

Interpretations of Kinesics Are Cultural not Universal

by Alice C. Pack

This is the part of a three part article on the relationship of body movement to culture, language, and language teaching. The first and second parts appeared in the Fall 1972 and Winter 1973 issues.

The following are merely samples of body language which have a different interpretation in different cultures.

We in the Western world shake our head from side to side to indicate no, and up and down to indicate yes, but there are societies in India where just the opposite is true. Up and down means no, and side to side means yes.

In Afghanistan an American reclamation engineer (my brother-in-law) on loan from the United States through the United Nations (1955) presented a plan to a native colleague. He was shocked to have a vigorous "negative" head shake as an answer for approval. As he again asked for a response he received the same gesture and an emphatic "beshar kob." The third time he asked for approval (he was certain the plan was what they wanted) he added, "Don't you agree with me? Don't you like it?" The reply in English--still with the head movement from side to side--was, "Yes, of course I like it. As I said before, it's very good."

For acceptance a Thai nods his head and for rejection he shakes his head. However, gestures like this cannot be used by children to adults. It is considered impolite for a child to answer an adult by nodding or shaking his head or to ask an adult to come near by waving his hand. He has to express with words in polite terms.

"Bartlett tells of the Swazi chieftan who perceived all traffic policemen in London as friendly beings, because in Swazi culture the upraised arm is an amiable greeting."

Saitz and Cervenka report this

embarrassing incident:

A North American Fulbright professor in Bogota arrived at a dinner a half hour later than the other guests; it had happened that while he was dressing the host's car had arrived to take him to dinner. As the chauffeur was parking, the professor's wife appeared in the window and waved her hand to indicate a five-minute wait. The chauffeur interpreted it as a goodbye dismissal gesture, and he merely took off.

In Thailand when one wants to ask a person to come near, he moves his fingers together back and forth with the palm turned down. This is also true of Samoa and Tonga.

In Tonga raised eyebrows and open eyes indicate agreement or pleasure, and this gesture is often used on greeting someone or when something is said with which the listener wholeheartedly agrees.

Usually among Thai children, to point with one's thumb means anger. When one wants to be reconciled with another person, he will point with his little finger.

Columbians point with the index finger and then bring the hand back to the chest to show "I like or love you," while they depict anger with clenched fists moved in a short, sharp, downward motion. The little finger extended vertically means you (he, she, it) are thin.

Americans expect men to be stoic, showing little emotion. This stoicism is shown in an extreme fashion by the Japanese "with the smile with which he responds to the scolding of his superior, or which accompanies his announcement of the death of his favorite son."

Keeping a "stiff upper lip" is considered unfeeling by one culture and overemotional by another. In Iran men are expected to show their emotion in tantrums, etc. "If they don't Iranians suspect they are lacking a vital human trait and are not dependable."

There is "copious shedding" of tears by Andaman Islanders and the Maori of New Zealand when friends meet after an absence, or when two warring parties make peace." My Maori friends tell me these tears are for those who have passed away and for the things that have happened since last they met.

There is a publication, a Chinese classic, *The Book of Rites* "a considerable portion of which is devoted to the technique of the mourning ceremonial, with elaborate instructions as to just what procedure should be followed in order that the expression of the grief may be socially acceptable."

Muslims, predominant in Malaysia and Indonesia consider the left hand unclean because of its personal use in the toilet. It is unacceptable to eat with the left hand or pass or receive objects with it. With most other Asians, however, good manners demand that you use both hands when offering or receiving objects (particularly food).

In Korea and the Philippines, a bit of food remaining on a plate signifies that you've had enough. In Japan and Malaysia, it means that you want another helping.

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Editor Mrs. Alice Pack, Assistant Professor of English and TESL.
Staff Api Hemi, Jovy Moss

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Fijians and Thais have the custom in common of remaining lower ~~at~~ show respect or reverence

When sitting, standing or passing before a high personage or an elder person, one should stoop or bend one's head and body so that it is not on the level of or above the head of that person. If a revered person is sitting on the floor in the Thai traditional style, he should be approached on the knees or in a crawling position...In a classroom when a student talks to the teacher who is sitting on a chair, he is supposed to kneel or to stoop so low that he does not seem taller than the sitting teacher.

In American respect or honor is shown by standing up, i.e. a standing ovation. Hewes states, "There are few postures which are prescribed or proscribed with legal sanctions in American culture, but they would include the standing posture required in a courtroom when the judge enters or leaves (violations can be punished summarily as contempt of court)..."

After learning that in Hawaii it is considered insulting to stand with arms behind the back or on the hips, a *haole* teacher understood why the principal at her school usually gently removed her arms from behind her back when she was on playground duty.

In Europe I'm consistently misunderstood when I emphasize a request for one ticket by raising my index finger. Two tickets are tendered and then, when I indicate it is the wrong number, the thumb is raised alone by the ticket seller and I'm questioned again.

A wave of the hand, using a side to side rolling movement (usually the hand is held vertically with the palm flat or slightly curved) has a peculiar significance in Hawaii--he's gone, there isn't any, we're all out, etc. Mainlanders frequently mistake this for a friendly wave.

The nearest thing I've found to this is the Columbian gesture used to designate "we don't have any" or "forget it," but in this gesture the thumb rests between the chin and the lower lip while fingers, extended, move from side to side.

Body contact is another form of kinesics which is subject to wide differences in interpretation. In the Thai

society, body contact between sexes is rarely seen while it is common for people of the same sex to walk hand in hand or with one's arm on another's shoulders, especially among the young. "To touch or hold a girl's hand is tantamount to expressing a desire for sexual relations, and such action was [sic] considered immoral."

"The Arab likes to touch his companion, to feel and smell him. To deny a friend his breath is to be ashamed."

According to Hall, in Irania men are often seen embracing and holding hands.

Hall has much to say about time and space in relative cultural communication and has some interesting observations on violation of personal territory with both men and animals. Birdwhistell also goes into this quite extensively. To quote at length or give explanations about these seems outside the realm of this article. However, two statements from Fast will be included as they emphasize the difference of cultural interpretation.

When an Arab wants privacy he retreats into himself, but when a German wants privacy he retreats behind a closed door.

The English body language that says, "I am looking for some momentary privacy" is often interpreted by the American as "I am angry at you, and I am giving you the silent treatment."

The examples cited in this paper could probably be multiplied many times. Everyone I've known who has lived abroad for an extended period of time seems to remember at least one incident in which he was personally embarrassed by some untimely gesture. An example of this is a peace corps member in Micronesia who, while teaching an elementary class, thought to shame a child for his unpreparedness. He used a gesture common in elementary schoolyards (mainland United States) to denote "you ought to be ashamed" or "shame on you," by placing one index finger crosswise over the other at the base of the two fingers, with the other fingers and thumb curled into a fist, pointing toward the victim, and rubbing the top finger over the other away from

him into the air, then bringing the finger back to the original position and repeating the action several times. (Saitz and Cervenka list this as a unique North American gesture, with the note that it is a teasing gesture used by children.) The shocked silence in the classroom, and the wide open eyes of the students convinced him of an error. Later he learned that in these islands this particular gesture indicated sexual intercourse.

Halting pronunciation and grammatical errors in a foreign speaker are always noticed but usually overlooked, and missing words or phrases are often supplied by the tolerant listener. Gestures given at the same time, although subject to a different interpretation, might also be overlooked, excusing the speaker because of his limited knowledge of the language; but listeners unconsciously seem to expect anyone with an excellent command of the spoken language to also be aware of the implications of his gestures.

When a speaker mispronounces a word, or uses a word in a wrong context this is recognizable; this is not true of the misuse of a gesture. The gesture itself is usually perfectly made, it is only the interpretation that is wrong.

In my experience gestures are never corrected by a listener, and it is usually with great difficulty that explanations are extracted from listeners who react in some way that shows the gesture is displeasing or has been misinterpreted. The speaker must constantly be aware of the subtle signs that indicate this.

The greatest misunderstanding seems to occur when the non-native speaker has great fluency in the second language. Unfortunately, foreign language text book writers either do not recognize this, or overlook the importance of communication by body movement.

I have visited Japanese language classes in Hawaii and observed that children's classes (taught by native Japanese speakers) follow the traditional Japanese practice of standing and then bowing low as the teacher enters the room, then sitting down only after recognition of

their greeting, but have not seen this done (or heard of it) on the high school or college level or in any adult classes although they, too, have had native Japanese speaking teachers. On the other hand, I have had new students from the Orient who have stood and bowed as I came into the classroom—much to their embarrassment, as the Polynesian members of the class always laugh uproariously. Evidently these students were not taught appropriate English classroom gestures with their previous English lessons.

Meaningful communication between cultures must include a knowledge of their contrastive gestures as well as their contrastive phonemes and morphemes.

Because gestures seem to be instinctive and usually become so automatic that we

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

are not aware of them, communication often fails even when there is some recognition of these differences in interpretation so they must be consciously practiced much as oral drills in language acquisition. It took hours of practice for me to automatically use the Polynesian accepted side hand gesture for class response; however, it is now my usual gesture and a demonstration using the forward form feels awkward. (I also feel guilty whenever I call someone with a beckoning motion of the index finger).

Because of their experiences and with the hope that others might successfully interact with Columbians and avoid their embarrassing errors, Saitz and Cervenka have prepared a contrastive inventory on Columbian and North American gestures.

They state in their introduction:

Now after more than a year's practice in maintaining our palms at right angles

to the floor, in loose finger-flapping and in fish-face mouth pursing, we feel a little better equipped for communication in our new environment, though perhaps not adept enough to buy fruit successfully in our local market.

Some books and articles on kinesic communication are available, although language learners will have to sift through extraneous material to find information on contrastive cultural gestures. Instructions on a very few gestures and their meanings are also given in some guide books and travel columns (along with wardrobe suggestions and currency conversions) so that travelers may avoid giving or taking offense when they visit other countries. This is not widespread however, and foreigners who live in another country must usually depend on a number of embarrassing mistakes before their trial and error gestures are acceptable in communication.

If these contrastive gestures, particularly those which give offense, were more widely publicized, then, along with the recognition that there were differences in meaning, more understanding would develop for those who unknowingly use the gestures.

Saitz and Cervenka conclude,

It is certain that the "silent language" of communication, among which gesture systems are prominent, are as important—often more so—as the verbal matter we are accustomed to regard as the essence of communication.

Cited experiences and research support Wieman's statement:

The communicative situation that provides the optimum conditions for creative interchange is existential..It includes the full expressiveness of body and personality of both a communicator and communicatee, and events involving choices for better and worse. Therefore, interpersonal communication, in contrast with group persuasive speaking, mass media, etc., is the form of communication that fosters growth of meaning more effectively than any other.

Specific and scholarly contrastive works on cultural kinesics like that of Saitz and Cervenka should be available for as many cultures as possible. Gesture guides should be incorporated in all language textbooks, listing cultural gestures as important as proper pronunciation, and serious language students should practice cultural kinesics as religiously as intonation when studying a new language.

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