

## Representation of Police Gestures as Symbols in Traffic Regulation: A Semiotic Study

Sintia

Universitas Nasional Jakarta, Indonesia

E-mail: [tias0335@gmail.com](mailto:tias0335@gmail.com)

Raziqa Mayyasya Adhandira

Universitas Nasional Jakarta, Indonesia

E-mail: [raziqaadhandira@gmail.com](mailto:raziqaadhandira@gmail.com)

Muhammad Syachrun Sjam

Hasanuddin University, Indonesia

E-mail: [muhammadsyahr74@gmail.com](mailto:muhammadsyahr74@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

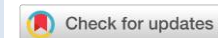
*This study aims to describe and analyze the meaning of police gestures as symbols in traffic control through a semiotic approach. The phenomenon of nonverbal communication in highway traffic control is crucial for ensuring the smooth flow and safety of road users. Using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory, which focuses on the triad (icon, index, and symbol), this qualitative study examines various forms of body gestures (kinesics) performed by police officers. The research data is sourced from documentation of traffic control gestures, the meanings of which are then analyzed. The results indicate that police gestures are not merely physical movements but conventional symbols carrying specific commands such as stopping, proceeding, slowing down, and accelerating the flow of vehicles. The clarity of these gestures is key to the effectiveness of symbolic interaction between officers and drivers in public spaces.*

**Keywords:** *Semiotics, Police Gestures, Symbols, Traffic, Kinesics.*

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Published

April 1<sup>st</sup> 2026



### ARTICLE LICENCE

© 2026 *Semiotika Urban dan Budaya* (Urban and Cultural Semiotics)

Under the license CC BY-SA 4.0



## 1. Introduction

Communication is a fundamental human activity that is not limited to the use of spoken or written language, but also involves complex nonverbal symbols. In the dynamics of public spaces, particularly on the road, the use of verbal language is often impractical due to constraints such as noise, distance, and the speed of traffic. Therefore, body gestures become the most effective and efficient means of communication for regulating interactions among road users (Yaumi et al., 2023;

Wicaksono et al., 2021; Suheri et al., 2025). Traffic police, as the authority responsible for maintaining order on the road, use a series of formal gestures that have been conventionally agreed upon to give instructions to drivers. This phenomenon demonstrates that the human body can transform into a medium for conveying messages rich in symbolic meaning.

A study of police gestures in traffic regulation becomes particularly intriguing when viewed from a semiotic perspective. Semiotics, as the science of signs, views every hand movement, body position, and expression of an officer as a sign representing a specific concept or command. However, in real-world situations, misinterpretations or misunderstandings by drivers regarding the intent of the displayed gestures often occur. This can lead to traffic congestion and even accidents. Therefore, a deep understanding of gestures as symbolic representations is essential to ensure that the messages conveyed by officers are accurately received by the public as nonverbal communication partners.

This study focuses its analysis on how police gestures represent specific symbols in traffic control settings in Indonesia. By examining the standard movements performed by officers, this study aims to dissect the sign structure underlying these kinesic movements. By employing a semiotic framework, we can observe how a simple hand gesture can possess significant legal authority and regulatory power. The urgency of this research lies in the effort to provide a scientific explanation of the nonverbal sign system used within the police institution, while simultaneously educating the public about the meanings behind the visual symbols they encounter daily on the roads.

Through this approach, it is hoped that the connection between the physical form of a gesture (representamen) and the meaning it conveys (object) based on social convention (interpretant) will be revealed. The representation of police gestures not only serves a technical function in regulating traffic flow but also reflects the presence of the state and authority in maintaining social order. This paper will systematically explain how these symbols are constructed and interpreted within the sociocultural context of Indonesian society, thereby fostering harmonious communication in both digital and physical public spaces.

## 2. Literature Review

Studies on signage systems in public spaces have been widely conducted, particularly those focusing on conventional traffic signs. However, research that specifically examines police officers' body gestures as a primary means of communication remains limited. The novelty of this study lies in its in-depth analysis of the physical movements (kinesics) performed by traffic police as a form of symbolic representation. Unlike previous studies that may have only examined the technical aspects of traffic regulation, this study places these gestures within a semiotic framework to reveal how body movements can possess legal force equivalent to static visual signs on the roadway.

## **2.1. Theoretical Basis**

### **2.1.1. Charles Sanders Peirce's Concept of Semiotics**

The primary foundation of this study is the theory of semiotics developed by Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce (1955) views signs through a triadic relationship consisting of the representamen (the sign itself), the object (the thing referred to by the sign), and the interpretant (the meaning that arises in the mind of the sign's recipient). In this context, the gestures displayed by police officers constitute the representamen. The primary focus of this study is on the classification of signs based on the relationship between the sign and its object, namely symbols. A symbol is a sign whose relationship with its object is determined by a rule or social agreement (convention). Police gestures are categorized as symbols because their meanings, such as "stop" or "go," do not arise naturally but through legal and social agreements understood by society.

### **2.1.2. Nonverbal Communication and Kinesics**

As part of nonverbal communication, gestures fall under the study of kinesics, which is the study of body movements as a means of communication. According to Chaer (2010), nonverbal language is often more honest and effective in situations where verbal communication faces barriers. In traffic control settings, the kinesics employed by officers include hand movements, body posture, and the coordination of other body parts. This study categorizes these gestures into functional categories, where each movement possesses illocutionary force to command or direct. Understanding this kinesics is crucial because, at high speeds, drivers rely more on visual perception of officers' body movements than on other traffic signs.

### **2.1.3. Gestures as Traffic Control Symbols**

In Indonesia's traffic control system, there are formally standardized movements. These gestures convey various instructional messages, such as stopping vehicles from a specific direction, proceeding, or slowing down or speeding up traffic flow. Semiotically, each hand movement carries a stable meaning because it is backed by the authority of the police institution. The symbolism in these gestures creates order; without a shared interpretation between officers (nonverbal speakers) and drivers (addressees), the function of traffic regulation would collapse (Sabila et al., 2025; Yaumi et al., 2024; Jariah et al., 2022). Therefore, this thesis examines how these kinetic symbols are constructed to ensure high interpretive clarity in the public eye.

### **2.1.4. Research Materials**

The primary material analyzed in this study is the visual representation of standard traffic police gestures. The data includes various hand and body positions, such as the "Stop" position from the front, back, or both directions, as well as hand movements signaling to proceed. Each of these gesture units is treated as a visual text containing sociocultural and legal codes (Sosrohadi et al., 2024; Faisal et al., 2025; Andini et al., 2022). Through an analysis of this material, the study seeks to describe

how the identity and role of the police are presented through dynamic physical symbols in the field.

### 3. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using descriptive methods to analyze the phenomenon of using gestures as symbols in traffic control. According to Sugiyono (2020), qualitative research aims to holistically understand the phenomena experienced by research subjects through descriptions in the form of words and language. In this study, the descriptive method was applied to provide a detailed description of the forms of police gestures (kinesics) and their meanings based on the sign system in use in Indonesia. This approach was chosen because the researcher not only collected physical movement data but also conducted an in-depth interpretation of the symbolic values contained within each movement.

The data in this study consists of visual representations of standard gestures performed by traffic police while carrying out their duties in regulating road traffic. Primary data sources were obtained through visual documentation depicting various body postures and hand gestures of the officers. Additionally, the researcher utilized official police literature on the standardization of traffic signals as a reference for validating meanings. Data collection was conducted using the documentary observation method, in which the researcher collected, classified, and categorized each gesture unit into data cards based on the type of kinesics present.

The data analysis technique in this study employs Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic analysis model. The analysis process begins with the identification of the representamen, which is the physical form of the police officer's hand gestures or body positions. Next, the researcher links the sign to the object, namely the actual instruction or command being referred to (such as stop, go, or turn). The final stage is determining the interpretant, which is the understanding or meaning that emerges based on the social and legal conventions applicable to drivers. Through this triadic process, the researcher can draw conclusions regarding how a body gesture transforms into a legal symbol that is collectively understood.

To ensure data validity, the researcher performed source triangulation by comparing the visual data found with semiotic theory and official traffic regulations. The analysis is conducted in a continuous manner, starting from data collection, data reduction to focus on the most representative gestures, data presentation in the form of descriptive tables, up to drawing conclusions. With this systematic methodological procedure, the study is expected to reveal the structure of effective nonverbal communication within the context of traffic regulation in Indonesia.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Result

Based on in-depth observations and data classification of traffic control activities, this study successfully identified the structure of nonverbal cues used by police officers. Categorically, these cues fall into two main kinesic domains: Gestural (dynamic hand and arm movements) and Postural (static body positions). To dissect the meaning behind each movement, each data unit was analyzed using Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic framework, which connects the physical form of the movement (Representamen), the legal command being referenced (Object), and the perception arising in road users (Interpretant). The distribution of these findings is summarized in the following table:

**Table 1.** Kinesics Taxonomy and Symbolic Meaning Representation of Police Gestures

No	Kinesic Category	Data Code	Movement Description	Symbolic (Object)	Meaning
1	Gestural	GS1 – GS5	Rhythmic swinging hand movements	Instruction to direct vehicles from various directions	
2	Gestural	GS6 – GS7	Palm facing downward in a flat position	Instruction to slow down vehicle speed	
3	Postural	PT	Upright standing position with hands at the sides	Basic/ready stance (initial communication position)	
4	Postural	PM1 – PM3	Hands raised or extended to the sides (static)	Instruction to stop vehicle flow (Stop)	

Data Source: Compiled by the Author, 2026

Overall, the results of the analysis indicate a distinct division of functional roles between the two types of kinesics. The Gestural component was found to be more dominant in dynamic and continuous traffic flow scenarios, where vehicle speed fluctuations are very high. Conversely, the Postural component functions as an absolute and definitive instructional foundation. The use of static postural positions serves as the primary instrument for issuing critical commands, such as a complete halt of traffic flow, which demands immediate compliance from road users for the sake of traffic safety.

## **4.2. Discussion**

### **4.2.1. Peirce's Triadic Analysis of Traffic Control Gestures**

From the semiotic perspective of Charles Sanders Peirce, a sign can only function if there is a harmonious relationship between the Representamen, Object, and Interpretant. Based on the research data, police body gestures are not merely mechanical movements but complex symbols. For example, when an officer makes a hand gesture swinging toward the chest (GS1–GS5), physically this is the Representamen. However, due to legal conventions in the Traffic Law, this gesture refers to the Object, which is the command “Go.” This process achieves the perfection of the sign when the driver (Interpretant) interprets the gesture as permission to accelerate the vehicle. This relationship is arbitrary or conventional; there is no natural reason why a hand wave means “go,” but rather because of social agreement and the state authority inherent in the officer's uniform.

### **4.2.2. The Dynamics of Gestural Kinesics as Long-Distance Visual Communication**

Data findings indicate that the Gestural category has the highest frequency of use in heavy traffic flow. Pragmatically, dynamic hand movements have a higher level of readability compared to static positions. Swinging or waving motions serve to break the visual monotony for drivers and provide immediate instructions. This analysis aligns with the kinesics concept that hand movements are often used to emphasize the message being conveyed. In this context, the speed of the officer's hand swing also acts as an additional signal: a fast swing indicates the command “speed up,” while a slowing or level swing (GS6–GS7) indicates “slow down.”

### **4.2.3. The Significance of Postural Gestures in Asserting Authority and Space**

Unlike dynamic gestures, the Postural category (as seen in codes PM1–PM3) functions as a symbol of strength and firmness. A rigid, static body posture facing the flow of traffic creates a strong visual barrier for drivers. Semiotically, this postural position represents the unquestionable presence of the law. When an officer stands with arms outstretched to stop vehicles from two directions simultaneously, they are dividing public space into two zones: a stopping zone and a safe zone. The dominant use of postural gestures in the “Stop” command indicates that restrictive or prohibitive messages require a more stable and authoritative physical representation to ensure absolute compliance from road users.

### **4.2.4. Summary of Discussion**

This discussion leads us to the understanding that the roadway is a massive space of symbolic interaction. The success of traffic regulation depends heavily on the synchronization between the codes sent by officers and those understood by the public. The representation of police gestures in films and real-world scenarios demonstrates that the human body can act as an effective semiotic medium to overcome the noise and

distance that spoken language cannot bridge. Through the standardization of these gestures, social order can be maintained due to the existence of a shared, universal nonverbal language. This analysis confirms that every small movement on the highway is a legal text that has a tangible impact on human safety.

## 5. Conclusion

This study concludes that the use of police gestures in traffic control constitutes a highly structured system of nonverbal communication rich in symbolic meaning. Based on Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic analysis, these gestures are categorized as Symbols, where the relationship between the officer's physical movements (Representamen) and legal commands (Object) is based on conventions or social agreements regulated by the police institution. The success of interactions on the road depends heavily on road users' ability to interpret these kinetic symbols accurately and quickly.

The research results indicate a clear functional distinction between the two types of kinesics. The Gestural category (dynamic hand movements) was found to be more dominant in regulating the rhythm of vehicle flow due to its nature of continuously capturing visual attention. Meanwhile, the Postural category (static body positions) functions as an instrument of absolute authority, particularly in issuing stop commands that require immediate compliance. The dominance of discretion in these interactions also indicates that, although imperative in nature, the nonverbal communication employed by officers prioritizes effectiveness and smoothness for the sake of public safety.

Theoretically, this study confirms that the human body can transform into an effective medium of legal text in overcoming verbal communication barriers in noisy and dynamic environments. Practically, the standardization of traffic police gestures is the key to establishing social order on the roads. As a recommendation, education regarding the symbolic meaning of these gestures needs to be continuously improved for the public to prevent misinterpretations that could endanger traffic safety. Further research could explore the use of technology or digital media to visualize these gestures as a means of broader legal socialization.

## References

1. Andini, C., Sosrohadi, S., Fairuz, F., Dalyan, M., Rahman, F. F., & Hasnia, H. (2022). The study of Japanese women in the facial treatment advertisement: a semiotics perspective of Pierce's Theory. *ELS Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 5(2), 337-347.
2. Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
3. Chaer, Abdul. (2010). *Sosiolinguistik Perkenalan Awal*. Jakarta: Rineka Cipta.

4. Faisal, R., Rahman, F., & Effendi, S. (2025). Cultural adaptation and branding strategy in noodle advertising: A semiotic and marketing perspective. *International Journal of Arts and Social Science*, 8(9), 171.
5. Jariah, R. A., Rahman, F., & Amir, M. P. (2022). Social Problems In Drama 13 Reasons Why: Peirce Semiotics Approach. *Tekstual*, 20(1), 48-60.
6. Leech, Geoffrey. (1993). *Prinsip Kesantunan Berbahasa*. Jakarta: Universitas Indonesia Press.
7. Moleong, L. J. (2015). *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif*. Bandung: Remaja Rosdakarya.
8. Peirce, Charles Sanders. (1955). *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*. New York: Dover Publications.
9. Sabila, A. S., Anjani, S. D., & Sosrohadi, S. (2025). Semiotic Analysis of Local Cultural Representation and Fingerprint Painting Authenticity on Indonesian TV's YouTube Channel. *ELS Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 8(1), 133-142.
10. Sosrohadi, S., Syukri, M., & Sosrohadi, A. A. (2024). Unveiling Political Persuasion: Speech Acts in the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Candidates' Speech Texts. *ELS Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 7(1), 170-179.
11. Sudaryanto. (2015). *Metode dan Aneka Teknik Analisis Bahasa*. Yogyakarta: Sanata Dharma University Press.
12. Sugiyono. (2020). *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif*. Bandung: Alfabeta.
13. Suheri, H., Sosrohadi, S., Sulastri, T., Adinda, R., & Andini, C. (2025). Semiotic analysis of signs and symbols in digital instant noodle advertisements: A Marcel Danesi approach. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Applied Science*, 10(4), 545-554.
14. Undang-Undang No. 22 Tahun 2009 tentang Lalu Lintas dan Angkutan Jalan. Jakarta: Sekretariat Negara.
15. Wicaksono, H., Rahman, F., & Sahib, H. (2021). Light Sign Communication Between Pilot and ATC: Language Function and Semiotics Analysis. *American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research*, 5(11), 176-185.
16. Yaumi, M. T. A. H., Rahman, F., & Sahib, H. (2023). Exploring WhatsApp as Teaching and Learning Activities during Covid-19/New Normal era: A Semiotic Technology Analysis. *International Journal of Current Science Research and Review*, 6(12), 7627-7634.
17. Yaumi, M. T. A. H., Rahman, F., & Sahib, H. (2024). Bridging Language and Technology through Semiotic Technology. *International Journal of Social Science Research and Review*, 7(1), 52-61.