

# Gesturing related to storytelling style, not nationality, study

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Elena Nicoladis, professor in the Department of Psychology, is lead author on a study finding a link between gesturing and how people tell stories. Photo credit: John Ulan Credit: John Ulan

There are many stereotypes about gesturing across cultures—the idea that Italians are prone to hand-talking, for example. But new research by University of Alberta scientists suggests that the amount you gesture

when telling a story has more to do with what you're saying than where you're from.

"We wondered if how frequently people gesture isn't determined so much by their culture alone, but rather by what they are saying when they are speaking," said Elena Nicoladis, lead author and professor in the Department of Psychology in the Faculty of Science. "So we designed a study to look at the differences in how people present a [story](#), and how that affects how they gesture."

Previous research shows that English speakers, for instance, prefer to tell stories in chronological order, play by play. In other cultures, such as China, it is more common to focus on the moral or meaning behind a story.

The study involved first-language speakers of French, Spanish, Mandarin, and Hindi who spoke English as a second language. Participants were asked to watch a cartoon and then tell the story back to the researcher. The researchers first examined how often each person gestured. The results found that French and Spanish speakers gestured a lot when telling the story, while the Hindi and Mandarin speakers did not. Next, they looked at the storytelling style that each participant adopted.

"Sure enough, the French speakers and Spanish speakers were very much telling the story in chronological order—vivid events illustrated with gestures," explained Nicoladis. "The Hindi and Mandarin speakers were much more focused on why the events in the story happened."

Maybe, Nicoladis explained, it's not so much that there are cross-cultural differences in how frequently people gesture. Instead, how they are speaking is related to how frequently they [gesture](#).

"This could tell us that spoken language is primary," said Nicoladis.

"How people are planning to speak seems to determine a lot of nonverbal communication, like gesturing, that happens. How you speak might be far more important than how you are communicating nonverbally."

The paper, "Gesture frequency is linked to story-telling style: Evidence from bilinguals," was published in *Language and Cognition*.

**More information:** ELENA NICOLADIS et al, Gesture frequency is linked to story-telling style: evidence from bilinguals, *Language and Cognition* (2019). [DOI: 10.1017/langcog.2018.25](https://doi.org/10.1017/langcog.2018.25)

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