

Gestures: What the International Traveler Should Know

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ABSTRACT

Since studies show that over 60% of all communication occurs through gestures their importance for the international traveler is paramount. Basically, there are three main types of gestures: Voluntary, Involuntary, and Coded. This paper will begin by defining each of the three, and explain the author's view of the relative importance of each type of gesture from the perspective of a non-native speaker attempting to communicate using English and understanding the body language that accompanies it in various multicultural international business contexts. It will be argued that while the degree of spontaneity required to use gestures effectively in this context makes it difficult to use body language and gestures, a receptive knowledge of body language can help the international business person avoid embarrassment. It will also be shown that a rudimentary knowledge of involuntary body language provides us with insight into the unspoken motives and thoughts of others that would also be useful in various situations where English is the lingua franca of business.

Finally, coded messages, or sign language, are used to communicate with people that have hearing problems, or among people in certain occupations. Because of their limited use and lack of widespread acceptance, they are of little relevance to the international traveler.

KEY WORDS

Gestures, Voluntary Gestures, Involuntary Gestures, Coded Gestures

1. What are gestures, and how should we classify them?

A gesture is basically a movement of the body or limbs that conveys some kind of idea, mood or attitude. They are sometimes used to reinforce the verbal message that we also

convey to the intended recipients, while at other times our gestures and other body language may give conflicting signals in situations where our true feelings might be very ambivalent.

Involuntary gestures are those that we do

without thinking. For example, in virtually every country, people smile when they are happy and frown when upset or angry. Involuntary gestures like these appear to be genetically programmed in humans, and for the most part tend not to vary in different regions of the world.

Voluntary gestures are deliberate, conscious body movements that we use to either reinforce a verbal message, or convey a message of their own. For the most part, the meaning associated with these gestures is different in each cultural realm or country. The origin of many of these gestures is often unclear, and serious misunderstandings can and do occur even among people from similar cultural backgrounds when they are used.

2.1 Spatial Relationships and Touching

Our native culture conditions us to become accustomed to standing a certain distance from the person that we are conversing with. However, to a certain extent, our preferences for distance are also determined by the social context in which communication occurs. In general, distance between two speakers tends to be less when the speakers have a more intimate relationship. For our purposes, however, it is not relevant to describe all of the different comfort zones that people have in terms of their spatial preferences. We will focus upon what Dr. Edward T. Hall describes as the zone of personal distance, which describes the preferred distance between ourselves and people that we have a formal relationship with, but not a close friendship. Since it is this area—the zone of personal distance—in which most

business relationships occur, it is important to understand how it varies in the world's different cultural realms.

In general, middle class white Americans generally stand about 30 inches apart from each other. In Asia, however, people usually prefer to stand a few inches farther apart from each other when carrying on a conversation, while Arabs and Latin Americans tend to stand so close together that they are almost touching each other when carrying on a conversation.

This often causes North Americans and Asians considerable discomfort when confronted with an Arab or Latino that insists on standing closer to us than we might be accustomed to. When interacting with Arabs or Latino's it is also likely that physical closeness is likely to be accompanied by actual touching as well.

To those of us from cultures classified as non-touch in Roger E. Axtell's book "Gestures: The Do's and TABOOS of Body Language Around the World.", would do well to be consciously aware of these differences. The point is that it is important to be aware of this and not make social situations more awkward than they need to be.

The following involuntary gestures often are seen when the person speaking is being dishonest about what he or she is saying. If the listeners sees these gestures, it might be wise to reconsider what the speaker has said, and ask detailed questions to determine the accuracy of the speaker's comments.

2.2 Involuntary gestures that indicate possible deception

The Nose scratch

When a person scratches his nose just before or just after saying something important, it may mean that this person is being dishonest.

The Feet Shuffle

When the speaker looks at the floor while moving his or her feet back and forth, it may indicate dishonesty, or it may indicate nervousness.

The Eyeball Roll

Though difficult to perceive because it occurs in a fraction of a second, the eyeball roll is one of the most important involuntary gestures. When asking a question about an event that happened in the past, the eyes will move in a different direction depending upon whether the information is being recalled from long-term memory, or being created instantaneously for the purpose of deception.

When right handed people recall information, their eyeballs move up and to the left, and with left handed people it is the opposite. On the other hand, when a right-handed person seeks to create information, as in when making up a story, his eyes will go up and to the right.

Obviously, however, it can be useful to detect deception in others only if we have an important piece of background information about the speaker: We have to know whether or not the person speaking is left handed or right handed. To determine right or left handedness, watch which hand that person

uses to write with and that is the hand that they favor.

The Mouth Cover

When someone is being deceitful, they often cover their mouth when talking. This can also signify that the speaker is simply nervous, however.

3. Voluntary gestures to avoid in certain parts of the world

The importance of voluntary gestures in communication is almost always neglected or completely ignored, often with very negative consequences. For international travelers or businesspeople, it is important to know which familiar gestures should not be used, rather than to spend time learning how to use gestures that are unique to a certain country or cultural realm. While showing knowledge of local customs and etiquette is often appreciated, it does not appear that this extends to gestures. Too often, it seems awkward or even insulting when a foreign guest tries to use gestures in a way that is unique to the host country.

Therefore, in this paper, the focus will be on presenting gestures whose use is to be avoided in certain parts of the world. The fact that two of the world's most common gestures have opposite meanings will also be explained.

The inverted "V" for victory signal

The "V" signal, when made with the palm facing outwards, or away from the speaker is almost universally recognized to signal victory. However, it is very important not to make this signal with the palm facing inwards when in

the British Isles or Australia; in these countries it is a vulgar gesture that is extremely offensive.

Former President George Bush clearly wasn't aware of the inverted "V" signals meaning in Britain and Australia during his visit to Australia in 1991. While riding in his presidential limousine, he flashed this signal to the newspaper and television cameras, only to read "President Insults Australians" in the Australian newspapers the next day!

The "OK" signal

With the palm facing out, when we bring together the thumb and the index finger, it is generally thought to mean "OK" in North America. However, it has a vulgar and insulting meaning in many countries, among them Germany, Brazil and Russia.

Former President Nixon was not aware of the meaning of this gesture when he went to Brazil on an official visit, as he enraged the Brazilians by making this vulgar gesture in front of the newspaper cameras.

The "Thumbs Up" signal

The "Thumbs Up" signal can signal "good" or "I am winning" but it is also important to note that in parts of the world where British English is spoken, too many people it has a vulgar meaning. Because of this, it is probably a good idea for the Japanese traveler to avoid using this gesture.

The curled index finger

This gesture is usually meant to signal "Come here!"; however, in some parts of the world, it is a gesture used only to beckon

animals. For this reason, it is better not to use the gesture.

The Greek "Moutza"

We often extend our arm with the palm facing outward to convey many things to others. Depending on the circumstances, it can mean "Stop!" "No!" or "No thank you!". This gesture, however, should never be used in Greece because it is so insulting that it may be seen as a prelude to a fist fight.

The palm smack

Sometimes when we are bored, we might smack the bottom of an outstretched palm with our balled fist. In some parts of the world, this can be interpreted as a sign of aggression and therefore should be avoided.

Nodding the head up and down

In most countries of the world, nodding the head up and down is a gesture that signals "yes". However, in Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Turkey, Bengal, and Iran, it signals "no". Because this is so unusual, it is something worth noting for the international traveler.

Shaking the head

In most countries of the world, shaking the head is a gesture that signals "no". However, in Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Turkey, Bengal, and Iran, it signals "yes". Because this is so unusual, it is something worth noting for the international traveler.

Arms Akimbo

When we want to seem defiant or we are simply bored we might stand with both of our hands on our hips. In some countries, such as Iran, this is seen as a sign of aggression.

4. Conclusions

The Japanese business person travelling to do business internationally would do well to consciously avoid using voluntary gestures that could be misinterpreted in various parts of the world—causing embarrassment, or even worse.

Learning the nuances of involuntary gestures and body language may also prove invaluable by giving the traveler a better idea of comfortable interpersonal distances in different parts of the world, while also providing clues to the extent to which others are being honest.

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ジェスチャー

—海外旅行者が知っておくべきもの—

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要 旨

全てのコミュニケーションの60パーセント以上の要素が、ジェスチャーにより成立していることは、この分野の研究が証明している。その意味で、海外旅行者や外交、国際ビジネスに従事する者にとって、ジェスチャーは重要な働きをする。ジェスチャーの基本形には、1. 無意識のタイプ、2. 任意のタイプ、3. コード化されたタイプ、の三種類がある。本論は三種類のタイプの定義を行い、国籍によって異なる任意のタイプのジェスチャーの意味を分析すると同時に、その問題点を検討する。第一の無意識のタイプは、世界で共通の意味をもつため、障害となることは少ないが、無言に伝える意味を理解しておくことは、相手を知る上で有用となる。第二の任意のタイプは、国によって伝える意味が様々に異なるため、問題となる。海外旅行や国際ビジネスにおいては、英語という共通言語を使用しても、任意のタイプのジェスチャーを理解しておかないと、様々な誤解や当惑を生み、国際親善や取引を円滑に行う上で障害となる。特に相手に不快な感情や否定的な意味を呼び起こす任意のタイプのジェスチャーは、使用しないように配慮することが重要である。

キーワード

ジェスチャー、無意識のジェスチャー、任意のジェスチャー、コード化されたジェスチャー