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## Introduction

### Gesture, ritual and memory

Paul Bouissac

The articles brought together in this special issue of *Gesture* are selected from the proceedings of a symposium that took place at the University of Toronto (Victoria College) in May 2004, and on a series of research seminars on the same topic organized during the following academic year. The symposium, titled "Gesture, Ritual and Memory", and the subsequent meetings which were designed to further explore some of the problems raised during the symposium discussions, involved representatives of several disciplines: developmental psychology, evolutionary biology, cultural anthropology, linguistics, history of religions, communication and literary studies. It is indeed obvious that the notion of gesture, which historically emerged as a technical concept in rhetoric, then acquired a scientific status in the context of modern psychology and linguistics, is relevant to a broader array of disciplines, albeit in a variety of capacities.

The theme of the symposium had been chosen in view of the fact that gesture research has focused so far almost exclusively on the synchronic perspective by developing methods of observation and recording, and elaborating classifications and systematizations of the data in a conceptual framework within which the temporal dimension merely provides more or less significant variables. Of course, gesture, as language, flows in time as does the observer. However, the influence of structural and functional linguistics that prevailed when the possibility of a science of gesture was conceived imposed some epistemological constraints which have been rarely questioned. This is why it was thought appropriate first to heuristically consider gesture from the point of view of evolution, development, interaction, transmission and transformation. Gesture must indeed be conceived as originating in deep biological and cultural time, carried forward by genes as much as cultural memory, and leaving decipherable tracks in language, artifacts and ritual.