e.g., analyses of TV sitcoms, movies, and documentaries (McClave 2007) or videos from language instructions (Eastman & Omar 1985), outsourcing video-recordings to subjects (Brookes 2004), self-made unobtrusive recording of subjects performing gestures (Kita & Esseghey 2001,Dingemanse 2011), recording of spontaneous script-acting by native speakers (Sander 2015), reliance on personal observations and emic knowledge (Poggi 1983), use of questionnaire or unelicited list of forms drawn up by investigators from their own culture (Morris et al. 1979), recall, interview and naturalistic observations (Omondi 1988), compilations from bibliographic sources (Payrató 1993), and semi-directed interview in which investigators steered informants towards describing particular objects (Nyst 2016) among arrays of elicitation

techniques. Since our goal for this study was to obtain naturalistic data, together with two native speakers, we conducted weekly observations in various settings, documenting emblematic gestures within their contextual occurrences through participant observations for six months. Occasionally, strangers were asked to repeat a performed emblem; sometimes they obliged, and at other times they did not, prompting us to mimic such informants to elicit proper information about them and their meanings. Creider (1973) faced challenges while attempting live recordings at a local market in Kenya, ultimately deeming it 'impossible'. In Ethiopia (2016–2017), live recordings were unfeasible due to the volatile political situation that ultimately led to the resignation of Prime Minister Desalegn. To douse the multifarious protests, the state response included shutting down the internet, prohibiting 'anti-government' activities (broadly defined), and preventing public recording or photographing. Consequently, colleagues and informants distanced themselves whenever 'recording' or 'photo' was mentioned. Relying on the two native co-observers, we were only able to write down our observations and have them re-enacted and elicited from native Amharic speakers.

Once data are acquired, regardless of the methods employed by scholars to gather them, a consistent set of procedures unfolds. The gestural expressions containing communicative content are meticulously extracted and presented to native speakers for validation and interpretation. To verify the data presented in this paper, open group discussions or debriefing were orchestrated, during which volunteers identified the collections as emblems in practical use. They elucidated the meanings behind the presented gestures, provided insight into their contextual usage, and even re-enacted them. The different illustrations in figures 1–25 below are stills from these re-enactments. The congenial ambiance of these sessions facilitated spontaneous comments, contributing to the organic generation or recollection of additional emblems. This not only enhanced the collection but also provided nuanced interpretations. The study comprised four sessions held in the city of Hawassa, involving a total of 14 participants, made up of 4 adult workers and 10 students. Among them, five were proficient in English and often translated the comments from others who spoke in a blend of Amharic and English. To further validate the findings, snippets from the video recordings of these sessions were presented to two independent consultants in Addis Ababa. Their task was to assess the recognizability of the gestures and provide additional interpretations. Overall, there was a consistent pattern of appropriateness in the use of these emblems, as identified by both participants and control individuals. This uniformity suggests these emblems constitute a socially shared coding system (Burgoon

1994:240). As the subsequent analysis will reveal, some of these emblematic forms have connections to various aspects of Ethiopian socio-cultural institutions and political history.

Ethiopian Emblems

Ethiopia, much like other African nations, boasts significant diversity with approximately 80 distinct languages. Despite this diversity, the country finds unity in its widespread and intricate display of affectionate greeting rituals, often involving multiple cheek kisses. Also shared among its people is a profound religious foundation encompassing Christianity, Islam, and, to a lesser extent, autochthonous belief systems. Further, the previous feudalistic nature of the country under Emperor Haile Selassie still largely holds sway despite rapidly growing foreign corporations, sprawling industrial cities, and precipitous expansion in the number of educational institutions with diverse student bodies. These commonalities extend to emblematic gestures, here termed popular Ethiopian emblems, because they are communicative competences in common possession of the urban, literate, and mobile individuals regardless of their ethno-linguistic backgrounds. They, like Amharic, represent a unifying thread amid the nation's evolving landscape.

What are the Variables Involved?

Specifically, the focus of this paper is those communicatively deployed *movements\forms\signs + meanings* termed emblems (Ekman & Friesen 1977), symbolic gestures (Efron 1972), semiotic gestures (Barakat 1973), independent paralinguistic (Claessen 1984), iconic and metaphoric gestures (McNeill and Levy 1982), autonomous gestures (Kendon 1983), and quotable gestures (Kendon 1992), among others. These are on the presumption that they constitute an interpretable message of their own whether accompanying speech or not; they can also be used in the absence of speech or substitute for verbal statements (Morris et al., 1979: xx); they are glossable into equivalent verbal expressions and are intentionally deployed.

Popular Ethiopian Hand Emblems

The form for ***beckoning*** involves an outstretched arm, with the palm facing up, and a rapidly clutched-and-opened hand (Figure[2] 1). A variation to this

[2] While IRB consent was duly obtained from each participant; only the likenesses of those who granted such permission appear in this publication.

gesture involves the use of both hands as displayed by the subject in the middle. The same motion can also be performed using one finger, as shown by the third subject, farthest right, where a distended forefinger is wiggled back and forth towards the gesturer.

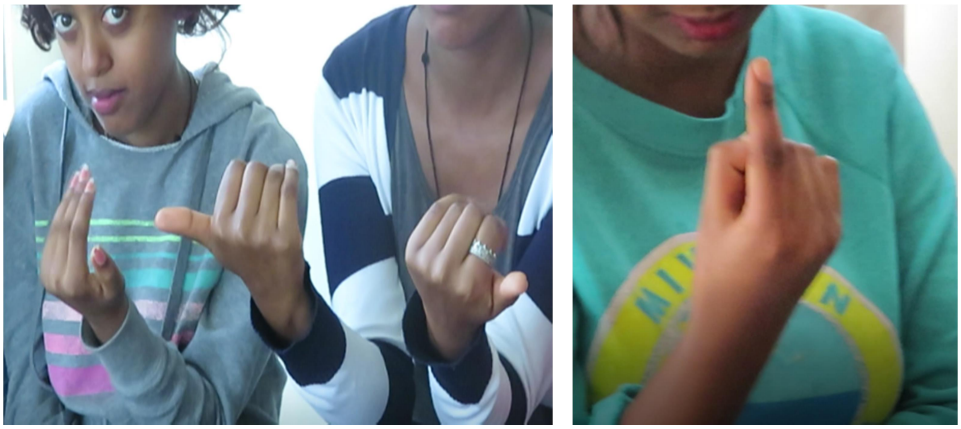


Figure 1: Beckoning emblem to summon someone

Variants of these emblems are attested in the continent with either analogous meanings or contrary interpretations. Yoruba (Nigeria) and Luo, Kipsigis, and AbaGusii (Kenya) peoples beckoning gestures, contrary to the up-turned palm of the raised hand facing the gesturer as the Ethiopians do, involve turning the palm of an outstretched hand with clutched fingers toward their interlocutors and then motioning it down. However, per Creider, Kenyans only use this form when the interlocutor is at a distance; when near, they use the morphology depicted in Fig. 1. Brookes (2004) reported similar use of the curved hand folding in and out in South Africa (*zwakala*). The Samburu of Kenya use the wiggling index finger demonstrated by the 3rd subject mainly to summon dogs.

To ***dismiss*** (or shoo away) someone, Ethiopians stretch out their arms, palm turned inward, the hand curled in and motioned out. Figure 2a shows the starting position of this motion and 2b, its conclusion. These outwardly extending motions are made repeatedly as needed.

Figure 2: Dismissal or go away gestures **2a -**onset (left) **& 2b**- offset (right)

Comparable form + meaning was reported for Kenya (Creider 1977). In South Africa, the 'go away' gesture involves the "hand, fingers down, is flung outward away from the gesturer, moves up and down once or twice in the appropriate direction…" (Brookes 2004:221). The Yoruba use a similar gesture as South Africans.

A distinct beckoning gesture is observed among Ethiopian mothers, tailored for calling wayward children to account for their actions. In this gesture, the arm extends vertically outward, the hand with fingers splayed is directed towards the child, and the fingers clench into a fist as the arm swiftly moves towards the chest. Informants clarify that this specific gesture is employed to summon children who have strayed, signaling impending consequences. *"it is come and get your punishment. When you see that, you look at your mother. If she is biting her lower lip like this* (Figure 3b), *then you know you are in big trouble."* Mothers bite their lower lip when they are very displeased with their children. This lower lip biting gesture attributed to mothers does not speak to all instances of lower lip biting. In other contexts, the gesture could denote determination, feistiness, or even bellicosity. These other interpretations are shared by Nigerians and Kenyans. Further, AbaGusii subjects added as interpretation for 3b: "*if I get a hold of this person*," to suggest a determination to settle a score. Different from this, Gussi people shift or point pursed lips sideways to indicate boredom with someone or something.

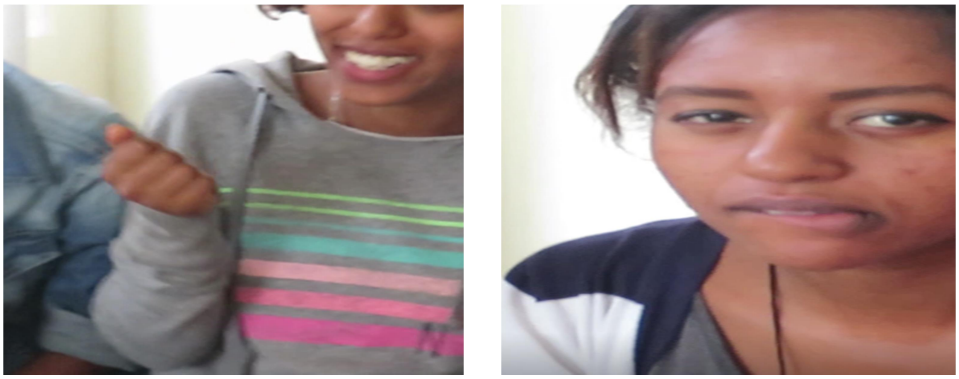


Figure 3: **3a**: Come here to receive your punishment: **3b**: Anger (Mothers).

To beckon a waiter at a restaurant, club, or café, Ethiopians snap the middle finger and thumb repeatedly in the direction of the desired waitstaff (Figure 4). They described it to mean come, *sima, sima,* or *na, na* (to males). While this is the popular emblem in use, two of the subjects said they find it a bit offensive even though they use it also. Yoruba people of Nigeria attach two different meanings to this gesture. (a) It conveys urgency. Parents needing their children to hurry up snap their fingers with a verbal imperative “quick, quick." (b) It is also a threat and a declaration of hostility. A one-time snapping of fingers at an interlocutor forewarns them to expect every conceivable harm, spiritual and physical (Agwuele 2014). Per AbaGusii subjects, they use the gesture to get the attention of an acquaintance whose name one cannot immediately recall. At Kisii University, the audience snaps their fingers in lieu of clapping after a presentation. This recent usage mainly occurs during formal functions.

Figure 4: Snapping of fingers to call for service at restaurants, locale or pubs

Obvious\Apparent: When the "finger snapping" gesture occurred, a colleague asked, "What does it mean?" In response, one of the informants shrugged her shoulders while saying, "*ne, ne, ne*" (come, come, come to a female waiter). It was not clear if the verbalization pertained to the shoulder-shrug or to the finger-snapping. Having clarified the meaning of the finger-snap (Fig 4), we inquired about the shrug. *"This?"* (She shrugs). *"It means it is obvious. When you asked what this* (snapped her fingers) means, *I did like that* (shrugs)[3]. *I tell you; it is obvious. Everybody knows I am calling the waiter to come."* (b) In addition to meaning "it is obvious," shoulder-shrug is gestured to reject a request or an offer. "*Someone wants you to do something. But you don't want. Then you do like that* (shrug). *If the person says, come! you do* (shrug)*; I am not coming*." (c) A third meaning is "I don't care." "*You do like that* (shoulders shrug), *then you walk away. That person knows you don't worry about it; anything can happen, you don't care."* To this, they used the Amharic phrase: *yerasishe gudaye* [የራሰሽጉዳይ]- I don't care. This third meaning is shared by Yoruba, who also use shoulder-shrugs to say, "none of my business." Impertinent Yoruba children shrug their shoulders as a rude response to adults when they feel imposed on.

Rejection: Ethiopians express a strong rejection by raising their arms to chest level, clenching their fists, and extending the index finger towards the interlocutor, swaying it side to side (see Figure 5). The use and context of this disapproving finger-wagging gesture vary. One encounter happened when we were seeking directions after taking a wrong turn. We asked a passerby for directions; seemingly in a hurry, the person employed the gesture without stopping to respond. Another instance was at a coffee shop when a friend declined an offer of coffee using the same finger-wagging movement. It also serves as a negative response to questions like "is this your book?" Contrary to Ethiopian, the Yoruba people use this emblem to convey severe threats. In such situations, the gesture may be accompanied by a verbal warning: "Don't you ever do it again, else you will encounter maggots in your salt," implying dire consequences for the person. Similarly, in Kenya, a side-to-side warning gesture is employed, resembling the Yoruba method. Also in Kenya, the open palm is waved from side to side instead of an extended index finger. While Ethiopians use finger-wagging to reject a proposition, Kenyans, Nigerians, and South Africans use horizontal head movements to convey refusal. The finger-

[3] An anonymous reviewer wrote: "Shrug (I don't care, I don't know), shrugging shoulder is avoidance with no regret. Your business!"

wagging gesture of refusal is unknown to both Nigerian and Kenyan informants shown the gesture.

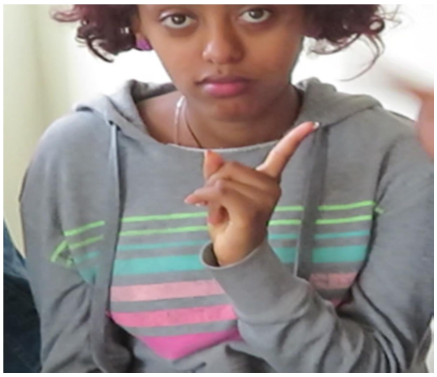
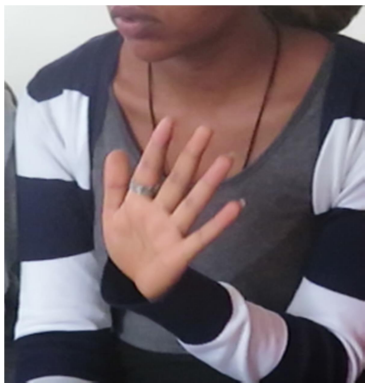


Figure 5: Ethiopian Emphatic no or refusal-side-to-side finger wagging

In view of this unexpected refusal emblem, we inquired how they will warn, scold, or reprimand someone. The popular Ethiopian emblem for **warning** involves the use of the index finger, held similar to the refusal gesture but motioned rapidly up and down (Figure 6). This Ethiopian emblem for warning is not remarkable or unique; it is pervasive across the continent and easily understood, except that the Ethiopian refusal gesture is a variant of the warning gesture in these other places.

Figure 6: Warning gesture: up-down finger wagging

To tell someone to **stop**, desist from an action, stop talking or walking, Ethiopians make use of the same generally familiar emblem observed in Kenya, Nigeria, and across the continent. This involves an outstretched arm and hand with splayed fingers held at face level facing the interlocutor (Figure 7a). According to the informants, "*when we do like this, we mean, hold on, wait a minute, or stop*."



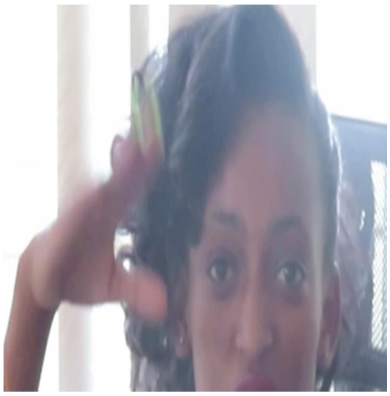


Figure 7. 7a: Stop\wait \hold on **7b**: Slow down:

Illustrated in Figure 7b is the deceleration gesture. For this, the hand is elevated vertically to eye level and then alternately flexed and extended from the wrist. "*If someone is* [in a] *hurry*. *You do like that."* It was gathered that this gesture is also a sign of 'caution.' In this context, similar variations occur among the Yoruba and AbaGusii. Among the Yoruba, the arm (or both arms) is held horizontally around the chest or belly area and moved gently up and down to convey "slow down, don't worry, take it easy." Another variation of this gesture is employed to halt a vehicle, such as a Bajaj or Boda-boda, on the street. In this scenario, the outstretched hand in the chest area is waved up and down. Despite slight variations in morphology, the overarching message remains consistent.

Popular Emblems Related to Valence

In Ethiopia, various hand and finger movements serve to express a range of emotions, including anger, obscenity, and fight or flight responses. The popular gesture to insult someone as crazy involves tapping the temple of the head with a pointed index finger, then spiraling the hand while keeping it fisted. This is shown in Figure 8. In contrast, for the Yoruba and AbaGusii, the two unified Ethiopian processes, tapping the temple and twirling the finger, are distinct and independent. They tap the temple repeatedly without twirling, or they twirl the index finger around the ear without tapping the temple. Both are rude emblems indicating crazy or mad.

Figure 8: You are crazy.

Figure 9 shows two emblems that convey the threat of physical violence. They were glossed as 'beat down'. These gestures involve the use of both hands with a clenched fist connecting with an outstretched palm. The focal subject in the picture holds out a clenched fist. She slaps a flat palm on it. In the background is a reversed image of the same gesture. Here the subject hammers a clenched fist into a flat palm. Participants interpret both gestures, saying, "*you are telling someone that you will beat them seriously. I will pound you."* Another subject added a second interpretation: "*when we do like that, I tell that person, I am no longer arguing, I am ready to fight*." Thus, both emblems can be glossed as (a) a threat of violence and (b) a challenge to a fistfight. The Ethiopian 'threat' emblem depicted in the foreground is employed by Yoruba to convey 'thoroughly'. It serves as a qualifier for the intensity of an intended or completed act, functioning as a 'verb' for Ethiopians, as an adjective for Nigerians, and for AbaGusii of Kenya, an adverb where it conveys how 'packed' or 'filled up' something is. For instance, during a meeting at Kisii University, one of the colleagues made this gesture while describing her schedule. In explaining it, she repeated the gesture, saying, "*my semester is packed, full; there is no room for meetings."* Another Gusii informant said, "*If you are fetching water and the bucket is filled up, then you make the gesture to tell the other person that it is filled to the brim*." Three different forms for this gesture obtain in South Africa: (a) "First finger is flicked against thumb and second finger, which are held tightly together. This gesture is used among Yoruba people to signal regret. (b) "Fist is held up with knuckles pointing away from the gesturer," and (c) one fist hits downward into the palm of the other hand, similar to Ethiopian (Brookes 2004).

Figure 9: Beat down and Challenge to a fist fight

An individual could promise to avenge themselves or do so by threatening to kill an interlocutor. The two ways to gesture such intensified rage are shown in Figure 10. Figures 10a & 10b are similar, differing only in the number of fingers involved. In 10a, the fingers are held tightly together, raised towards the throat, followed by a slashing motion, which can also be made using just a distended index finger (Fig. 10b). Different from these is the throat grab shown in 10c. The subject grabs their throat to convey an intended action to the interlocutor. Yoruba and AbaGusii subjects recognize this gesture as a threat, but they don't use it. The Yoruba make a wringing motion to threaten homicide, and the AbaGusii do so by drawing an extended index finger across the throat as in Fig. 10b. Unlike Ethiopians, Yoruba and AbaGusii subjects did not recognize these gestures as conveying revenge, but South Africans do.

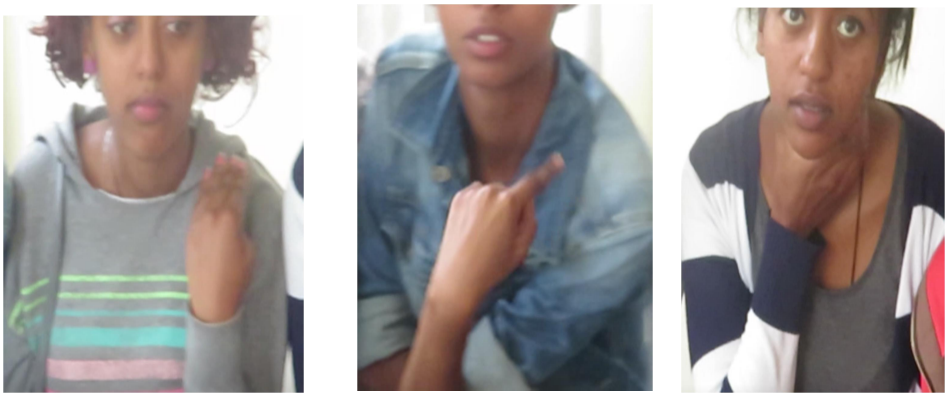


Figure 10: I will kill you\Revenge gesture

Fig.10 Fig. 10b Fig. 10c

As in all cultures, Ethiopians have rude and obscene emblems. Subjects identified 3 morphologically different gestures that they glossed as 'fuck you', which they rendered in Amharic as ልብዳሽ (female); ልብዳክ (male). These are depicted in Figures 11 and 12. The informants described them as extremely offensive and vulgar. They repeatedly cautioned against using them because their usage would generate violent reactions. They equated them to the American middle finger, both in content and in intent. In Figure 11a, an outstretched arm with a fisted hand is raised at a right angle towards the face. The second arm, with a clenched fist, crosses the stretched arm at the inner elbow. Interestingly, Figure 11a is analogous to the Italian rude gesture known as "vaffanculo". Ethiopia has a history of fighting off Italian occupations. In 1895, Italian forces invaded the Kingdom of Ethiopia and occupied it. They were defeated in Adwa in 1896. In a second expansionist attempt, they deposed Emperor Haile Selassie and occupied the country between 1935 and 1942, when they were defeated and effectively driven out. These periods of occupation left some enduring linguistic and cultural influences. For instance, every city center in Ethiopia is called '*piassa'*. This close cultural contact may have bequeathed Ethiopia with this supposedly 'fuck off' gesture.

The second emblem (Fig. 11b) may have also resulted from contacts with popular American cultures, as all the participants were quick to say, "*this is the American 'fuck you."* However, as shown in Fig. 11b, there is a morphological difference between this Ethiopian emblem and its presumed American counterpart. The Ethiopians raise up the palm with an extended middle finger, facing the interlocutor, while for Americans, the palm faces the gesturer. Consultants in Addis Ababa replicated it saying, "*you should know this; it is international."* These emblems in figures 11a and 11b are called *tagalbet* in Amharic.

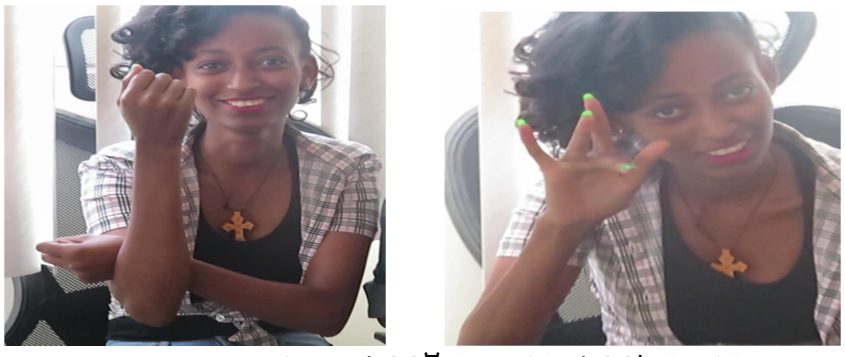


Figure 11a and **11b**: ልብዳሽ (Female); ልብዳክ (Male)

Yoruba and AbaGusii subjects did not recognize these Ethiopian emblems depicted in Figure 11. They also do not seem to be attested elsewhere on the continent, at least not in the form depicted. An equivalent profane and obscene emblem in use among Yoruba is to stretch out a hand with fingers splayed at someone, which translates to 'fuck your mother' (Orie 2009).

The third gesture, equally vulgar and offensive, involves sticking out the tongue at someone. The informant strongly condemned this action, labeling it as'very bad' and warning against doing it. To emphasize the offensive nature of the gesture depicted in Figure 12, the subjects once again drew a comparison to the American middle finger. One subject explained, "*In America, you do this*" (shows middle finger), "*here, you do like this*" (sticks out tongue). In contrast to Ethiopians, Kenyans associate the sticking out of the tip of the tongue at the corner of the mouth with playing a trick on someone, while lip pointing is considered pejorative. In Kisii (Kenya), older adults interpret it as expressing doubt or skepticism, with one informant remarking, "*Who are you lying to?*" Young Kisii and Yoruba students view it as an amorous gesture displayed by females to their love interests on social media. For Yoruba people in general, it serves as a mocking gesture deployed to label an interlocutor as foolish, and they also use it surreptitiously to indicate the target of a joke or the subject of gossip. In South Africa (Brookes 2004), moving the tongue across the upper lip is a gesture conveying desire.

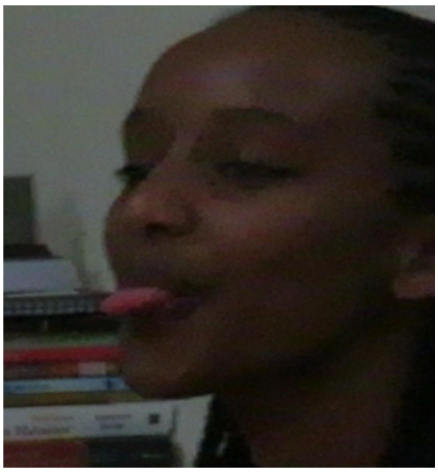


Figure 12: Fuck you- [ልብዳሽ Female; ልብዳክ - Male]

For Ethiopians, the 'thumbs-down' gesture (Fig. 13) is a rude and offensive gesture that is made out of extreme anger. Described in Amharic as ተገልበጥ

(direct translation is get upside down) and glossed in English as ‘go to hell’, the gesture, which is mainly a sign of disapproval in the western world, is used by Ethiopians to rain the worst imprecation possible on a most hated interlocutor. A consultant in Addis Ababa explained it as follows: “*it is like when an acrobat puts the head on the ground and the legs are in the air. You see, they go down with their heads. So, you say to the person, go down to hell with your head first."* This gesture is perhaps borne out of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian view of hell as being situated underneath, far below the grave. With it one wishes an interlocutor eternal damnation; hence, it was adjudged the most egregious of all angry emblematic gestures.

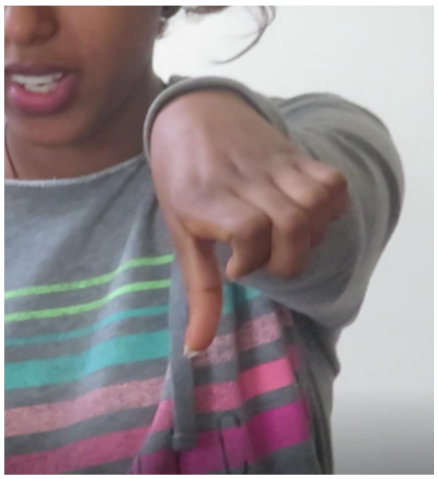


Figure 13: Tegelbete: ተገልበጥ (Male) & ተገልበጪ (Female): get upside down” i.e., Go to hell.

Aside from expressing negative emotions, some hand gestures serve the purpose of posing questions or making assertions. For instance, in situations where an individual experiences newfound love or enters a new romantic relationship, friends may playfully taunt them using a distinctive gesture that signifies, "*Oh, you're in love*." This particular gesture involves pinching an extended index finger at the second joint. Directed at someone, the gesture says, ‘*you are in love’*. It can also be used to mean ‘*you are going to get something new*’. Unlike all other popular gestures, there was no unanimous consensus among the subjects to these interpretations; as such, it may be a regionalized gesture. The two control subjects in Addis Ababa did not interpret it as ‘*you are in love’* but as an expression of anticipation of something new. Furthermore, the informants in Hawassa added, ‘*when your*

right palm itches, it means you are going to get money [a monetary gift]. *If it is the left palm, then you are going to lose money. It is like the eyes; if your lower eyelid itches, you are going to see some new person. Like relatives that you have not seen in a long time'*. A Yoruba gesture that pertains to eyelids is only found among children. When a child has erred and is wary of the consequences, the child plucks a hair from their eyelids and rubs it into their hair, and with that, it is believed that the parents will forget the incident and they will escape punishment. The Yoruba also interpret itchy right palm as a sign of an impending, unexpected monetary gift.

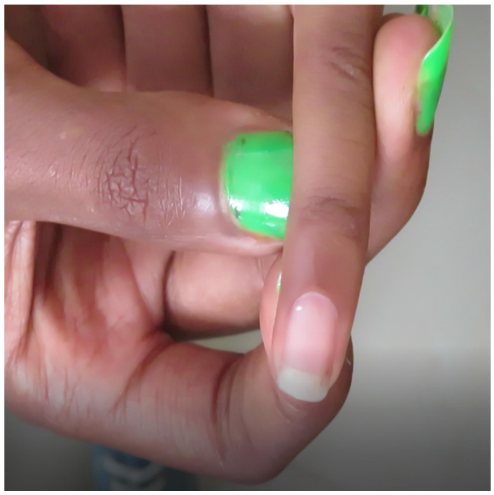


Figure 14: "You are in love" or "Expect something new"

Shown to Yoruba and AbaGussi subjects, they did not recognize the "you are in love" interpretation of the gesture in Figure 14. On seeing the emblem in Fig. 14 during the consultations, one of the Ethiopian informants jokingly gestured the emblem shown in Figure 15. It instantly drew chuckles and laughter and the comment "you had sex" from the participants. This gesture is not regarded as obscene; it could be used to communicate a desire, to ask a partner for sex, inquire from a friend if they did it, or to tell a friend that you did it. The gesture involves both hands. In one hand, the index finger and the thumb are folded to form a circle, while other fingers are extended. With the other hand, the index finger is thrust through the formed circle. The O-circle stands for the female organ; the index finger depicts the male organ. The thrusting of the index finger through the circle symbolizes the act of coitus. This emblem and its proffered meanings are not unique to Ethiopians; informants attest to its use in Nigeria and in Kenya. Three different

morphologies of the emblem were reported for South Africa, one of which is “a fist with thumb tip between knuckles of firsts and second fingers” (Brookes 2004), i.e., the fig gesture.

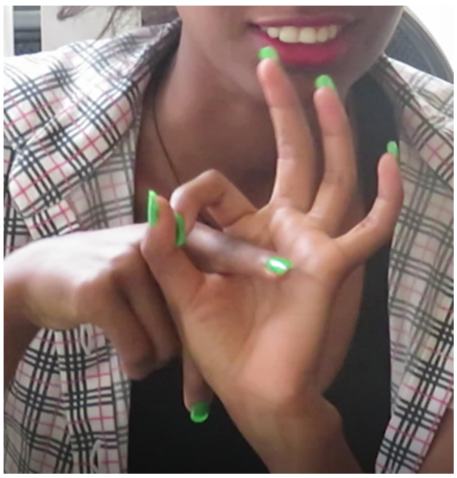


Figure 15: To have intercourse.

Ethiopians employ the 'pinky bet’ or 'pinky swear’ to amend broken friendships. This gesture involves locking together the pinkies and pulling them apart, as shown in Figure 16. This is done to resolve a conflict between friends and reset their friendship, i.e., “*let us make up."* First, the two people involved lock their pinkies, then they pull them apart, making a snapping sound. To further seal this truce, each kisses their respective pinkies, sounding out the kissing noise. This same gesture is also a promise gesture, such as a promise to return a borrowed book or pay someone a visit. Contrarily, among the Yoruba, locking the pinky fingers and pulling them apart is a dare\bet gesture. A boy, for instance, grounded by his parents, could boast to his friends that he would defy them and go to the movies. His friend, knowing the consequence, could dare him. To do this, the boy would extend his pinky saying to his friend, “I bet you that I will go to the movies tonight." The friend, in locking his own pinky to his friend's, accepts the bet and dares the boy to go to the movies, often with the verbal challenge, “you are a bastard if you don’t go.” The Yoruba also use the gesture to threaten physical harm to someone. The AbaGusii of Kenya, like the Yoruba, lock their pinkies to make a bet or a dare. Unlike Ethiopians, they do not use it to make positive promises, e.g., visit someone or pay a debt.

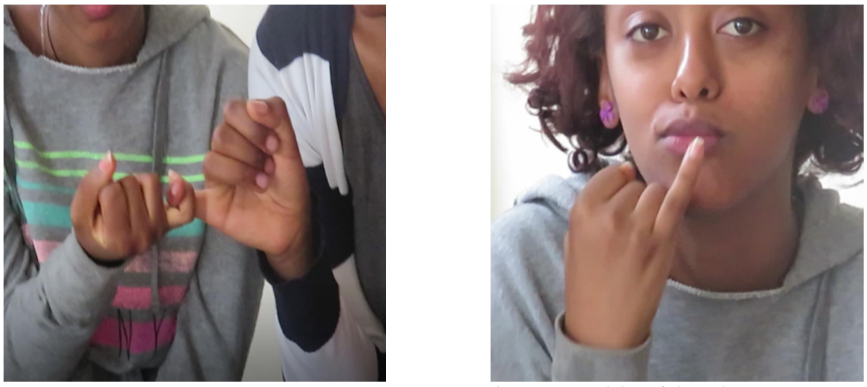


Figure 16 (a & b): Let us make up and be friends

'*To promise, you know, promise like, you say to me, I will bring your book tomorrow, I promise*. *For promise, we do like this*." She turns to another participant, who stretches out her hand, palms up. She slaps her own palm on it and slides it away. '*This is; I promise to do something.*' She continues, '*to make it stronger, we also do like this.'* Using her pinky, she draws the sign of a cross on the opened palm of her friend before slapping hers on it and sliding it away. Shown to the Nigerian and Kenyan subjects, they were unfamiliar with this emblem. This and the 'go to hell' gesture may be religiously motivated. Different from Ethiopians, the Yoruba touch the index finger to the tongue and point it to the sky, while the AbaGusii point their hand, palm open, to the sky to make a promise.

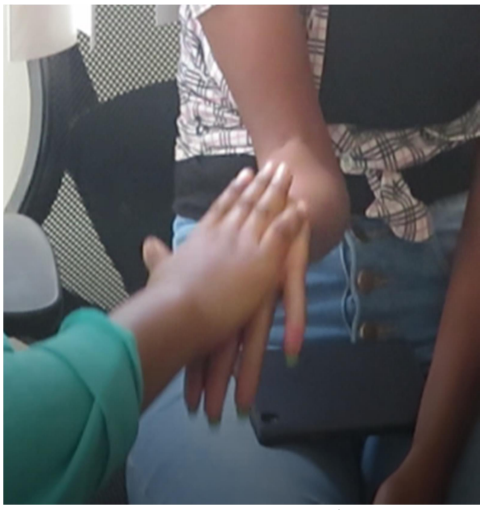


Figure 17: I promise

When veracity is questioned, Ethiopians gesture their doubts or '*I don't believe you'* by puckering the lips and pointing them sideways, away from the interlocutor. This gesture, shown in Fig. 18, is mainly used by females. Among the Babukusu of Kenya, this is a gesture of ridicule that is called *Khusiniola*. It could be accompanied by a clicking noise made by sucking in air (tsk tsk). The Gusii and Yoruba people make the gesture to identify the subject of an ongoing gossip to someone else. Furthermore, Gusii subjects use it to suggest that an interlocutor is ranting foolishly.

Figure 18: I doubt you.

To congratulate someone for a good job, Ethiopians shake with their thumbs. This emblem, shown in Figure 19, is the equivalent of American 'high five'. According to the informants, '*In America, you say high five; here we do like this*.'

Figure 19: Congratulations or good job!

The gesture in Figure 19 appears to be unique to Ethiopians, as none of the Nigerian or Kenyan subjects recognized it. To gesture congratulations or well done in South Africa, "hands with palm facing forward and fingers slightly

splayed held up at head height and rotate slightly from the wrist" (Brookes 2004). The Yoruba, on the other hand, pump their fists repeatedly (Agwuele 2014).

"*If something bad has happened and you are afraid that you will be scolded, or you fear punishment. For girls, we do like this."* She bites her index finger at the corner of the mouth (Figure 20a). "*We also do like this*" (Figure 20b); she covers her mouth with a fisted hand and lowers her gaze. "*Another way is to do like this*": She holds out both hands at chest level, the wrists relaxed, and hands made limp, then flaps up and down. The hands could also be raised to chest level and used to fan air towards the face. These three forms demonstrated the different ways of gesturing the fear for an impending negative response. Yoruba and Gusii people, unlike Ethiopians, use the finger-biting gesture of Figure 20a to convey regret, not of an act of commission or omission, but to reminisce over a humiliation suffered. For the Babukusu of Kenya, the index finger is bitten by females to express anger when provoked. The Yoruba, like Ethiopians, make use of the third gesture, the limp hands, to express fear for impeding consequence for an act of commission against an authority figure.

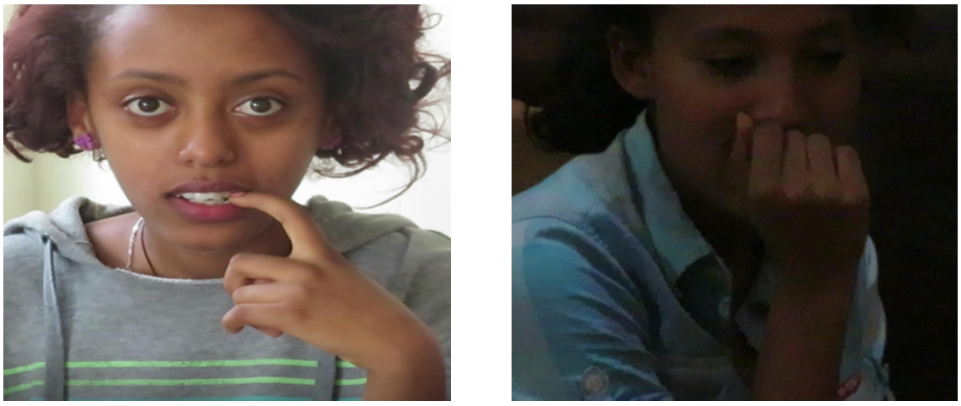


Figure 20 (a & b): Afraid or scared

To gesture shyness, Ethiopians make the facial expression depicted in Figure 21. One of the male consultants, independent of the females, produced the expression in Figure 21b, saying, *'village girls, you will see them make faces like this*'. When this was presented to the ladies, they were unified in describing it as **shyness**, saying '*but not boys, girls*.'

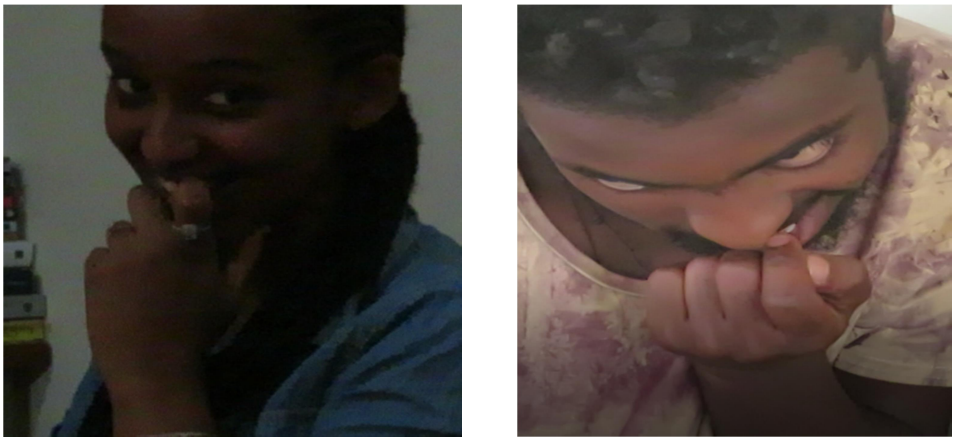


Figure 21: Fig 21a by females 21b: Flirting and shyness

The subjects quickly pointed out that Figure 21 should not be confused with the female mouth or face covering gesture that expresses **surprise**. According to the participants, when females are surpised, they cover their chin, mouth, and nose with both hands as shown in Figure 22. AbaGusii and Yoruba subjects also recognize Fig. 21 as expressing shyness.

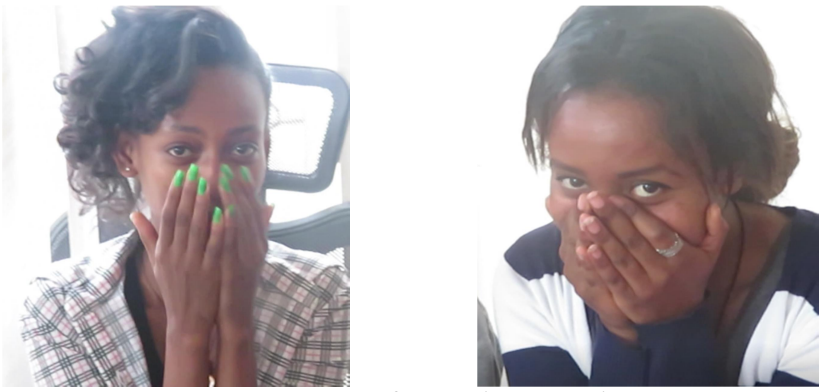


Figure 22: Gesture for surpise: Females

Surprise: the most common male gesture conveying surprise is a wide, open mouth and eyes. One of the female informants demonstrated it, as shown in Figure 23. This demonstration drew collective approval. The consultants in Addis Ababa, on seeing the mimicked portrayal, quickly said, '*girls, we don't do like that. Only boys*'.

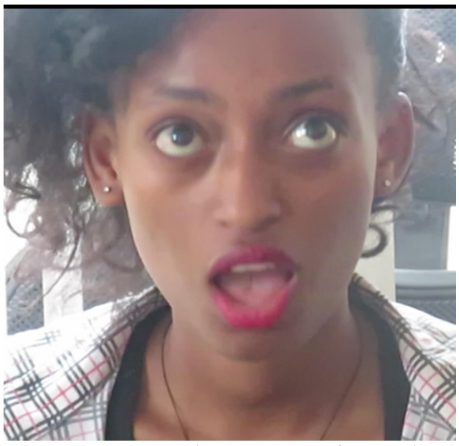


Figure 23: male gesture of surprise

The gesture in Figure 23 attributed to Ethiopian males is commonly used by the Yoruba people regardless of sex or age. They say verbally "it tore apart my mouth" and refer to surprise as *iyalenu*, 'that which drops the jaw'. With both sexes present, Figure 23 was later presented to the male participants; one laughed, nodding, and another fastened his head with both hands, as demonstrated by a female participant in Figure 24. The subjects explained that by clasping his head with both hands, the male was expressing his sadness and remorse. The male, they said, presumed that the lady got back at him for his portrayal of girls' expressions of shyness (Fig. 21b). Fastening the head with both hands as an expression of **sadness** seems to be a common cross-cultural gesture.

Figure 24: Gesture for sadness, sorrow or remorse.

Children-related gestures: The data verification and interpretation process, being interactive, led to the spontaneous acquisition of several additional emblems and commentaries. This context-driven nature of emblems reinforces the notion that the association of forms and meanings cannot be separated from their communicative contexts, despite their quotability. For instance, present during these sessions was our seven-year-old daughter, Helga. She attended school in Hawassa. When the subjects explained the 'make-up' 'or 'friendship-repair' gesture (Fig 16), she interjected by touching her forehead, her cheeks, and then her lips, saying, '*macchiato, shalala, putica*.' I was confused, but before I could give her 'the look', everyone started laughing and talking animatedly. It turned out that they were reminiscing about their school days. Finally, they said. '*Among children, but not adults.*' One of the subjects now said to Helga. '*when you fight with your friend and you don't want to be friends anymore, then you do like this* (she touches her forehead, saying *shuka;* ሹካ (fork); then her right cheek saying *mankia;* ማንኪያ (spoon); then her left cheek saying, *shalala;* ሻላላ; (*there is no meaning, you just say shalala, it is shalala,* (she said)), and finally she tapped upwards her lower lips and vibrated both lips, saying "putica," ፑቲካ. *When you move your lips, then you don't talk to them again. It is over'*. Apparently, children perform the gesture to end a friendship.

Since Helga was now involved, one of the consultants tapped her own temple and said, '*intelligent, your daughter is smart.'* This is shown in Figure 25. Touching the temple with the index finger is their emblem for intelligence. The AbaGusii, like Ethiopians, would tap the temple once to indicate intelligence; repeated tapping of the temple, however, conveys 'crazy' for the AbaGusii and Yoruba people.

Figure 25: You are intelligent

Conclusion

Seeing gestures as culturally significant actions and gesturing as a culturally situated practice, the goal of this paper has been to understand the semiosis of some extant emblems popularly in use among urban Amharic speakers in Ethiopia as obtained in their situated interactional contexts. While external observers may not immediately insert themselves into the full experience of the native gesturer-perceiver, they are nevertheless able to study the semantics and pragmatics of signs by understanding the actions, the moments of an activity, and the dynamism involved as interlocutors negotiate the meaning, message, and goal of a deployed gesture in contextualized discourse. This hermeneutic and interpretive quest was not to determine conformity with a presumed essence but to comprehend diverse cultural approaches to gestural communication and the malleable relationship between forms and their meanings within their cultural situatedness and as a habitude.

The study identifies 20 emblematic forms with social meanings and functions (holophrastic gestures) and examines 6 communicative acts. These gestures include emblems that serve to regulate the behavior of others (e.g., finger snapping), convey internal states (e.g., jaw dropping, head-clasping), or evaluate others (e.g., thumb down, thumbs clicking). When recognized and understood within their contextualized environment, these emblems independently constitute full speech acts (warning, betting, promises). The ostensive approach, through cross-cultural referencing, confirmed that they are not mere accompaniments to speech but serve as independent message bearers. They constitute propositions formed by a valid and revealing connection to their consequents, particularly as this connection is culturally recognized and systematically operationalized. Furthermore, the study illustrates that their use is not only indexical (content dependent) but also reflexive, related (members' background knowledge, setting, place, and occasion), and complex (Garfinkel 1967:4).

From the presentation, it is clear that gestures, imagistic, heavily affected, yet simplistic in form, are communicatively effective. Their message at times can be so piercingly precise and lingering. The semiotic properties of an emblematic gesture and its utility as a communicative device reside in a society where it derives its relevance, signification, anchor and cultural associations, even when some emblems are cross-culturally understood. For example, the "promise" gesture, which involves making a sign of the cross on the palm of another before placing one's own palm on it and sliding it off (see Fig. 17), is elevated to a binding oath due to its religious connotations.

Emblems thus take a cue from its culture in its adaptation to, and convergence on, the needs of its members. Underlying the promise or oath gesture therefore is the need to extract compliance through an appeal to a higher spiritual being to whom deference is shown. Sending and decoding of these emblems occur pragmatically, and they are co-acted and jointly performed actions. Gesturers do not mainly rely on 'quotable' gestures\emblems, rather, they communicate meaning through a confluence of significations that guide to the retrieval or inference of intended meaning, and this is due to habitus. Whatever the meanings or indications are, they precede their forms and are rooted in experience (Wegener 1885\1995:128). Consequently, any emblem advanced as universal reflects a purely interpretive frame (e.g., structuralism vs. poststructuralism).

Some vast contextual movements of the head, arms, hands, and a combination of them and parts thereof are so ubiquitous, seemingly raising the notion of 'universality'. No matter the extent of the similarities, the place, usage, and psychological dispositions are differently (socially and culturally) anchored. The Ethiopian swearing or oath gesture (Fig. 16a) is meaningless to a Kisii or Yoruba person, for whom more binding is touching the earth with the index finger, then touching it to the tongue, and then pointing it to the sky. This highlights the considerable divergence in how different societies assign meaning to body movements, whether these gestures are borrowed (e.g., the middle finger in the USA), inherited (e.g., the Italian "fuck-off" gesture), or indigenous. Despite any morphological similarities, decoding of these emblems requires participatory knowledge of the semantics of a given culture, an emic acquisition that is variable (Axtell 1991).

Exploring diversity across cultures and language groups necessitates redirecting focus away from assigning influential status to any particular variant. It involves recognizing the validity of each variant within its specific context. Further, these emblems often carry nuanced and intricate meanings specific to their context of usage and that are interred within the communicative situation of their performance and reflective, and sometimes derivative, of historical or material culture and cultural worldview. Consider the diverse ways of gesturing the concept of 'telephone' as described by Haviland (2005). The instrumental iconic gestures resembling holding a phone to the ear wouldn't exist if the device were not part of the users' material culture. The ontogenesis of some of the described Ethiopian emblems is easily traceable, like the 'promise' (Fig. 17) or 'go to hell' emblems (Fig. 14) (religious), but not the 'no' emblem, which remains opaque, except to daringly

propose that the 'wagging finger' replaces the rapid horizontal head shake for 'negation' that is commonly attested across the continent. The etymology of others could be linked to political occupations such as 'go to hell' or through cultural transmission such as the adoption and indigenization of the American 'middle finger'. Even here, caution is required. These communicative forms + meanings are local; they are constrained by a group and could extend to other groups depending on the looseness of the network and ease of members to traverse in and out of the network. The data also showed some of the Ethiopian emblems to be a function of ascribed status, such as sex, evident in gestures like 'surprise' (Figures 22 & 23) and 'shyness' (Fig. 21b), and the 'come and get your punishment' demeanor of mothers (Fig. 3a). Certain performative gestures are synonymous with age, e.g., children's 'make-up' or 'friendship-repair-gesture' (Fig 16). For others, there appears to be some generational differences starkly visible between urban and rural residences. Rural residents recognize some gestures that are not in their repertoires, the difference being that they are less prone to using them and vice versa. Emblems, like words, are subject to change. Sticking out the tongue has a dual usage among AbaGusii, expression of doubt among older people or amorous feelings among the youth. If the Abyssinians (Ethiopians), as Darwin[4] claims to have been informed by Captain Speedy, indeed "express a negative by jerking the head to the right shoulder, together with a slight cluck, the mouth being closed; [and] an affirmation is expressed by the head being thrown backwards and the eyebrows raised for an instant," these gestures are definitely not recognizable to contemporary Ethiopians who furrowed their brows when asked and instead wagged their index finger, gesturing an emphatic 'no'.

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