

# Evidence found for gestures as the likely beginnings of human communication

March 15 2022, by Bob Yirka

---



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

A team of researchers from Australia, Germany and the U.S. has found evidence that the origin of human language was hand gestures rather than grunts. In their paper published in *Proceedings of the Royal Society*

*B*, the group describes experiments that involved asking volunteers to attempt to describe words using only grunts or gestures.

Movies and television have often portrayed human ancestors as using simple grunts to convey information between individuals. In this new effort, the research team wondered if that was an accurate portrayal. To test the idea, they recruited several groups of volunteers to play a game similar to charades, in which one person acts out a word using gestures and others try to guess what it is. In this case, the volunteers were the actors and another group of undergrad students were the guessers. In another experiment, the volunteers attempted to do the same using only grunts or guttural sounds, but the catch in both situations was that the volunteers were from two [different cultures](#)—one from Australia, the other Vanuatu. In addition to speaking [different languages](#), the groups also had many [cultural differences](#). The researchers reasoned that if gestures were a universal mode of communication, then gestures used by the two cultures to describe the same thing should be similar; likewise for grunts.

In comparing [data](#) from the two types of experiments, the researchers found that gestures were far more effective in communicating meaning and were often similar between cultures.

The researchers then repeated the experiment, but in the second go-round, visually impaired people were asked to gesture or grunt. They found that once again, gestures were far more effective in communicating ideas. The researchers suggest the second experiment was more revealing than the first because the visually impaired people did not have shared visual clues. As an example, volunteers from either group pantomimed holding a cup to their mouth when asked to convey the idea of drinking.

The researchers conclude that gesturing is far superior to grunting as a

means of communication, and thus, logic suggests it would have been the primary means of communication before the development of speech.

**More information:** Nicolas Fay et al, Gesture is the primary modality for language creation, *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* (2022). [DOI: 10.1098/rspb.2022.0066](https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2022.0066)

© 2022 Science X Network

Citation: Evidence found for gestures as the likely beginnings of human communication (2022, March 15) retrieved 13 March 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-03-evidence-gestures-human.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--