

INTERPRETATION AND INCLUSION

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The purpose of this column is to address the need for improving our interpretation diversity and developing a broader approach to WHAT we interpret and to WHOM we interpret. This includes changing both our techniques and our subject matter to reflect a more diverse and encompassing education and interpretation program.

Ø COLUMN NOTES

This is the tenth article in an occasional column on the *In Touch* bulletin board. Comments, essays, notes, and news, are welcome. You can address to me by cc:mail under my name on the directory. Please indicate if your item is intended for future printing in this column.

Ø FEATURE ARTICLE

GESTURES: A NON-UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE!

Gestures and body language or often thought of as a type of universal language. While this is sometimes true, it is more often than not, untrue. Wide cultural differences, and even differences between sexes and ages, exist in the meaning and use of gestures. Lack of awareness of these differences can lead to misunderstandings, un-intended meanings, and even insults.

World-wide Confusion

Gestures are so intricately related to culture that it would be impossible to describe all the permutations and meanings associated with hands, arms, legs, heads, etc., that contribute to non-verbal communication. Even among a single culture gestures may vary from town to town. These few samples are a brief look at the variety of meanings a gesture can take on around the world:

- The "OK" symbol: In the U.S., the circling of the thumb and forefinger with the other three fingers open is often meant to mean "ok" or otherwise express approval. This is not what this gesture means around the world.

In the 1950s, Vice-President Richard Nixon stepped from a plane in Latin America and flashed the "ok" sign to the assembled crowd. He was met with a chorus of boos. Why? Because, in their culture, the hand gesture meant the equivalent of "Screw you!" In France, it often means "zero" or "worthless." In Japan, it means you want your change in coins.

- The "Hitchhiking Thumb": In the U.S., extending one's thumb while standing on the side of the road is generally accepted as a sign that you are asking for a ride. Not so in some other places. Try hitchhiking with your thumb in Australia and it might get you a punch in the nose because it means "Up yours!" In Nigeria, it is also a rude signal and may get you in trouble with passing motorists.

- The "V for Victory" sign: We have all seen photos of Winston Churchill signalling with the first and middle fingers the "victory" sign in World War II. But look carefully. In England, it is essential that this sign be given with the palm and fingers facing out. To give the sign with the palm facing in and the wrist out is an offensive gesture!

- Greeks may nod for no and shake their head side to side for yes.

- In most Arab countries and some Asian countries, showing the sole of the shoe or pointing it at someone (such as resting your outstretched leg on a chair) is impolite.

- Many cultures beckon people with the palm up and a waving of fingers. In other cultures, this is considered rude and beckoning is done with the palm down!

The Universal Gestures

Given all these differences, are there any gestures regarded as universal? Yes, with few exceptions, these gestures are considered almost universal:

- Smiling almost always mean friendliness.
- The extended middle finger almost always does not mean friendliness!
- Turning one's back on someone is almost always considered rude.
- Handshakes, once a Western custom, is now becoming a world-wide method of greeting.

What to Do

So, now you may be afraid to move a muscle in the presence of someone else for fear of offending them. On the other hand, standing rigid and immovable would probably insult someone as well! What's a person to do? These few practical reminders can help:

1. "When in Rome..." always applies. Foreign visitors to the U.S. usually accept the fact that they are in a strange land and will forgive gestures that are the custom here but may not be common at home. Likewise, you would probably do the same if you were visiting a land unfamiliar to you.
2. Learn some of the more common gestures of the cultural groups you are most likely to deal with. This will help you with the majority of your contacts.
3. Avoid broad, sweeping hand gestures that are most likely to be misunderstood or colloquial.
4. Avoid the gestures that are most often considered offensive - and use the smile a lot!

Reference:

Gestures; The Do's and Taboos of Body Language Around the World, Roger E. Axtell (John Wiley and Sons, 1991)