



Gesture in Diplomatic Address: A Case Study of Imran Khan in 74th UNGA Speech

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Abstract

Political oratory is a diverse genre which effectively juxtaposes speech and non-verbal cues. Politicians from diverse backgrounds and cultures often incorporate non-verbal elements, such as hand gestures, into their speeches. These hand gestures possess high utility and universality; thus, researchers believe that hand gestures and speech work together as a unified system for production and comprehension. This research explores the complex relationship between non-verbal and verbal communication within the dynamic realm of political public speech, drawing on McNeill's (354) Gesture theory. McNeill's theory classifies gestures into four categories: iconic, metaphoric, beat, and deictic. Employing a qualitative approach, the study provides an in-depth analysis of Imran Khan's gestures and relationship with spoken words. Iconic and metaphoric gestures were found to reinforce spoken content, while deictic and beat gestures directed attention to specific subjects and enhanced overall communication of meaning. The study found that Imran Khan effectively employed all four types of hand gestures and demonstrated a clear correlation between these gestures and his spoken words, thereby revealing his underlying thought processes. This study confirms the intricate correlation between gestures and language, emphasising their importance in influential public speaking. This resource provides unique perspectives on effective communication tactics, emphasising the significance of non-verbal clues in global conversations.

Keywords: *hand gesture, Imran Khan, public speaking, non-verbal*

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Introduction

Communication is an essential component of human survival. Researchers traditionally divide communication into two domains: verbal and non-verbal communication. However, McNeill (354) challenges this dichotomy and argues that verbal and non-verbal dialogue, i.e., speech and gesture, are interlinked; they are semantically and pragmatically connected. McNeill further dissects gestures into four types: iconic gestures, which depict concrete attributes of speech; metaphoric gestures, which convey abstract ideas of speech; deictic gestures, which point to objects or locations; beat gestures, which are small hand or finger movements for rhythm and speech flow. Hence, these gestures are integrated with speech to co-express meaning at both literal and contextual levels. Kendon (31) also reinforces the idea that gestures are effective in enhancing the clarity and flow of speech. Therefore, it is implied that speech and action coexist for effective communication.

In the genre of political speeches, Bull, Peter (663) consciously investigates the use of gestures, suggesting a strong connection between speech and hand movement. Furthermore, Atkinson (372) studies hand movements of political figures such as Martin Luther and Hitler, which trigger audience reactions. Similarly, Heritage and Greatbatch (108) find gestures and speech heavily intermingled in generating effective responses from the audience. Numerous researchers, like Streeck (281), have investigated non-verbal cues used by Democratic Party candidates. However, minimal attention has been directed towards the use of non-verbal cues, especially hand gestures, among Asian political figures like Imran Khan. Therefore, the research aims to analyse the use of hand gestures in Imran Khan's speech at the United Nations General Assembly. This study significantly enriches the growing body of research in non-verbal political communication, offering an insightful discussion on how non-verbal cues emphasise and alter meaning in pivotal diplomatic addresses.

Theoretical Perspectives on Non-Verbal Communication in Political Discourse

Non-verbal behaviour is a form of communication; it often supplements and complements the verbal message. Research on non-verbal cues, including hand gestures, facial expressions, and body movements, has been an important area in communication research (Condon and Ogston 338; Kendon 32). In the communication process, non-verbal behaviour, including hand gestures, can significantly enhance the delivery of the spoken word (Ekman and Friesen 149). Knowledge of such gestures provides deeper insights into both the speaker's intentions and feelings, as well as the intended message. This study aims to identify the correlation between Imran Khan's hand gestures and his verbal communication. Furthermore, it seeks to identify the specific hand gestures employed by Imran Khan and determine how they complement, emphasise, or alter the verbal message of his speech. Politicians' speeches, such as Imran Khan's, are a unique genre of public address. In public speeches, the use of non-verbal behaviour, particularly hand gestures, has a significant implication for effective communication with the audience. According to research conducted by previous researchers, including Atkinson (370) and

Heritage and Greatbatch (110), certain rhetorical features, combined with non-verbal aspects, can effectively elicit audience responses, such as applause. Bull and Connelly (169) further emphasised the relationship between body movements and vocal stress in informal conversation, implying that similar dynamics may be at work in political speeches.

McNeill's Gesture Typology and Cognitive Integration

Hand gestures are significant for the speaker when talking in public because they are seen and have the power to emphasise and support speech (Kendon, 29 and McNeill, 102). In political speech, gestures play a decisive role in persuasion and emphasis, which significantly alter how messages are perceived and understood by others (Bull 103). Despite the large volume of studies on verbal communication, such as the analysis of political speeches, a noticeable gap is observed in the analysis of non-verbal cues, particularly hand gestures. While most analyses focus on the content and rhetoric of political speeches, less attention is paid to the accompanying non-verbal behaviours that matter in the delivery of messages. This gap is evident even in high-stakes international addresses, which have a global audience with diverse cultural backgrounds, demanding a nuanced understanding of non-verbal communication, and this present research will seek to fill precisely these gaps. This study attempts to address this gap by analysing hand gestures in the discourse of the former Prime Minister Imran Khan, during his speech before the 74th United Nations General Assembly. This study is conducted under the categorisation of David McNeill's *Hand and Mind: What Gestures Reveal about Thought, the theory of gestures*, which has four categories: iconic, metaphoric, beats, and deictic.

1. Iconic gestures: These show “formal relation to the semantic content of the linguistic unit” (McNeill 354).
2. Metaphoric gestures: These represent abstract ideas or concepts.
3. Beat: “bi-phasic small, low energy rapid flicks of the fingers or hand” (McNeill 80), that serve punctual and discourse marking functions.
4. Deictic gestures: These point to objects, people, or locations (McNeill 203).

McNeill explores the complex relationship between gesture and cognitive processes. He argues that gestures are not merely supplementary to speech but are deeply linked to thought. Gestures and speech are tightly integrated and are part of a unified system (Kendon 204; McNeill 192). They emerge from the same region in the brain and work jointly to convey meaning (Bonda et al. 44; Gallese et al. 396; Nishitani et al. 60). For instance, a gesture may convey a concept that is not be fully expressed through words.

Problem Statement

This study aims to ascertain the relationship between Khan's hand gestures and verbal messages in a symbiotic manner. A qualitative method is used to capture these complexities and closely examine how Khan's hand gestures enhance the impact of his speech. In line

with previous research on nonverbal communication in politics, this study examines the relationship between words and hand gestures. Streeck (285) discovered that political candidates used a shared code of pragmatic gestures to punctuate their speech acts and give visual structure. More recently, Kendon (23) pointed out that many gestures coincide with the most stressed syllables in speech, thus adding emphasis and clarity. Masters and Sullivan (123) found that audiences react emotionally to non-verbal behaviour when speakers use it; such reactions can have a substantial impact on perceptions of the speaker's credibility or authority. Moreover, Bull (103), studying hand movements as they relate to political speeches, found that gestures served many functions, from emphasising points to showing apparent sincerity. With this background, the current analysis of Imran Khan's hand gestures would significantly contribute to recent efforts directed towards determining the roles of non-verbal communication in political speeches. This highlights how gestures can be used to enhance the content of verbal information, making messages more engaging and persuasive. Thus, it brings added value to the research field in political communication.

The importance of this study resides in examining the complex interaction between gestures and verbal discourse in the context of global diplomacy, with a particular focus on Imran Khan's speech at the 2019 United Nations General Assembly. This research provides insights into how political leaders utilise non-verbal cues, specifically hand gestures, to strengthen, highlight, or subtly alter their spoken messages. It achieves this by analysing the coherence and divergence between Khan's gestures and spoken words. Moreover, the study goes beyond analysing political rhetoric by exploring the role of non-verbal communication. It makes a valuable contribution to the broader field of communication studies by emphasising the significance of non-verbal communication in successful public speaking. Therefore, it offers valuable insights for academics, diplomats, and orators, highlighting the significance of incorporating non-verbal components to strengthen the effectiveness and transparency of verbal communication in international diplomacy. In brief, this study establishes a connection between political discourse and non-verbal behaviour by examining the use of gestures in a South Asian political context. However, this study is unique because it addresses how Imran Khan's hand gestures during his 2019 UN General Assembly speech co-construct meaning with his spoken words. By applying McNeill's gesture theory, it becomes clear how iconic, metaphoric, beat, and deictic gestures enhance clarity, persuasion, and emotional impact in global diplomacy. It also contributes to the discourse community by clarifying the role of non-verbal cues in high-stakes political discourse.

Methodology

This research employed a case study research design. A case analysis is a qualitative research method that examines a phenomenon in its natural setting and gathers extensive information from sources such as reports, papers, audiovisual materials, observations, and interviews (Creswell, 2007). This research aims to analyse the hand gestures of former Prime Minister Imran Khan during his 74th UNG speech. For this purpose, David

McNeill's theory of gestures was applied as a theoretical framework. McNeill's work, *Hand and Mind: What Gestures Reveal about Thought* is based on over a decade of research that gestures do more than support spoken language. They have a direct impact on thinking processes. Moreover, gestures can convey thoughts that language alone might find difficult to articulate by transforming mental images into tangible forms. To understand the complexities of cognitive processes, McNeill advocates for a comprehensive analysis of language and gestures combined. This theory categorises hand gestures into four main types: iconic, metaphoric, beats, and deictic. Metaphorical gestures relate to abstract objects, whereas iconic gestures reflect what is said in the speech. Beat gestures are those that convey an emotion, whereas deictic gestures involve pointing with the hands and arms at an object.

The primary participant in this study is former Prime Minister Imran Khan, as observed during his 74th UNGA speech. The analysis will focus on his non-verbal expressions, specifically hand gestures. The speech was downloaded from the United Nations' official YouTube channel. It was observed, and screenshots of the most common hand gestures were taken using the Snipping Tool. All gestures were coded by the primary researcher using a coding sheet based on McNeill's categories. Each instance was marked with a timestamp, verbal phrase, and gesture description. Additionally, the statement accompanying each hand gesture was transcribed to clarify the relationship between the gesture and the words and interpreted according to McNeill's (102) theory. The hand gestures captured from the speech were analysed using McNeill's (102) theory of gesture as a framework. This analysis examines the form, function, and meaning of the hand gestures within the context of the speech. The relationship between hand gestures and verbal content is explored to identify patterns and possible implications of the gestures on message delivery.

Limitations of the Study

The analysis is limited to Imran Khan's hand gestures in a particular speech. Given that gestures could change based on the audience or situation, this constraint limits the generalisation of findings across speeches or contexts. Non-verbal cues, such as hand gestures, are subjective by nature. Researchers or observers may interpret the same gestures differently, as their cultural, societal, or personal biases can influence their perception. Although McNeill's typology offers a systematic framework for analysis, it may not completely encompass all features of gestural communication, particularly those distinct to political oratory or specific cultural contexts. The study primarily concentrates on hand gestures and may not comprehensively address how these gestures interact with other non-verbal signs, such as facial emotions, posture, or voice modulation. The study is dependent on video data, and the quality and angles of the clip may limit the accuracy of gesture analysis. Due to these limitations, some important gestures may be overlooked or misinterpreted.

Iconic Gestures: Visualising Concrete Ideas

When politicians speak in public, their words are only half the story. Their body language, mainly how they use their hands, can tell us a lot about their feelings and thoughts (McNeill 102). By examining Khan's hand gestures more closely during his speech at the United Nations, we can gain a better understanding of his message and persuasive strategies.

According to David McNeill (19), people use four main types of hand gestures during their speech. The following analysis identifies the specific types of gestures employed by Imran Khan during his speech.:



Fig. 1. Iconic gestures used for concrete representation.

Talking about the melting of glaciers, Khan directs the audience's attention by saying, "If nothing is done, we are scared [humans are facing a huge catastrophe]" (*United Nations* 00:03:39-00:03:50). The speech is accompanied by the gesture shown in Fig.1. Khan's use of this gesture effectively communicates the urgency and the magnitude of the threat posed by melting glaciers. The iconic gesture makes his message clear, impactful, and emotionally resonant for the audience. This gesture and his words serve as a call to action, urging everyone to take responsibility and work towards a solution to this critical environmental challenge. In Fig.1, Khan's gesture while stating "poor get poorer and rich get richer" (*United Nations* 00:09:57-00:10:00) can be interpreted as an Iconic gesture (McNeill 144). The open palm's initial downward movement represents the poor's downward trajectory. It visually represents their decline in wealth and well-being. The following upward movement of the same hand symbolises the opposite trend, the rise of the rich and their increasing wealth.

Khan brings his extended index fingers together (Shown in Fig.1) and then separates them quickly, creating an arc that is used and accompanied by the statement, "When nuclear-armed countries fight to the end, it will have [consequences far beyond the borders.]" (*United Nations* 00:44:35-00:44:43). The initial convergence of the fingers symbolise the escalation and proximity of nuclear conflict. He brings two powerful forces together, representing the opposing sides in a war. The sudden separation of the fingers with an arc can represent the devastating explosion of a nuclear weapon and its far-reaching consequences. The arc emphasises the spread of destruction beyond the borders of the countries directly involved.



Fig. 2. Iconic gestures: Framing shapes

Standing on a stage, Imran Khan talks about the world [“world is changing”] (*United Nations* 00:09:49-00:09:52). He brings his hands together, palms facing each other, and moves them apart, forming a rounded shape like a globe (shown in Fig.2). This type of gesture directly represents the meaning of spoken words. It adds a clear and memorable image to Khan's message. By forming the globe with his hands, he is not just talking about the world but bringing it to life right before the audience. In Fig. 2, he holds both hands in front of his head, with fingers slightly spread and palms facing each other, creating a frame around his head. This is an iconic gesture because it directly resembles the concept it represents, in this case, the mind (McNeill 176). It symbolises the mind, suggesting he can think deeply about Western thinking.



Fig. 3. Metaphoric gestures expressing abstraction.

Metaphoric Gestures: Conveying Abstract Concepts

While iconic gestures offer direct visual representations of concrete ideas, Imran Khan's hand movements also play a vital role in conveying more abstract concepts. This transition from the physical to the conceptual is evident in his use of metaphoric gestures, which transform intangible ideas into visible forms for the audience. Showing numbers with fingers is a metaphoric gesture, as shown in Fig. 3. This is because the gesture represents an abstract mathematical object, which is, in this case, the number itself (McNeill 53). For example, Khan shows his four fingers and says, “There are lots of problems the world is facing, but I will talk about [just four problems today] (*United Nations* 00:01:23-00:01:30) in Fig. 3. By using the visual aid of his fingers, Khan draws attention to the problems he will be focusing on. Secondly, it also shows limitations. While

acknowledging the vastness of global problems, Khan invites the audience to consider these four issues in greater depth.

Similarly, in Fig. 3, he shows a thumb that illustrates [number one] (*United Nations* 00:21:45-00:21:50). It is also a metaphoric gesture by which Khan draws the audience's attention to the first problem (McNeill 237). In Fig. 3c, he is illustrating number one with a different gesture. This time, he uses an extended index finger and says, "When we came to power, my [priority was.....]" (*United Nations* 00:26:16-00:26:23). The extended finger gesture has a more vital metaphoric element (McNeill 238). It extends beyond simply representing the number and can be seen as a metaphor for pointing towards or highlighting the importance of the priority.



Fig. 4. Metaphoric gestures indicating scale and comparison.

Imagine Khan raising his hand, holding his thumb and index finger apart, as shown in Fig. 4. He creates a small gap between them, like someone holding a tiny, invisible object. While doing this, he says ["In the ten years] preceding that, our total debt went up four times." (*United Nations* 00:34:15-00:34:21). This gap between his thumb and index finger acts like a visual representation of ten years. Showing the duration of time with the gap of thumb and index finger is a metaphoric gesture (McNeill 47). This is because the gesture does not directly resemble the object it represents, which, in this case, is time. It uses a symbolic association to represent a concept. The gap between the thumb and index finger represents a small amount of time, while a wider gap represents a longer amount of time. The gesture in Fig. 4 shows a smaller section. Khan uses this gesture, saying, "I blame a [certain section] of people in the West" (*United Nations* 00:18:01-00:18:09). In certain sections, the gap between the index finger and thumb is less in Fig. 4b compared to 4a. In Fig. 4c, he further decreased the gap between the index finger and the thumb, almost touching each other, while saying ["In one minute, I am trying to explain"] (*United Nations* 00:18:29-00:18:34). It serves as a non-verbal cue to the audience to lean in and listen carefully. Khan is about to share something crucial in the limited time he has. All three different gestures have a close relation to the statement he makes.



Fig. 5. Metaphoric gestures distinguishing abstract categories.

Talking about Islamophobia, Imran Khan uses the gesture shown in Fig. 5, accompanied by the statement [“the Western leaders have equated terrorism with Islam”] (*United Nations* 00:11:35-00:11:43). Firstly, Khan moved his right hand downward, making a slicing, metaphoric gesture because it shows equity, which is an abstract thing. It is followed by making an arc with his left hand pointing to Islam, which is again abstract. The downward slicing motion followed by the arc pointing to “Islam”, Khan is emphasising the separation of terrorism from Islam. He is trying to represent visually that equating the two is inaccurate and unfair.



Fig. 6. Metaphoric gestures conveying certainty and stability.

Fig. 6 shows a metaphoric gesture where the index finger touches the thumb, and the other fingers are closed. The closed ring formed by the thumb and index finger is often associated with strength, certainty, and confidence. Khan uses this gesture while discussing a fact; it indicates his strong belief in its validity and accuracy. The next gesture in Fig. 6 was used while stating [“there was rule of law”] (*United Nations* 00:21:45-00:21:50). It is a metaphoric gesture representing balance, stability, or fairness. These qualities are often associated with the concept of the rule of law. This gesture visually emphasises its importance in maintaining order and justice.

Deictic Gestures: Directing Attention and Establishing Agency

Beyond representing both concrete and abstract ideas, Khan’s gestures are further utilised to direct attention and establish relationships between himself, the audience, and

referenced entities. This purposeful use of hand movement to indicate people, objects, or locations is captured through deictic gestures.



Fig. 7. Deictic gestures indicating audience and institutional reference.

In Fig. 7, Khan points with an open hand to the audience in the house, saying he feels honoured by presenting his country at [this forum of world leaders] (*United Nations* 00:1:10-00:1:15). It is like a warm handshake with the audience. This gesture shows Khan is genuinely grateful for the opportunity to represent his country and is addressing the audience directly. Imran Khan used a different gesture this time, as shown in Fig. 7b, pointing to UNGA, “How can the poor countries spend money on human development which the United Nations asks?” (*United Nations* 00:8:47-00:8:56). It is an example of a deictic gesture because Khan's finger acts like a spotlight, directing attention to the United Nations (McNeill 39). With the gesture in Fig. 7c, Khan points to UNGA by saying, “I would like [the United Nations] to send.....” (*United Nations* 00:27:43-00:27:49) This creates a sense of connection and trust between Khan and the UN, potentially making his request more persuasive.



Fig. 8. Deictic gestures for self-reference.

Khan points to himself in Fig. 8 [“I will start with my own country”] (*United Nations* 00:2:35-00:2:39), which is a deictic gesture (McNeill 40). This gesture is used several times in the speech: 2 times for [my country], two times for [we], and one time for [I]. This gesture is a powerful way to claim ownership and responsibility for his words and actions. When Khan says “my country” or “we,” pointing to himself, reinforces the idea that he’s speaking from a deeply personal place and is fully invested in the matters at hand. In the next gesture, in Fig. 8, Khan again points to himself, but with a different gesture; he puts both palms of his hands on his chest while saying [“The reason why I oppose this

war on terror”] (*United Nations* 00:26:06-00:26:11). With both palms placed firmly on the chest, this gesture taps into deeper emotions and convictions. It conveys sincerity, passion, and a strong belief in the cause he is advocating for. In Fig. 8, Khan places only his right hand firmly on his chest and points to himself. Khan uses this gesture four times during his speech while saying [I]. The hand on the chest and pointing naturally draw the audience's attention towards him. By repeating this gesture four times, Khan emphasises these messages and ensures they stick in the audience's minds. It is a recurring theme that reinforces his sincerity, responsibility, and emotional investment in his message.



Fig. 9. Deictic gestures listing and localising.

Talking about glaciers on Pakistan's side and India's side [“the glacier not only on the Pakistani side even India”], (*United Nations* 00:03:05-00:03:11) he uses a slicing hand gesture (shown in Fig. 9) positioned close to his body, representing Pakistan's proximity and sweeping outward in a semi-circular arc, crossing his body to reach the opposite side. Khan's hand rests on the opposite side of his body, signifying India's location and further emphasising the presence of glaciers on both sides. Using this gesture, he directs the audience's attention and highlights key points (McNeill 67). In Fig. 9, Imran Khan used his index finger five times subsequently to point to 5 different things in his statement. He says, “The state took responsibility for the [weak], [widows], [orphans], [poor people] [handicapped]” (*United Nations* 00:19:40-00:19:49). He is listing them out visually and emphasising their importance. Less likely, but it also has the elements of beat gestures. Beat gestures help in maintaining the rhythm and focus of speech. In this case, the repeated pointing might help keep the audience engaged and focused on the list of groups Khan mentions.



Fig. 10. Deictic gestures establishing spatial engagement.

Khan says, “I have come [here] to tell the UN”, accompanied by the gesture shown in Fig. 10. He points down to the space with his index finger, and this gesture is used two times with beats in it. The point and downward motion emphasise the importance of his message and his intention to address the UN directly (McNeill 134). The gesture in Fig. 10 is used several times when he points to the audience with an index finger while saying [you]. Pointing directly at the audience creates a powerful connection and establishes a direct line of communication. Pointing to the audience points toward a shared responsibility or challenge. This motivates the audience to act and become involved in the issues he is addressing.

Beat Gestures: Marking Rhythm and Emphasis

In addition to indicating reference and agency, Khan’s gestural repertoire includes movements that serve a rhythmic or emphatic function. These beat gestures are less about representation or pointing and more about marking the cadence and emphasis within his speech, guiding the audience’s attention and reinforcing his spoken message.



Fig. 11. Beat gestures marking emphasis and rhythm.

In Fig.11, Khan uses beat gestures (moving his right hand seven times up and down) accompanied by the statement that despite the challenges my country is facing, I have come to this forum [“I would not have come but because I feel that there are some very urgent problems that the world must address”] (*United Nations* 00:01:40-00:01:51). In conjunction with his statement, Khan's beat gestures communicate his firm conviction, determination, and sense of responsibility regarding urgent global problems. The repeated hand motion adds visual impact and reinforces the urgency of addressing these issues (McNeill 40). This type of gesture (shown in Fig. 11) is used several times as a beat gesture. He says about global warming, “One country cannot do anything [this has to be a combined effort of the world]” (*United Nations* 00:04:15-00:04:21); Khan lowers his hands three times, as shown in Fig. 11, to stress his statement. Fig. 11 is an example of a beat gesture with one hand, palm facing down. While saying that humans can positively address global warming [“I want United Nations to take the lead on this”] (*United Nations* 00:04:14-00:04:51), Khan pushed down his right hand four times during the speech to stress his words.



Fig. 12. Beat gestures signalling urgency.

Khan makes a fist gesture with his thumb up (shown in Fig. 12), accompanied by the statement [India must leave this curfew]. He moves his hand up and down five times quickly in response to the statement. The rapid up-and-down movement of the fist suggests urgency and a sense of pressure. The repetition reinforces this message and emphasises the need for immediate action (McNeill 107). The gesture in Fig. 12 is used several times to create rhythm and emphasise his words.



Fig. 13. Beat gestures used for rhetorical punctuation.

Power grip (shown in Fig. 13) can sometimes take on iconic or metaphoric meaning, and it is more commonly used as a beat gesture to emphasise or punctuate specific points in the speaker's message. It is the most repeatedly used gesture throughout the speech. Imran Khan mostly used a power grip as a beat gesture in his speech. Beat gestures are non-representational gestures that maintain or punctuate speech (McNeill 182). They are often small, repetitive movements that are not directly related to the meaning of the spoken words. Beat gestures such as the power grip can help set a rhythm to the speech. This can boost audience engagement and keep them focused on the flow of his message. The same gesture in Fig. 3b is used as a metaphoric gesture because Khan makes a bold declaration and asserts his position by stating that [the state of Medina announced that all human beings are equal regardless of the colour of their skin].

Discussion

The examination of Imran Khan's speech at the United Nations General Assembly in 2019 highlights a significant integration of gestures and spoken language in a diplomatic

context. It demonstrates that Khan's speech involved a consistent alignment of gesture and verbal content. The analysis confirmed that all four of McNeill's gesture types; iconic, metaphoric, deictic, and beat, were employed to enhance meaning, structure arguments, and express conviction. These findings illustrate how Khan's gestural choices were integrated into his rhetorical strategy to highlight urgency, authenticity, and moral authority. This alignment not only improved the delivery but also strengthened the content of his message, resulting in a more memorable impression (McNeill 102).

Each of these gestures made a distinct contribution to the overall communicative effect. Nemirovsky suggests that thinking is not separate from body movements but happens through them so that physical gestures can be regarded as a form of embodied reasoning (Nemirovsky 130). This perspective supports the observation that Khan's gestures and movements formed a cohesive non-verbal communication strategy that reinforced his spoken arguments. One reason these gestures proved effective is that they corresponded with established persuasive techniques identified in prior research. Beat gestures punctuated key statements and created a sense of rhythm that guided the audience's attention (Bull and Connelly 169). Deictic gestures, particularly when Khan pointed towards himself or the assembly, constructed immediacy and ownership of his claims (Masters and Sullivan 127). Furthermore, iconic and metaphoric gestures contributed extensively to illustrating abstract information in more concrete terms. The frequency and regularity of these movements suggest that some gestures were deliberately rehearsed in preparation for the speech rather than arising solely from spontaneous impulse. Nevertheless, particular spontaneous adaptations, such as open-palmed gestures during emotionally charged passages, may have emerged in response to audience engagement and the high-stakes setting. This concurs with the observation of Heritage and Greatbatch that messages which are more highly stressed in both vocal and non-vocal modes tend to elicit applause (Heritage and Greatbatch 117). Khan delivered his speech with energy and strong audience appeal by strategically employing rhetorical devices such as contrasts and lists alongside meaningful hand gestures.

While the gestures correspond with McNeill's categories, the analysis also indicates that their function in diplomatic discourse may differ from their role in informal or conversational contexts. McNeill argues that gesture and speech form an integrated cognitive system (McNeill 102). However, Khan's use of repetitive deictic gestures and emphatic metaphoric gestures suggests that cultural and situational factors shape how this integration manifests. In South Asian political rhetoric, overt displays of humility and moral commitment are often emphasised. The repeated gestures of self-reference, including touching the chest and pointing to the self, resonate with this cultural expectation and signal a distinctive style of South Asian diplomatic address. Compared with Western leaders such as Barack Obama and European heads of state, Khan's gestural repertoire demonstrated a higher frequency of gestures conveying personal accountability and religious solidarity, especially during references to Islamophobia and Kashmir. Peters and Hoetjes found that Obama's gestures tended to prioritise inclusive open-handed

movements, whereas Khan's gestures combined assertiveness with appeals to shared cultural identity (Peters and Hoetjes 661).

The rhetorical situation of this speech also informed the significance of the gestures. At the time, Pakistan faced heightened diplomatic tension with India over Kashmir, as well as international debates about the representation of Islam. Khan's emphatic gestures, such as slicing motions while denouncing terrorism and open-palmed appeals to the United Nations, functioned as visible enactments of Pakistan's political stance. These gestures did more than illustrate meaning; they shaped how the speech was received as an appeal grounded in urgency and moral conviction. This convergence of cognitive, cultural, and rhetorical dimensions reinforces Kendon's assertion that gestures serve as both communicative and performative acts (Kendon 28).

These findings contribute to the field of political communication by showing that McNeill's framework, while valuable, benefits from being situated within a broader cultural and diplomatic perspective. The study suggests that gestures in high-profile international addresses cannot be fully understood without considering the interplay of national identity, religious representation, and strategic image construction. Therefore, the analysis moves beyond simply confirming the cognitive integration of gesture and speech to demonstrate how non-verbal cues participate in the negotiation of political narratives. These insights suggest that political speakers can enhance audience engagement by incorporating purposeful gestures that complement verbal content. Training in culturally resonant gestural repertoires may help leaders project sincerity and authority in international forums.

Future research could extend this work in several directions. For instance, Comparative studies might examine whether similar patterns emerge in the UNGA speeches of other South Asian leaders. Comparative studies of cross-cultural cultures, such as Western and non-Western diplomatic practices, would further elucidate how cultural conventions inform gestural repertoires. Additionally, multimodal approaches that integrate prosody, facial expression, and gaze could deepen the understanding of how political authority is performed through coordinated semiotic resources.

Conclusion

The study examines the hand gestures of Imran Khan, the former Prime Minister of Pakistan, during his speech at the 74th United Nations General Assembly in 2019. The analysis reveals his strategic use of hand gestures, iconic, metaphoric, deictic, and beat (McNeill 102). The findings of this study show that Khan has used diverse types of hand gestures during his speech, establishing a relationship with not only his verbal rhetoric, but also adds to the emotional and persuasive impact of the message. These hand gestures used by Imran Khan complement, emphasise, and alter the verbal message of his speech. Beat gestures are used to emphasise or stress certain things, while deictic gestures are used for

pointing out, for example, pointing toward the audience and the president of the United Nations General Assembly. Iconic gestures are used to show the meaning of verbal words visually, and metaphoric gestures are used to convey abstract concepts or emotions through symbolic representation. Furthermore, gestures are also shaped by culture as sincerity and collective identity are repeatedly reflected in self-referential and symbolic gestures. His gestural repertoire is directed towards personal accountability and religious solidarity, creating a unique mode of diplomatic communication. Overall, the speech exemplified how hand gestures can elevate political discourse and create lasting impressions on a global stage.

In all fairness, the study covers only one speech of Imran Khan. Further research can be extended to a bigger set of speeches having different political contexts, so that a diverse understanding can be achieved regarding non-verbal behaviours in political communication. Moreover, research studies on other non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions and body movements, can provide a complete and comprehensive view of how verbal communication complements non-verbal cues in political speeches.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing does not apply to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study. However, the speech referenced in this article is publicly available on the United Nations' Official YouTube channel. The speech was closely watched, and snapshots of the gestures given in the manuscript were taken.

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