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Essential Things to Know about Gestures and Body Language

Sixty percent of our daily communication is nonverbal.

—Edward T. Hall

Are simple hand gestures and body movements important? Here are some answers:

It's inaugural day in the United States, 2005. President George W. Bush is in the reviewing stand on Washington, D.C.'s Pennsylvania Avenue as the University of Texas marching band passes by. He raises his hand to salute his alma mater with the time-honored "hook 'em horns" sign—fist raised upright, index finger and pinkie sticking up, the sign of the horns of a Texas longhorn steer, the mascot and symbol of the University of Texas. Bush's picture appears on TV screens around the globe . . . and many people in countries around the world are immediately insulted!

That very same gesture—fist upraised, index and little fingers extended upward—is considered rude in certain other countries.

- In Italy, it means "Your wife is cheating on you!" "You are being cuckolded."
- In some parts of Africa, you are issuing a curse.
- In Norway, the Internet newspaper *Nettavisen* expressed outrage that not only Bush, but his wife and two daughters, would issue such an insult.
- Yet the gesture can also have positive meanings. In the Mediterranean Sea, fishing boats may have this symbol painted on their bows to ward off evil, and in Brazil, women often wear gold or silver lockets with this sign as a good luck amulet.
- In the United States, the "hook 'em horns" sign has varied meanings. A baseball player uses it as a signal for "two outs," and in American football, a referee flashes this sign to indicate a "second down." Finally, on the streets of Los Angeles, it is a gangland symbol representing the horns of the devil!

As for poor George Bush, the newly installed president of the United States, he was simply paying tribute to his alma mater, the University of Texas. There are more details on the "hook 'em horns" gesture later in this chapter.

Here are two more examples of how an innocent gesture can become a faux pas: take, for instance, the sole of your shoe.

> It's March 2003 in Iraq, and coalition troops are invading Baghdad. People are glued to television sets around the world as U.S. soldiers climb a huge statue of Saddam Hussein and tie a rope to its head. Armored tanks then pull the statue down. Crowds of Iraqis rush forward and *pound the fallen statue with their shoes*! Why? In the Middle East and Southeast Asia, the bottom of the shoe is considered the lowest, dirtiest part of the body; therefore, the crowds were insulting Saddam's likeness with the strongest gesture possible.

> It's 1995, and ambassador to the UN Bill Richardson (now governor of New Mexico) is in a negotiating session with Saddam Hussein for the release of American oil workers who were captured after they unintentionally crossed the border into Iraq. Richardson sits down across from Hussein and crosses his legs, inadvertently displaying the sole of his shoe toward the Iraqi leader. One newspaper account reports that Hussein immediately got up and walked out in a huff. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Richardson claims his translator explained that he was expected to apologize, but he decided not to. "I think [Saddam] respected that. When he returned, I saw the glint of a smile when I didn't grovel."

Showing the sole of the shoe is just one of a wide panorama of gestures around the world that is viewed as benign in many cultures but is highly insulting in others. A person using these gestures risks incurring the wrath of onlookers—even to the point of provoking bodily harm.

> It's 1988 in Los Angeles, and an entertainer from Thailand is convicted of second-degree murder of a twenty-nine-year-old Laotian. The reason? The entertainer was singing in an after-hours Thai cabaret when the Laotian, a patron sitting in the front row, put his foot on a chair with the sole directed at the singer. When the cabaret closed, the entertainer followed the man outside and shot him dead.

Just how important is this whole realm of gestures and body language? The famous social anthropologist Edward T. Hall wrote that 60 percent of our daily communication is nonverbal. Daniel Goleman, a former science writer for the *New York Times* and the author of the international bestselling book *Emotional Intelligence*, claimed that 90 percent of our emotions are expressed nonverbally.

This chapter will chronicle several dozen signals that can become hidden booby traps in daily discourse with international visitors to the United States or when we travel abroad. This subject is apparently interesting to people in other cultures, too. I am pleased to report that my book *Gestures: Do's & Taboos of Body Language Around the World* has

been reprinted in the following foreign languages: Finnish, French, German, Hungarian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, Swedish, and two separate forms of Chinese for Taiwan and mainland China. Also, at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where U.S. Army special ops commandos are trained for duty in Iraq, *Gestures* is used to teach soldiers that mistakes can be, if not outright dangerous, at least a serious stumbling block during negotiations and interrogations.

In this chapter, I will arm you (no pun intended) with information on the most commonly misunderstood gestures and will provide material that has been updated since the publication of *Gestures*. You'll see that some gestures date back to ancient times, and others depicted in that book are already out of date and new ones have replaced them. For example, in the world of U.S. sports, the well-known "low five" (i.e., slapping the open palm of a teammate) is, in some circles, now considered passé. It has evolved upward into the "high five," which is still popular. More recently, the bumping of knuckles and of chests has become athletes' signals of congratulation. And in this country, sporting crowds whistle to show approval at sporting events, while in Europe, whistling during a team competition is comparable to booing in the United States.

As an aside, it's important to know that words, as well as gestures, can have different meanings from one country to the next. For example, a *boot* in the United States is a shoe with a high top, whereas a *boot* in England is also the trunk of an automobile. (For more examples, see chapter 4.)

The meaning of gestures can also change from generation to generation within the same country. For example, in Australia, the "thumbs-up" gesture is considered rude by many in the older generation. Younger people there, however, seem to interpret it as we Americans do, meaning "O.K." The supposition is that American movies, plus TV channels like CNN and MTV that are now seen worldwide, have caused this flip-flop in interpretation.

The British anthropologist Desmond Morris is, in my opinion, the world's leading expert in chronicling the meanings of these social gestures. His seminal book *Manwatching* is must-reading for anyone seriously interested in this topic. A later book, *Bodytalk*, is a visual dictionary containing penned drawings and explanations of some six

hundred gestures from all over the world. Proof of the fickleness of gestures is evident in *Bodytalk* when Morris indicates which countries a particular gesture is common in and then simply notes "widespread" or "varied locations."

Over the years, these vagaries have been pointed out to me by readers who wrote saying that I was "almost" correct in my definition of a certain gesture or that "They do that in the northern part of my country but not in the south." Or, "That is only done here by the older population." The conclusion is obvious: gestures are elusive and very difficult to codify, so it would be almost impossible to chronicle all of them in each and every country with total accuracy.

Interpreting gestures and body language is like aiming at a moving target, but here is some simple advice you should consider when traveling the world.

- By all means, try to learn some of the basic and more popular gestures before traveling to a country outside the United States, but be aware that this subject is not known for total consistency.
- The best advice is to be aware, respectful, and politely inquisitive when you encounter a gesture that doesn't seem to fit the setting or the context of your conversation.

How Gestures Are Classified

There are three basic types of gestures: (1) instinctive, (2) coded or technical, and (3) social.

1. *Instinctive gestures* are inbred and automatic. For example, Morris points out that when people all around the globe meet one another, there is a tendency to raise the eyebrows and wrinkle the brow. It is called the "eyebrow flash." The theory is that we are opening our eyes wider as a sign of openness and acceptance. A subsection of instinctive gestures is found among certain psychologists who claim that various body movements are clues to what's going on

inside a person's mind. For example, this group suggests that when someone crosses his or her arms across the chest, it is a signal of defensiveness or disapproval. (On the other hand, maybe that person is simply chilly?) These psychologists also suggest that scratching the nose can sometimes be an indicator that a person is telling a lie. (Or, maybe that person's nose just itches?) You have probably read about practitioners of this branch of subconscious body language being hired to interpret what's going on in the minds of jurors at a courtroom trial. If this category of gestures and body language interests you, I suggest that you read Julius Fast's book *Body Language*. More than 3 million copies of this book have been sold.

2. *Coded or technical gestures* are those used by referees, umpires, brokers in trading markets, and, of course, by people using the American Sign Language (ASL) and the Boy Scout semaphore system.
3. *Social gestures*, or acquired gestures, are described in this chapter. These gestures are generated among various societies, often without a logical explanation but with common acceptance of meaning within those societies. For example, we don't know exactly how the "O.K." gesture originated in the United States, but, as you will soon learn, this very same gesture has rude and insulting connotations in other countries.

Fifteen Common Social Gestures—But with Uncommon Meanings

1. The "O.K." Sign

In 1990, the parlor game–manufacturer Milton Bradley Co. introduced a game called Guesstures, subtitled The Game of Split-Second Charades. As part of the research for the game, Milton Bradley conducted a survey to determine the best-known gestures in the United States. It turned out that the "O.K." sign had 98 percent recognition,

greater than any other gesture. (When the game was introduced, I included this finding in my book *Gestures*. Shortly afterward, the then late-night-TV host Arsenio Hall had a segment about it and, referring to my book, kiddingly disputed the "best-known" claim. He proposed that there was another gesture, especially on the freeways of California, that probably had 100 percent recognition and usage! That gesture was, of course, the one-fingered "bird." More on this in a moment.)

Let's analyze the "O.K." sign, its origins and its varied meanings around the world.

In the 1950s, vice president Richard Nixon made a goodwill tour of Latin America. At that time, there was already widespread hostility toward the United States, and Nixon unwittingly added fuel to the fires of resentment with a single, inadvertent act. At the airport in São Paulo, Brazil, he stepped off his airplane and flashed the "A-O.K." sign to the waiting crowd. In fact, he did it with both hands! People responded by booing. In addition, newspapers the next day published large photographs of Nixon making this gesture. Why the boos and the headline news? Because in Brazil, what Nixon had gestured was the symbol for a woman's vagina.

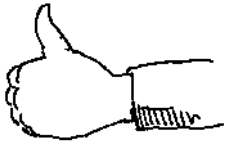
A Frenchman, particularly in the south of France, would read that very same gesture as meaning "zero" or "worthless."

In Japan, the thumb and the forefinger forming a circle is often used as a symbol for money—the fingers creating the round outline of a coin.

It's not definitively known how and why this gesture means "O.K." in the United States; however, the spoken term for "O.K." probably originated here in 1840. At that time, the Democratic Party's "Old Kinderhook" label was given to its presidential candidate Martin Van Buren, who was born in Kinderhook, New York. The nickname was shortened to "O.K. Van Buren" and used as a spoken campaign slogan.

Clearly, the "O.K." gesture, as Americans and many others know it, is "non-O.K." when you communicate with people in certain other cultures. It would be better, perhaps, to quickly learn the words in the local language for "yes" and "fine" and keep your hands to your side.

2. "Thumbs-Up"



Pilots do it the world over. Astronauts and cosmonauts even do it *out* of this world. It has become an almost universal signal for "Everything's O.K." or "Fine" or "Good going!" and a dozen other positive messages in that vein.

But watch out! There are some exceptions—important exceptions. Before we get to those, however, let's review the origins of this gesture. According to Hollywood's portrayal, it goes back to the gladiators of Rome who received a "thumbs-up" signal from the emperor when he thought that a courageous fighter should live or a "thumbs-down" to signal the opposite, a bloody death sentence for the losing warrior. It's not the first time Hollywood may be guilty of creating its own history.

Once again Desmond Morris comes to our rescue. He contends that recent historians may have confused the Latin phrase *pollice verso* (meaning a "thumb turned") with the Latin phrase *pollice compresso* (meaning a "compressed thumb"). Also, there are apparently no friezes or painted walls from Roman times showing the "thumbs-up" gesture. Morris theorizes that instead the ancient Romans *compressed their thumbs by tucking their thumbs inside their fists* to signify "He shall live." Whereas the "thumbs-down" meant to "plunge the sword into the victim," just as today in our society where "thumbs-down" means "no" or "negative" or "bad."

Today in Spain the "thumbs-up" has a strong political meaning because it is used by the Basque separatist movement from the north of Spain. Therefore, showing the "thumbs-up" in Spain may bring you unwanted attention.

In Japan, the upright thumb signals the number five. That is because when the Japanese count numbers with their fingers, they start with the upright index finger for "one," then use the middle finger for "two," add the ring finger to make "three." The little finger signals "four." Then, when those four fingers are closed into the palm, the upright thumb stands for "five." The number six is represented by the upright thumb and the upright little finger, and so on.

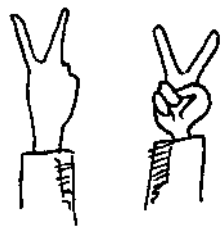
To confuse this issue even more, in Germany, the upright thumb signals "one." So in Germany when you want to order one beer, don't

use the upright index finger, as we would in the United States. Instead, show the fist closed with the upright thumb protruding. As we pointed out earlier, however, in Australia, especially among the older generation, this is considered a rude gesture, meaning "Up yours!"—especially if the thumb is jerked upward.

Another locale where the thumb is problematic is Nigeria. Reports have been published telling of Americans walking along Nigerian roads using the hitch hiking motion (thumb jerked up and back), only to have cars stop and the passengers jump out and rough them up because it has rude connotations in that country.

If and when the "thumbs-up" is used around the world with the same positive connotation as in the United States, it has probably been observed in U.S. movies and television. A word to the wise, however—be careful of indiscriminate use of the upright thumb.

3. "V" for Victory or Peace



This well-known gesture has an interesting history. During World War II, it was popularized by England's prime minister Winston Churchill. It signaled "victory" and became a powerful rallying symbol during that war. But—pay close attention—it was done with the palm facing outward. If the palm faces inward (as shown here), it is comparable to signaling "Up yours!"

Now go back five hundred years to the battle of Agincourt when the English longbow archers were considered the most powerful military adversaries on earth. Consequently, if an English bowman was captured by the enemy—in this case, the French—the captors would cut off the forefinger and the middle finger, thus effectively disarming or, in this case, disfingering, the bowman. However—and here's the point—the English won that war, and, consequently, when the French prisoners were paraded away in defeat, the surviving English bowmen would raise those two fingers in triumph, as if to say, "See! I still have mine." But—and once again, pay close attention—they would give the gesture with the *palm facing inward*.

Thus, to this very day, in all of Great Britain and many of the former British colonies (e.g., Australia, South Africa, etc.), when the two

fingers are raised upward with the palm facing inward, it is a sign of insult and derision.

Two other anecdotes about the "V" for victory sign come to mind. The former president George H. W. Bush once flashed that "V" signal to nearby journalists and impishly asked, "Do you know what this means? It's Julius Caesar ordering five beers in Roman numerals."

In 1995, during a visit to the Portuguese island of Madeira, I casually asked our guide what the "V" signal meant there. She looked at me strangely and said, "It's simple. It means 'two.'"

Finally, the gesture is also well known in the United States from the days of the antiwar demonstrators in the 1960s, when it did not signal "victory" but instead meant "peace."

4. "Hook 'em Horns," "Hang Loose," "I Love You"

A. Fist closed, index and little fingers extended—"hook 'em horns"

B. Fist closed, thumb and little finger extended—"hang loose"

C. Fist closed, with thumb, index finger, and little finger extended—American Sign Language shorthand for "I love you"

These three gestures, very similar in nature, are often confused with one another:

A. "Hook 'em Horns." As we learned at the beginning of this chapter, "hook 'em horns" comes from the University of Texas at Austin, where the longhorn steer with its huge, widespread set of horns is the

school mascot and symbol. According to press reports, it was a University of Texas student, H. K. Pitts, class of '73, who fashioned the signal. In the Texas football stadium on Saturday afternoons in the fall, you'll see thousands of students thrusting their hands upward and shouting, "Hook 'em horns!" But when in Italy—caution!—this is the sign for the *cornuto*, which refers to the "horns of a bull" and is an insulting signal that means you are being cuckolded or says, in effect, "Your spouse is cheating on you." Press reports tell us that University of Texas alumni serving in the U.S. military forces in Italy have innocently flashed this sign to fellow alumni in restaurants and other public places, which actually provoked fistfights with native Italian men who view it as insult to their manhood and honor.

And there are other meanings for this gesture. Fishing boats in the Mediterranean Sea carry this sign painted on the bows of their boats because it signifies warding off evil. In parts of Africa, when pointed downward at another person's feet, it signals a curse. In Brazil and Venezuela, it carries the meaning "good luck," and women often wear it as a charm around the neck.

When an American baseball player or umpire gives this signal, it tells teammates that there are "two outs." In American football, a referee uses it to indicate the "second down."

And in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the home of many metal-fabricating companies, the gesture signifies slightly coarse barroom humor because it supposedly identifies a long-suffering punch-press operator ordering "four beers."

B. "Hang loose." In the Hawaiian Islands, "hang loose" is a signal for "Take it easy." It is called the "shaka" and sends the message "Hang loose, brah!" (for "brother"). It should be done with a twist from the wrist or the elbow. Its origins are unclear. One version of the story is that it comes from a plantation guard, Hanmana Kalili, who had lost his three middle fingers in an accident and afterward worked as a guard in the sugarcane fields. Kalili apparently used his disabled hand to wave off local youths who tried to steal sugarcane. Other youths repeated the gesture to warn their friends that Kalili was nearby. Another explanation is that the Kahuku high school football team is said to have adopted it as a pep signal when breaking from the huddle. In other regions of the islands, it became a neighborhood

greeting. Today, it simply means "Relax, brother," and is unique to the Hawaiian Islands.

C. "I love you." The origin and explanation for this gesture is simple. In American Sign Language (the third-most-popular language in the United States, after English and Spanish), it is a shorthand signal for the words *I love you*. Rock and heavy metal musical groups have adopted it and often flash it to their cheering fans.

5. Touching and Space

Wherever Americans travel, they are each accompanied by an imaginary bubble of air around them, measuring about eighteen inches. This is called our "territorial imperative" or "our personal space." We Americans value our personal space. When Americans meet one another in social or business situations, note that there will be about thirty-six inches between them (eighteen inches of space per person). That's just about the distance of extending your arm and putting your thumb in the other person's ear. In other words, in public situations it's a symbolic "arm's length" relationship. That's how we are comfortable—and, heaven forbid, not any closer!

In Latin America and much of the Middle East, however, the "bubbles" are much smaller. People there will often stand just inches apart. Friends may grasp each other's elbows or forearms and might even touch the lapel of the other person's suit jacket (though not with women, of course).

Observers in those regions have noticed a mythical dance called the "conversational tango." That occurs when American and Latin men meet each other and the Latin steps forward, not realizing he is entering the American's space. The American, naturally, takes a step backward. The Latin thinks, "Where's he going?" and steps forward; the American steps backward; the Latin steps forward; and . . . there you have it—the conversational tango.

The famed American anthropologist Edward T. Hall posits that there are four distinctive spatial zones:

1. The *intimate zone* is eighteen inches of space extending outward from the body. This is the zone for lovers and parents holding infants. In this zone, the sense of smell and awareness of radiated warmth also comes into play.

2. The *personal zone* is the "arm's length" distance described previously. In this zone, the facial expressions of the other person are clearer. But even here, there are incongruities. When seated in the economy class on airplanes, we accept and permit elbow touching and even possible knee-to-knee touching. This same anomaly is true in wide spacing–conscious Japan where touching is uncommon, yet we see photos of Japanese office workers packed tightly together on commuter trains.
3. The *social-consultative zone* extends outward from, say, four feet to eight or ten feet and often occurs in ordinary daily conversation. It's at this distance that we acknowledge other people and include them in our conversations.
4. The *public zone* is a ten- to thirty-foot space extending outward from the body, or the outer boundary for acknowledgment—a professor standing in front of a class, for instance.

Many of the same variations apply to touching. Americans avoid casual touching in business and social situations, unless the two parties are very close friends. We may, on occasion, pat shoulders, slap a back or two, and hold the other person's elbow when shaking hands. But this is usually taboo in most of Asia, the United Kingdom, and Northern Europe. Even between cities such as London and Paris, there are differences in touch patterns. Richard Gesteland's wonderful book *Cross-Cultural Business Behavior* describes how hidden cameras recorded the number of times casual touching occurred in social situations such as during lunch. In Paris, about a hundred touches took place. In London, zero.

The ultimate act of social touching may occur when two men walk down the street holding hands. My first encounter with that behavior occurred in Saudi Arabia. My male customer and I were walking down a street in Jeddah, he in his long, flowing robe, when he silently reached over and took my hand . . . and we continued down the street holding hands. I was stunned, but I just hung on. Very quickly, however, my palm became very sweaty. Later, I found out I was shot with luck. In his country this was merely a sign of friendship and respect—there were no sexual overtones in the least. If I had

abruptly pulled away, I would have risked insulting the man. This same sign of friendship might be seen—and experienced!—in Bombay or in parts of Southeast Asia. In Latin America, two male friends may stroll down the street arm in arm, with no message intended other than general friendship.

Another example of this was cited in the summer of 2004 when terrorists in Saudi Arabia targeted Westerners employed there. Americans were encouraged to grow beards and don the traditional ankle-length robes worn by Saudi men in order to look less conspicuous. But there was more. According to a July 2004 issue of *Time* magazine, Westerners were cautioned, "Don't walk like you are going somewhere. Here (in Saudi Arabia) we walk like we're not going anywhere. We saunter as if we have nowhere to go." Furthermore, Americans were advised, "When walking with another man, hold hands, like Saudis do. That makes you look more authentic."

6. Greetings

You will learn in chapter 2 that while there are many forms of greeting, the most common is the handshake, which is also the most common type of touching. With thanks again to my friend, the author and world traveler Dick Gesteland, here is a list of variations around the world for the ubiquitous handshake:

Germans	Firm, brisk, and frequent
French	Light, quick, and frequent
British	Moderate
Latin Americans	Firm and frequent
North Americans	Firm and infrequent (compared to France and Latin America)
Arabs	Gentle, repeated, and lingering
South Asians	Gentle, often lingering
Koreans	Moderately firm
Most other Asians	Very gentle and infrequent

That last version is particularly true in Japan because the traditional greeting there is, of course, the bow. When the Japanese offer their

hands for handshakes, they are simply showing knowledge of and respect for the Western custom of shaking hands. In Japan, bowing involves many nuances that most Westerners find difficult to comprehend. In brief, the higher the stature of the person you're meeting, the lower you bow. But in general, a slight bob of the head is sufficient for most of us. I've heard Americans complain, "You want me to bow? I'm an American! I don't bow to anyone!" In Japan, however, bowing does not imply subservience or subordination—it is an act of humility and respect. Personally, I don't find anything objectionable in being humble and gracious and respecting the cultural mannerisms of others.

In places like Thailand and India, the traditional greeting involves pressing the palms together at chest height, as in a prayerful position, and bowing the head slightly. When this is done, the person is saying, in effect, "I am praying to the God in you." Top that for an impressive greeting!

As for other forms of greetings, in parts of the Middle East, you might observe the other person placing the right hand over his heart. In New Zealand, among the Maori ethnic group, using your nose to rub the nose of the other person is the customary greeting. In certain parts of Africa, tribal people actually spit at one another's feet. And in Siberia, they may open their mouths and repeatedly stick out their tongues.

What about shaking hands with women? In American business and even social circles, it has become more common to exchange handshakes man to woman or among women themselves. That is also the case in many European countries. But, in general, one cautionary rule is to wait and see if the woman extends her hand first.

And what about cheek-kissing and the embrace, or *abrazo*, so common throughout Latin America and popular in countries like Italy, France, Russia, and many Middle Eastern locales? First, as a general rule, this is not usually done among strangers or at first greetings. It is said to have originated in ancient times when everyone wore robes or gowns and a body hug was a quick way to determine whether the other person had any weapons hidden beneath. As for so-called cheek kissing, these are usually not lip-smacking kisses but instead are called "lip brushes to the cheek" or "air kisses."

How can you tell when a hug is appropriate? First, it is likely reserved for people who have become fairly good friends. Second, and this is especially helpful when meeting women in another country, if you extend your hand and she takes it, and then you feel a slight tug on your hand, this signals that she is expecting a friendly hug—not a full-body hug, but only one from the shoulders up.

Finally, for the definitive word on handshaking, check out *The Power of Handshaking for Peak Performance Worldwide*. The coauthor, Robert E. Brown, says, "Handshaking is a method and process for communicating that we've had with us since the beginning of time. It is extraordinarily important. It seals the deal."

Brown wrote that handshaking originated during the Roman Empire, about two thousand years ago. Then, when a man met another man, he had to make sure he wouldn't be attacked, so the two either laid down their weapons or showed the empty palms of their right hands. To ensure that neither would go for the sword or lunge, the two men grasped hands.

There are twelve basic handshakes, according to Brown. They range from the finger squeeze to the water pump (an enthusiastic, rapid movement), to the "dead fish" (limp, effeminate), to the two-handed shake (one hand doing the shake, and the other covering the two clasped hands). Brown claims the "all-American" shake is a warm, firm, palm-to-palm shake that a confident person gives with no hidden agenda. One could also add to that list the finger-busting "Texas" grip.

In summary, the handshake is both varied and ubiquitous . . . so, let's shake on that!

7. Eye Contact

Most Americans, starting as youths, are told by parents, teachers, and other superiors, "Look me in the eye when you speak to me." It's clear that we Americans favor direct eye contact. But around the world, other parents and superiors teach just the opposite. In most of Asia, and especially in Japan, direct eye contact is considered inappropriate, too forward, and impolite. In the Native American culture, staring directly into the eyes of another—especially of an elderly person—was also considered rude and impolite.

On the other hand, strong, direct eye contact is especially important in Latin America and the Middle East. In places like South Korea and the central African countries, eye contact is termed "moderate" by Gesteland, and, of course, throughout Northern Europe the practice is very similar to that in the United States.

8. Beckoning

As you read this, imagine that another person walks into the room and you want him or her to come toward you. What will you do? The natural American gesture is to raise one hand, with the palm inward, and move the upright fingers toward you. Or, a second acceptable gesture is to raise the hand, palm inward, with the index finger upright and curling back and forth. But in countries as widespread as the former Yugoslavia and Malaysia, the curled finger gesture is used only for animals. Therefore, using it to beckon a person would be terribly impolite. Incidentally, in Australia and Indonesia it might also be used for beckoning "ladies of the night." But in most of Europe, if you wish to beckon someone to come toward you, the proper gesture is to extend the arm, *palm downward*, and make a "scratching" motion downward with all the fingers.

Here are some other forms of "beckoning": in France, the preferred way to call a waiter to your table is simply to catch his eye and then perhaps quickly nod your head backward. In Colombia, one way to get a waiter's attention is to clap your hands lightly. In China, to beckon a waiter to refill your tea, simply turn your empty cup upside down in its saucer or leave the lid of the teapot off or open. In Spain, Mexico, Haiti, and a sprinkling of other countries, when calling a waiter, restaurant patrons can be heard issuing a noise with the lips, something like "hsssst" or "psssst," or even a kissing noise. Don't, however, try the kissing sound to call a waiter or a waitress at your nearest American truck stop.

9. Kissing

How did the act of kissing begin? Anthropologists are unsure. Desmond Morris called it a "relic gesture" that probably originated when mothers passed chewed food, mouth-to-mouth, to their infants.

In recent years, the kiss has reached—shall we say—new dimensions. Britney Spears and Madonna were shown at the 2003 MTV Video Music Awards on national television giving each other an open-mouthed, tongue-to-tongue kiss that was rehashed and replayed on TV countless times.

Good male friends in many Eastern European and Middle Eastern countries greet one another with kisses to the cheek, often as many as three times, alternating the cheeks.

The French seem to idolize the kiss. In the nineteenth century, the French had a kissing game called *maraichinage* that involved deep-tongue kissing among ten or more couples who changed partners weekly. In some parts of France, this "tongue dueling" was conducted in parks and even in churches. It was banned by the clergy in 1864. Two years later the French sculptor Auguste Rodin created one of the world's most famous sculptures, *The Kiss*. The French are famous today for the "air kiss" to the cheek and sometimes to the back of a woman's hand. This means the lips do not actually touch the skin.

Finally, I was told that among some women in Brazil, a common greeting among good friends and relatives is to kiss the cheeks alternately, three times. "Why three times?" I asked. My source explained that the first cheek kiss signifies "I hope you get married." The kiss to the other cheek sends a second message, "And I hope you have children," and the final kiss on the original cheek says, "And I hope your mother-in-law does not come to live with you." Truth or myth? I'm not sure.

10. "I See a Pretty Girl"

How do we signal this in the United States? One would think that whistling while raising the eyebrows would be the answer, and that such a signal would be universal. Not so. Here are ways that people in other cultures send that message:

1. The French, of course, kiss the fingertips and then wave the hand outward. This is a special Gallic gesture for praise, whether it be for beauty or a memorable wine.
2. An Arab may stroke his beard.

3. Many South American men will place a forefinger against the lower eyelid and pull down slightly, in effect saying, "That's an eyeful."
4. An Italian gesture, used in old American silent movies, was twisting the mustache, as if a man were preening himself to prepare for his advances toward a girl.
5. An Italian man might also place his forefinger against his cheek and make a screwing motion, as if he were creating a dimple.
6. A Greek man may stroke his cheeks with one hand because in ancient times an egg-shaped face was considered especially beautiful.
7. But it is in Brazil where there is a unique but clearly indicative gesture that sends the message "I see a pretty girl." The man forms two tubes with his hands and brings them up to one eye as if peering through a telescope.

11. Applauding

One would think that the act of applauding would be duplicated the world over. Well, almost. Try this experiment first. Go ahead. Applaud. Just applaud, right now. You've probably never thought of it or noticed before, but if you are right-handed, you are probably pounding the right hand down into the left palm. And if you are left-handed, vice versa.

Hearing-impaired people cannot, obviously, hear the gratifying sound of applause. So how do they substitute? They raise both open hands head-high, one on either side of the head, palms outward, and waggle them vigorously. Picture an entire audience doing this signal, and you can understand why it sends a powerful message of thanks and gratification.

Also, the timing for applause varies from country to country. In Russia and China, groups may use applause to greet someone. If you are fortunate enough to visit young children at schools in China, you will probably be greeted by line after line of small children standing and applauding your arrival. Performers in Chinese and Russian

theaters also will often applaud back to an audience at the end of their performances.

Finally, applauding does not automatically mean approval. In many European countries, audiences frequently clap in rhythm as a sign of approval, whereas in North America, slow rhythmic clapping signals impatience. Similarly, in the United States, when spectators whistle at sporting events, it means approbation and encouragement. But in many parts of Europe, whistling is tantamount to booing by American audiences.

12. The "Fist Slap"

For many years, Johnny Carson did it during his late-night-TV opening monologue. His successor, Jay Leno, continues to do it. In fact, many of us do it on occasion. It's the "fist slap"—when we might be standing on a corner and casually swing our arms and slap the closed fist into the palm of the other hand. In Chile and parts of France, however, this motion is tantamount to saying, "Up yours." In Chile, it is called the *tapa*. An abbreviated version in Chile is done by a person who simply makes a fist, knuckles pointing outward, and taps the thumb up and down into the top of the fist; that's called the *tapita* in Spanish.

13. The "Ear Waggle" and the "Thumbing of the Nose"

These are two acts of derision that schoolchildren all over the world seem to learn instinctively. With the ear waggle, one places the hands at either side of the head, with the thumbs at the temples or the ears, and then flaps the hand back and forth. Morris claims that this is probably an imitation of the long, floppy ears of a donkey, an animal usually depicted as lazy and stupid. With the thumbing of the nose, the person places the thumb of one hand on the tip of the nose with the other fingers splayed outward and makes a wiggling motion. It is thought that this represents the hostile, erect comb of a fighting cock.

14. The "Forearm Jerk"

This powerful and well-known gesture is done by raising the fist upward and outward and then, with the other hand, cutting down

sharply into the crook of the elbow. It is a strong, sexual, and insulting gesture, and in American street language it signifies "Up yours!" The upright arm represents the phallus—which allows us to segue into the final and perhaps the most ubiquitous gesture of all.

15. The "One-Finger Salute"

We should fittingly end this tutorial with one of the most famous and best-known gestures of all: it's sometimes called "the bird" or "flipping off." On highways and expressways, it is occasionally referred to as "the expressway digit." In Latin, it is the *digitus impudicus* (translation: "the indecent digit"). Or, we simply call it "the finger."

It sends a powerful, insulting message with little leeway for misunderstanding. It may interest you to know that it has been used for more than two thousand years. Desmond Morris wrote that "The [Roman] Emperor Caligula is thought to have used the extended middle finger as a substitute for the phallus when offering his hand to be kissed, as a deliberately scandalous act." In other words, a demeaning act to people beneath him.

Arabs have reshaped the upright finger into a downturned finger, with the hand extended outward, the palm facing down, and the middle finger dangling downward. When this is done, the finger also represents the phallus.

This ubiquitous gesture has even been lionized with its own Web site (www.ooze.com). According to this site, "By jabbing a threatening phallus at your enemy like a wild animal, you aren't just belittling him, but also making him your sexual inferior."

And finally, there are other, more benign, variations of upright-finger gestures: "The three-finger salute" has had two disparate uses. In Yugoslavia and Serbia, it is a nationalistic salute used by ethnic groups in that region. A second and quite different use appeared in the 2004 presidential election when George W. Bush adopted the upright three-fingered gesture to depict his middle initial—"W"—which represented his name as distinguished from his father's: George H. W. Bush.

A Summary of Essentials to Know about Gestures

Here is a short list of gestures and examples of body language most commonly used by North Americans that have other meanings elsewhere.

1. Shaking Hands

Here: As children, North Americans are taught to do this with a firm, solid grip.

There: While hand clasping as a greeting has generally been adopted around the world, the Japanese prefer bowing but will quickly cater to Westerners by shaking hands. Southeast Asians prefer to press their own palms together in a praying motion. And if and when Middle Easterners and Asians do shake hands, they favor a gentle grip because in their cultures a firm grip suggests aggressiveness.

2. Eye Contact

Here: When greeting and conversing with others, North American children are taught to look people directly in the eyes. To do otherwise is often regarded as a sign of shyness, as a lack of warmth, or—even worse—as weakness.

There: In Japan and certain other Asian countries, parents train their children to avert their eyes and avoid direct eye contact, which is considered intimidating or may have sexual overtones. Interestingly, among Native American tribes, it was consider disrespectful to stare directly into an elder's eyes.

3. Waving

Here: Whether a North American is signaling "hello" or "good-bye" or simply trying to get the attention of some distant person, he or she raises the arm and waggles the open hand back and forth.

There: Throughout much of Europe, waving back and forth signals "No!" To signal a greeting or a farewell, a European customarily raises the arm and bobs the hand up and down at the wrist, similar to the wrist action when dribbling a basketball. And Italians may use an

entirely different version: palm up, fingers curling inward, back and forth in a scratching motion.

4. Beckoning

Here: A North American will often summon another person by waving to get his or her attention and then turning the hand to make hand scoops inward. Another beckoning motion an American might use is to raise the index finger (the palm toward one's face) and make a curling motion with that finger.

There: Both of these beckoning gestures may be misunderstood in other parts of the world. Throughout Europe, the gesture that says "Come here" is done by raising the arm, palm down, and then making a scratching motion with the fingers. As for curling only the index finger, in places like Australia and Indonesia, it is used only for beckoning animals and never for humans.

5. "V" for Victory

Here: Display the index and the middle finger in the shape of a V with the palm facing outward, and virtually all over the world it is understood to mean "victory" or "peace."

There: Be careful, however, in England, Australia, South Africa, and other former members of the British Commonwealth. In these countries, when this same gesture is done with the *palm facing inward toward the face*, it is tantamount to signaling "Up yours!"

6. The "O.K." Gesture

Here: In a national survey, this proved to be the single best-known gesture in the United States, with 98 percent recognition. North Americans flash this gesture frequently and enthusiastically: it's done by forming a circle with the thumb and the forefinger, with the other three fingers splayed upward.

There: Take care in France, however, where it can mean "zero" or "worthless," or in Japan where it can mean "money," as if making the shape of a coin. In places as disparate as Brazil, Russia, and Germany, it is the signal for a very private bodily orifice. So, in these countries, the American signal for "O.K." is definitely not.

7. Thumbs-Up

Here: North Americans and people in many other cultures flash this nearly ubiquitous gesture when they want to silently say, "Good job," "O.K.," "Great!" or a dozen other expressions, all of which demonstrate support and approval.

There: In certain locales, however, it can carry completely different meanings. Among the older generations in Australia, if the upright thumb is pumped up and down, it is the equivalent of saying "Up yours!" Where Americans may use the upright thumb when hitchhiking, in Nigeria it is considered a rude gesture and should be avoided. In Japan and Germany, the upraised thumb is also used when counting: in Japan it signifies "five," but in Germany it means "one."

8. "Hook 'em Horns"

Here: Most Texans will recognize this gesture (the fist raised with the index and the little finger extended) as a rallying call at the University of Texas because it mimics the horns of the school's symbol and mascot, the famous Texas longhorn steer.

There: In Italy, this same gesture says that someone is being cuckolded. In Africa, when pointed downward, it can mean placing a curse on someone. And in Brazil and Venezuela, the same gesture (pointed upward) is considered a good luck sign to ward off evil.

9. Spatial Relationships

Here: In normal social situations, North Americans generally stand about thirty inches apart from one another. That's considered the personal comfort zone and is equal to about an arm's length.

There: Asians, however, tend to stand farther apart. In contrast, Latins and Middle Easterners often stand much closer—sometimes even toe-to-toe or side by side, brushing elbows. As a result, North Americans need to steel themselves for such close encounters because to move away sends an unfriendly message.

10. Touching

Here: North Americans are not touch-oriented. With good friends, they may occasionally touch a forearm or an elbow, and with very good friends they may go so far as to place an arm around a shoulder. But hugging is almost never done among casual acquaintances.

There: While Asians join Americans in shunning such bodily contact, Latins who are good friends seem to dote on it, with hearty embraces and warm pats on the back. In the Middle East, two Arab male friends may even be seen walking down the street hand in hand, and all it signifies is friendship.

11. Kissing

Here: Among North Americans, kissing is usually reserved for sweethearts, one's spouse, and one's mother and can occur among close female relatives, friends, and acquaintances, but rarely between two men.

There: Among Latins, southern Europeans, and Russians, both male and female acquaintances will commonly greet one another with kisses to the cheeks. These are more likely feigned kisses to one cheek, sometimes to both cheeks. Incidentally, the continental practice of kissing a lady's hand has almost disappeared—except among a few pockets of gallant gentlemen in Italy and other Romance-language cultures.

From the various forms of body language and gestures, we move now to the types of ceremony and etiquette that are common among various peoples of the world. In one word, it's called *protocol*. This is probably even more complex than all the silent signals we send to one another because social behavior varies so much in both form and content, depending upon where you are on this diverse globe. Is there any rational person who does not want to know the rules for proper behavior? Read on.