

**Please cite as:**

Senft, G. (2004). Participation and posture. In A. Majid (Ed.), *Field Manual Volume 9* (pp. 80-82). Nijmegen: Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics. doi:[10.17617/2.506964](https://doi.org/10.17617/2.506964).

---

**REGULATIONS ON USE**

**Stephen C. Levinson and Asifa Majid**

This website and the materials herewith supplied have been developed by members of the Language and Cognition Department of the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (formerly the Cognitive Anthropology Research Group). In a number of cases materials were designed in collaboration with staff from other MPI departments.

**Proper citation and attribution**

Any use of the materials should be acknowledged in publications, presentations and other public materials. Entries have been developed by different individuals. Please cite authors as indicated on the webpage and front page of the pdf entry. Use of associated stimuli should also be cited by acknowledging the field manual entry. Intellectual property rights are hereby asserted.

**Creative Commons license**

This material is provided under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike license (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0). This means you are free to share (copy, redistribute) the material in any medium or format, and you are free to adapt (remix, transform, build upon) the material, under the following terms: you must give appropriate credit in the form of a citation to the original material; you may not use the material for commercial purposes; and if you adapt the material, you must distribute your contribution under the same license as the original.

**Background**

The field manuals were originally intended as working documents for internal use only. They were supplemented by verbal instructions and additional guidelines in many cases. If you have questions about using the materials, or comments on the viability in various field situations, feel free to get in touch with the authors.

**Contact**

Email us via [library@mpi.nl](mailto:library@mpi.nl)

Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics

P.O. Box 310, 6500 AH, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

## PARTICIPATION AND POSTURE

Gunter Senft

<b>Projects</b>	Space Project; Multimodal Interaction Project
<b>Task</b>	Collect high quality video recordings documenting human spatial behaviour
<b>Goal of subproject</b>	First exploratory, heuristic research to establish a new subproject that – based on a corpus of video data – will investigate various forms of human spatial behaviour cross-culturally

### Background

Human ethologists have shown that humans are both attracted to others and at the same time fear them. They refer to this kind of fear with the technical term 'social fear' and claim that "it is alleviated with personal acquaintance but remains a principle characteristic of interpersonal behaviour. As a result, we maintain various degrees of greater distance between ourselves and others depending on the amount of confidence we have in the other" (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1989: 335). It is claimed that these individual distances are learned and that they are different in different cultures. In 1966 Edward T. Hall published his seminal monograph on human distance maintenance, with which he founded the discipline called 'proxemics'. Hall's research confirmed that people in different cultures utilise different culture-specific distances. He differentiated between 'contact' cultures and 'distance' cultures. For "Americans of North European heritage" he differentiated the following four distances: intimate distance (0-40cm), personal distance (40-120cm), social distance or normal, social-consultive distance (120-400cm), and public distance (400-800cm), e.g., the distance between a speaker and his audience. He defined these distances with respect to kinesthesia (e.g., one person has elbow room, just outside of touching distance), thermal receptors, olfaction (e.g., washed skin/hair, breath), and vision.

These personal distances are instantiations of human territoriality. We mark individual and group territories – and this also has implications for posture behaviour with which we control the territory that is claimed in, and for (conversational) interaction. Kendon (1977) and Deutsch (1977) pointed out that participants in conversation (in Europe and in Anglo-Saxon cultures) usually have visual contact and look at each other. Here conversation usually means face-to-face interaction. If two persons talk to each other, a third person who wants to join this dyad cannot simply intrude on such a dyad (nor can a fourth person simply intrude on a triad) – the interactants have to grant access – and they usually do this by changing their posture and position, thus opening the closed dyad and granting access to the new person. Similarly, one cannot simply leave such a group but one has to mark with positional changes or with gaze behaviour that one intends to part (see also Eibl-Eibesfeldt, Senft 1987; also Goffman 1963).

So far we have not researched this aspect of spatial conceptualization in various cultures. The above mentioned forms of spatial behaviour are interesting for both the space project and for the multimodal interaction project. Therefore it is proposed to start this subproject with a heuristic phase of documenting such spatial behaviour.

## Research questions

Given the fact that we need such an exploratory heuristic phase of documenting aspects of proxemics to develop a proper subproject, field researchers are asked to video-document various forms of the spatial behaviour described above, especially contact and distance behaviour. Here answers to questions like the following ones are relevant:

- How many kinds of distances do people maintain?
- How are these distances differentiated?
- Are there any special associations with distances (e.g., relationship, emotions, activities)?
- How are boundaries conceived and set up – apart from distance?
- How are boundaries marked, how permanent are they, what constitutes a violation of a boundary, and how are boundaries perceived?
- How do people sit together?
- How does a third party enter an ongoing conversation between other people?
- How do people leave a group with which they just had interacted?
- What kind of interactional borders are created by what kind of different engagement areas of interactants ('engagement area' can be defined as the place which is at a given moment the conceived site of a person's currently dominant engagement (Enfield 2003: 89))?
- What about touching and grooming behaviour?
- What about body positions when people block the path of another person?
- How do people mark their (private) territory?

It should be kept in mind that these forms of behaviour may be different if observed in interactions with strangers, in interactions with acquaintances, with close kin and family members, with older people, with younger people, with members of one's peer group, and with members of same and different sex.

Moreover, conversational data on researcher – consultant discussions of this topic may contribute further interesting insights and information.

The collected data and the insights gained will serve as the basis for describing specific research tasks and for developing hypotheses to be verified or falsified in future comparative cross-cultural research.

## Task

Field researchers are asked to video-tape a range of different forms of human spatial behaviour that are relevant for the research questions asked. For further information see the "Building a corpus of multimodal interaction" instructions.

## References

- Deutsch, Robert. 1977. *Spatial Structurings in Everyday Face-to-Face Behavior*. New York: Orangeburg (The Association for the Study of Man-Environment Relations, Inc.).
- Eibl-Eibesfeldt, Irenäus. 1989. *Human Ethology. Foundations of Human Behavior*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

- Eibl-Eibesfeldt, Irenäus and Senft, Gunter. 1987. *Studienbrief "Rituelle Kommunikation"*. Hagen: Fernuniversität – Gesamthochschule Hagen, Fachbereich Erziehungs- und sozialwissenschaften.
- Enfield, Nick. 2003. Demonstratives in Space and Interaction: Data from Lao Speakers and Implications for Semantic Analysis. *Language* 79: 82-117.
- Goffman, Erving. 1963. *Behavior in Public Places*. New York: Free Press. Hall, Edward T. 1966. *The Hidden Dimension*. New York: Doubleday.
- Hall, Edward T. 1968. Proxemics. *Current Anthropology* 9: 83-95, 106-108. (reprinted in Weitz, Shirley, ed. 1979. *Nonverbal Communication. Readings with Commentary*. 293-312. New York: Oxford University Press).
- Kendon, Adam. 1977. Spatial Organization in Social Encounters: the F-Formation System. In: Adam Kendon, ed. *Studies in the Behavior of Social Interaction*. 179-208. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Schegloff, Emanuel A. 1998. Body Torque. *Social Research* 65: 535-596.