

**Short Composition 1 | Gilbert Austin**

**Development of Non-Verbal Communication in Rhetoric**

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## Introduction

Gilbert Austin was an English educator and clergyman who organized and illustrated gesture and non-verbal communication with written descriptions and illustrations to deliver effective rhetoric. He is best known for his book *Chironomia*, which introduced a gesture communications system used in public speaking. His work helped shape the development of rhetorical theory beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This paper will explore Gilbert Austin's life and contributions to rhetoric and demonstrate how his work with non-verbal communication had a lasting impact on rhetoric.

### Chapter 1: Background on Gilbert Austin

Gilbert Austin was born in Ireland. After graduating with degrees from Trinity College in London, England, Austin served as a clergyman in several churches in England. Austin was also an educator while writing several influential books on rhetoric. As the headmaster of a school for upper-class boys in Dublin, Austin wrote *Chironomia*, and it was intended as a textbook both for his students and for adult professionals such as lawyers, ministers, and politicians, who were required to use non-verbal eloquence in their work (Bizzell et al., 2020). He was interested in rhetoric because he believed it was an essential tool for communication, and it helped speakers better engage with their audiences.

In 1806, *Chironomia* introduced an illustrated system of gesture-based communication used in public speaking. Austin's gesture-based communication descriptions used body language and facial expressions to convey messages to an audience. His gesture system was based on the idea that certain gestures could be used instead of certain words and ideas, making them more powerful and memorable.

## Chapter 2: Overview of Non-Verbal Communication in Rhetoric

Rhetoric is the art of using language to effectively communicate ideas and persuade an audience. It is also used to create a sense of shared values and beliefs among citizens. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, rhetoric influenced public opinion and shaped political discourse.

Non-verbal communication is the intentional or unintentional transmission of meaning through an individual's non-spoken physical and behavioral cues (Patterson, 1995). Non-verbal communication differs from verbal communication in several ways. Non-verbal communication uses multiple sensory channels to convey meaning. When talking to someone using non-verbal communication, you create an expression more potent than words alone by using auditory, visual, and tactile channels. These channels can include facial expressions, body language, gestures, eye contact, posture, and tone of voice.

Non-verbal communication meanings are more ambiguous than verbal cues, and non-verbal cues can be misinterpreted due to cultural differences or lack of context. Culture and non-verbal communication are closely intertwined, making it challenging to communicate across cultures effectively. Variations of non-verbal communication between cultures can include the perceptions of touch, the appropriateness of eye contact, facial expressions, and body language (McCornack & Morrison, 2022).

Non-verbal communication is not governed by grammar, spelling, pronunciation, and meaning as verbal language. We rarely receive rules or formal instruction in the use of non-verbal communication. However, there are still rules that govern non-verbal communication. Most rules are unwritten in each situation, such as, "Raise your hand instead of interrupting a conversation." These unwritten rules have an impact on how people interact with each other.

In the example of eye contact, some cultures consider it rude to make eye contact while speaking, while in different cultures, it is seen as respectful non-verbal communication (McCornack & Morrison, 2022).

Austin creates a detailed description of commonly misinterpreted non-verbal communications in *Chironomia*. His book contains descriptions of gestures, facial expressions, and body language and provides examples of how different gestures can be used to convey different meanings. For example, a clenched fist can mean both anger and determination, crossing your arms in front of your chest can be a comfortable position, or it can be a sign of defensiveness, and nodding your head up and down could mean approval, or it could be a gesture of acknowledgment. Austin demonstrated this by regulating and codifying the language of gestures by creating a system of symbols representing different gestures. His natural gestures were already used in everyday life, such as nodding or shaking one's head. Austin also categorizes artificial gestures in a second group for those explicitly created for communication purposes, such as pointing a finger. The skills gained by studying non-verbal communication go along with skills in verbal communication, and both are needed to communicate competently. *Chironomia*, like the other elocutionary works of the time, can be considered part of the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century British project to standardize language use in general, whether through dictionaries, grammar, or handbooks of elocution (Spoel, 1998).

### **Chapter 3: *From Chironomia***

*Chironomia* is an in-depth exploration of non-verbal communication and its role in rhetoric. It is divided into sections that discuss the principles of non-verbal communication:

facial expressions, gestures, and body language. Austin provides examples of non-verbal communication and then analyzes how gestures can convey different meanings.

According to Debra Hawhee and Corey Holding, *Chironomia* offers a critical “theoretical reflection on bodily passions” derived from Austin’s intellectual pursuits in philosophical chemistry. Austin’s work thus suggests that through gestural skill, the orator's strategic passions can be transferred to the audience in the same way that gases are transferred to water or between vessels. For this reason, Hawhee and Holding named him an essential innovator in early materialist conceptions of rhetoric (Hawhee, Holden, 2006).

#### **Chapter 4: Gilbert Austin’s Contributions to Rhetoric**

During the 18th Century, the field of chemistry suffered from naming reform to the field of chemistry’s terminology. Gilbert Austin, who just also happened to be an amateur chemist, was influenced by the new methodical language for naming chemical substances by the Royal Irish Academy. He used this inspiration to create his methodical language for notating and classifying rhetorical gestures in *Chironomia*. It was clear to Austin that human gestures had an “infinite” variety, and he made a science of it in his rhetorical work. Austin developed a method of symbolic notation, “a special code,” to represent crucial features in the study of rhetorical delivery (Spoel, 1998).

Gilbert Austin’s gesture system is founded on explaining a specialized non-verbal language notation. This non-verbal language establishes the “grid” for analyzing bodily rhetoric and makes the abstract analysis as crucial as the represented practices. Austin’s work has provided a foundation for further exploration into the study of rhetoric and its applications. “The technologies of discipline that Austin inscribes have a normalizing effect in that they

define and code standards of polite bodily action against which improper behaviors can be identified. In this sense, his work and other works of the elocutionary movement contribute to the general 18th-century project of standardizing linguistic usage. However, in *Chironomia's* case, the non-verbal language of the body is the object and target of power” (Spoel, 1998).

### **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

In conclusion, Gilbert Austin’s ideas and contributions to the study of rhetoric in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and his book, *Chironomia*, describe the importance of using body language as a valuable tool in communication. Austin suggests that non-verbal communication is essential to study because the way you move and speak can be misinterpreted by an audience, which will have a negative rhetorical impact. Becoming better skilled in non-verbal cues while communicating with a person will help to maintain or improve their social rank and professional identities and to produce a complex and diverse system of permissible actions. Austin’s *Chironomia* names non-rational bodily persuasion, which has been acknowledged since Aristotle's time. Austin's treatise participated in the British elocutionary movement, a movement characterized by a proliferation of handbooks and public lectures on the fifth canon of rhetoric, delivery using more than just words. Austin named vocal and gestural delivery as the substance of the elocutionary study. Certainly, rhetoricians before Austin had attempted to develop a gesture system as extensive and complex as his (Spoel, 1998).

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