

Interpretations of Kinesics

Are Cultural Not Universal

by Alice C. Pack

This is the second part of a three part article on the relationship of body movement to culture, language, and language teaching. The first part appeared in the Fall 1972 TESL Reporter

Recent publications and flyers for advance publications indicate that psychologists, linguists, educators, and laymen all have an increasing interest in kinesic communication. Hewes feels that neither of the notational systems for posture and body movement developed by R. Laban and Dr. Birdwhistell are satisfactory and suggests his own terminology for the *posture domain*.

Julius Fast asks:

Are there universal gestures and expressions which are culturally independent and true for every human in every culture? Are there things every human being does regardless of race, color, creed, or culture? In other words, is a smile always indicative of amusement? Is a frown always a sign of displeasure? When we shake our head from side to side, does it always mean no? When we move it up and down, does it always mean yes? Are all these movements universal for all people, and if so, is the ability to make these movements in response to a given emotion inherited?

Bolinger concludes:

What type of gesture is a handshake?

Could you be sure, if you held out your hand to a member of some completely unknown culture, that he would not take

it as a challenge to a wrestling match?

Hall cautions:

We must never assume that we are fully aware of what we communicate to someone else.

and

The ways in which man reads meaning into what other men do either reenforce or deny the spoken word.

This new interest in the communication of body movement follows the trends of many "fad" interests. Flyers are out for a new "psychological game" called *Body Talk*. Note this opening

Chances are there is a serious gap in your education. In this country, we are rarely taught how to use our bodies as effective, conscious communicators. Body Talk is designed to help remedy this situation--and it's plenty of fun, too! How do you say "I love you" without opening your mouth? How do you signal concern to another person without using words or facial expression? ...Since scientific research has indicated that as much as 93% of the impact of what you communicate to others is conveyed by nonverbal means, it is a matter of some importance that you learn more specifically what these means are. If, for example, your body communicators are giving others a different message than your words, you are in some trouble...

A recent article in the travel section of

a local newspaper was entitled "Courtesy in the Orient" and listed some definite instructions for travelers. The article ended with this observation, "While Asians are very tolerant of foreign ways, they are extremely pleased when you observe some of their more basic social conventions."

I became interested in nonverbal communication during a summer TESL workshop in Samoa when I watched a companion conduct a demonstration which called for individual and group participation. Teachers performed perfunctorily, without the enthusiasm and spontaneity typical of Samoans, and which had been exhibited in earlier activities. I felt that somehow the audience had become alienated during the session, and I wondered why. At our next session I asked this group if they would use the gestures previously demonstrated in teaching one of their own classes. There seemed to be a definite negative reaction (though politely expressed) so I pressed the point, redemonstrating the gesture previously used—a cupped hand with the fingers curled and a movement of the fingers back and forth. When convinced that it would not be impolite to criticize the instructors, all admitted they would not use this because it would be insulting to the participants. I then altered the gesture, using one finger in a beckoning motion. As a single unit the class indicated that that was even worse. ("Only to a dog!" was the comment.) I then tried placing the hand upright instead of horizontal with the fingers curled, making the same in and out movement as in the original gesture. This was entirely acceptable and I have since used this hand movement for all class choral response.*

A Fulbright lecturer and a coordinator in Bogota, Columbia report a similar experience.

...we became aware that our messages were not getting across as well as they should have been.

In conversations with Columbians, our

*See Alice C. Pack, "Gestures and Mannerisms: A Help or Hindrance?" *TESL Reporter* Vol. 2 No. 1, Fall 1968.

side of the talk seemed limp. We were making good points argumentatively, but they were winning, it seems aesthetically. Often at crucial points in discussions when we were sure that we sounded convincing, the audience laughed.

This article is concerned with answers to the questions posed by both Fast and Bolinger--contrastive interpretations in kinesics and the implication of situational difficulties that can and do occur because of the lack of universality in kinesic communication.

In my research I have not found any single gesture that has accepted universal interpretation. Every culture has accepted interpretation of its own meaningful gestures. Sometimes these correlate with those of another culture, sometimes they contrast, and often they are unique.

Dr. Birdwhistell, who has initiated most of the basic work in developing a notational system for the new science of kinesics, warns that "no body position or movement, in and of itself, has a precise meaning." In other words, we cannot always say that crossed arms mean, "I will not let you in," or that rubbing the nose with a finger means disapproval or rejection, that patting the hair means approval and steepling the fingers superiority.... Sometimes they are true and sometimes they are not, but they are only true in the context of the entire behavior pattern of a person.

Recently I saw a directive from a college president to a curriculum committee to develop a class which would teach the students to raise their heads and look people in the eye, so that they might find employment in the tourist and hotel business in their native countries. He recognized the fact that unless they "look them in the eye" employees are not trusted by Americans (in this case the tourists). We often hear someone considered guilty because "he wouldn't look me in the eye." Fast quotes a high school principal, "But I questioned the child myself, and if ever I saw guilt written on a face--she wouldn't even meet my eyes!" These incidents seem to imply that the inherent meaning of looking people in the eye is honesty and forthrightness; the fact is that

honesty in our culture demands that we look someone straight in the eye.

From reports of an experiment by Dr. Ralph V. Exline of the University of Delaware, and other observation, Fast states, "Looking away during a conversation may be a means of

Mrs. Pack would appreciate additional information or comments on contrasting or conforming cultural Kinesics by any TESL Reporter readers.

concealing something. Therefore when someone else looks away, we may think he is concealing something. To practice deceit we may sometimes deliberately look at our partner instead of refusing to meet his glance."

The students referred to in the directive feel that lowered eyes and bowed heads show respect, and that there is an inherent meaning of boldness and disrespect in looking someone in the eye with a raised head. To save an innocent girl, a mediator informed the "uneducated" high school principal, "In Puerto Rico a nice girl, a good girl, does not meet the eyes of an adult. Refusing to do so is a sign of respect and obedience. It would be as difficult for Livia to look you in the eye as it would be for her to misbehave...In our culture, this is just not accepted behavior for a respectable family."

This virtue (in our culture) of looking someone straight in the eye can have overaction if the gaze is held beyond acceptable time limits. People then become embarrassed and feel uncomfortable. Often a child is cautioned, "Don't stare, it's rude."

A Frenchman meets your eyes when he is talking to you, and he looks at you directly, holding his gaze. No American male looks at women like this. Instead of appreciation this would be interpreted as rudeness in an American.

Fast reports that

When two Arabs talk to each other.

they look each other in the eyes with great intensity. The same intensity of glance in our American culture is rarely exhibited between men. In fact, such intensity can be interpreted as a challenge to a man's masculinity. "I don't like the way he looked at me, as if he wanted something personal, to sort of be too intimate." is typical response by an American to an Arab look.

Patting a person's head in a friendly way is often considered highly complimentary in our culture, particularly among friends or with children, especially when accompanied by the words, "Good girl or Good boy!" Miss Ruth Aust, physical therapist at Honolulu Shriners' Children's Hospital for over 15 years, who spent six months in Micronesia as a physical therapist in 1970, reports that it is very insulting to touch a person's hair or pat his head. This is also true in Thailand, where people regard the head as the most sacred part of the body.

The head is regarded as sacred by Thai people, and children are taught never to touch an adult's head. An adult letting a child sit on his shoulders and hold on to his head would be unusual in Thai society while it is common in the Western world.

In an unpublished paper, April 1967, Chamnong Vibulsri (Thai) stated, "Traditionally, children are not allowed to touch the head of the parents or older persons nor to stand in front of them."

In December 1971 one of our ELL teachers reported an incident which shocked some of the students in her class. As her arms were full she used her foot to push open the door of the classroom, and, slipping off a Hawaiian slipper, she also retrieved something from the floor with her toes. The Japanese students were aghast, and when questioned stated that it was highly insulting in their culture to use the feet in either of these manners. Children would even be whipped for pushing a door open with a foot. (This teacher had a valuable lesson as she has accepted a summer teaching experience in Japan.)

Feet also have low status in Thailand: *The feet are considered very low. That*

is why Thai people usually sit with the "pab piab" position, when they can hide their feet on the back, and not show them to the people. Feet are never used to point at people however old or young because it is implied as an insult. When sitting on a chair, it is considered impolite for a Thai to sit with crossed legs, since one foot will then point to the side. Sometimes a woman may sit with crossed feet, but rarely with crossed legs facing the public. In class, a teacher never sits with his legs on the table pointing his feet at the students.

Pointing with a hand or foot is impolite in all of Southeast Asia. So is sitting with your toe pointed toward anyone, having your legs crossed or showing the sole of a foot.

Samoans and Tongans always sit with feet and legs tucked under their bodies. If legs or feet are exposed they are covered with a mat or shawl. If an honored visitor neglects to do this someone may quickly place a mat over her feet and legs. (I learned this in the usual trial and error way.)

My daughter got off to a very bad start with her future mother-in-law for not shaking hands as she left after her first meeting in Austria. Although she had studied German in college and had had a semester abroad with the language, the importance of this gesture had not been indicated. (How many German language students are taught to shake hands on leaving as well as in greeting a person?)

To most of the Thai, the "wai" is preferred to hand shaking for the reason that generally Thai people avoid physical contact in public especially between men and women.

The wai greeting is to raise both hands, join palm to palm slightly touching the body somewhere between the face and the chest. The upper parts of the arms remain close to the sides of the body without the elbows extended. The higher the hands are raised, the greater is the respect and courtesy conveyed; that is, if it is meant for a religious figure, the fingertips touch the forehead, etc.

A travel tip for the Orient states:

Always shake hands upon meeting and leaving a person in Philippine and Indonesia cities. This is a legacy of

centuries of European rule. In other parts of Asia, however, refrain from hand-shaking. The common greeting may be a bow, often with hands pressed together as in prayer. While this looks simple, it's actually quite complex and an inept performance by you makes local people feel you are disrespectful of their customs. Don't even attempt these greetings with children. A child realizes you're not following rules so it bewilders him while it displeases his mother. Simply speak a simple greeting.

Saitz and Cervenka note:

Colombians, men and women, shake hands at the beginning and end of meetings much more frequently than North Americans; it is sometimes omitted in informal meetings between friends and companions. The Colombian handshakde is likely to last longer than the North American handshake.

One of my friends who spent two years in and around Mexico City told me that demonstrating the height of a person with the hand held horizontally with the palm down is highly insulting; it is tantamount to calling that person a dog or an animal. The hand must be held in a vertical position to indicate human height. Saitz and Cervenka corroborate this in their report of Columbian gestures with this comment:

In a culture such as the Spanish, which distinguishes between animals and human beings to the extent that there are different words for a human leg (pierna) and an animal leg (pata) the North American performer may be ridiculed if he uses his general height gesture to indicate human height.

The "V for victory" sign which Churchill used during World War II (the same as the modern "Peace" sign)--the index and middle fingers raised and spread apart, the rest of the fingers curled into a fist--has been greeted with shock in some parts of the Pacific where this gesture is an obscenity.

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