AXTELL - Gestures: Dos and Taboos (1998)

News item:

> (Reuters)—The opening session of Bangladesh's new parliament turned into chaos Sunday after opposition legislators reacted with fury to an alleged offensive thumb gesture by Shipping Minister A. S. M. Abdur Rab.
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> The gesture is considered a grave insult in Bangladesh.
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> "This is a dishonor not only to Parliament but to the nation," said the deputy leader of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Badruddoza Chowdhury.
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> "The minister must apologize for his showing of the thumb. And the speaker must ask the minister to do so," he said amid shouting from his party colleagues.

This news report appeared in the Sunday *New York Times* on August 18, 1996, and prompted *Times* writer John Kifner to ask the question, "What had the shipping minister done to provoke such wrath?" Kifner explained: "He gave the old thumbs-up." Kifner then followed with a lengthy exposition, complete with drawings, on the meanings of other innocent American gestures that can be misinterpreted overseas. His source, by the way, was the first edition of this book.

More and more Americans, along with our neighbors in the global village, are discovering the power—and the surprises—of gestures and body language.

Just look around you.

The world is a giddy montage of vivid gestures—traffic police, street vendors, expressway drivers, teachers, children on playgrounds, athletes with their exuberant hugging, clenched fists, and high fives. People all over the world use their hands, heads, and bodies to communicate expressively.

Without gestures, our world would be static, colorless. The social anthropologist Edward T. Hall claims 60 percent of *all* our communication is nonverbal. And in Daniel Goleman's international bestseller, *Emotional Intelligence* (Bantam, 1995), he claims that 90 percent of our emotions are expressed nonverbally. In that case, how can we possibly communicate with one another without gestures?

We use gestures daily, almost instinctively, from beckoning to a waiter or punctuating a business presentation with visual signals to airport ground attendants guiding an airline pilot into the jetway or a parent using a whole dictionary of gestures to teach (or preach to) a child.

Gestures can be menacing (two drivers on a freeway), warm (an open-armed welcome), instructive (a policeman giving road directions), or even sensuous (the languid movements of a Hawaiian hula dancer).

The premise of this book is not only that gestures are woven inextricably into our social lives but also that the "vocabulary" of gestures can be at once informative and entertaining . . . but also dangerous. For while great enjoyment can come from learning the odd, sometimes contradictory meanings of gestures we tend to take for granted, some innocent-appearing gestures can generate genuine grief.

Examples

An American teenager was hitchhiking in Nigeria. A carload of locals passed him. The car screeched to a halt. The locals jumped out and promptly roughed up the visitor. Why? Because in Nigeria, the gesture commonly used in America for hitchhiking (thumb extended upward) is considered a very rude signal.

Halfway around the world, an American couple on an auto tour in Australia was stopped by a policeman in Sydney for failing to signal before turning. Seeing that they were tourists, the officer gave them only a friendly warning. Relieved, the American man responded with a smile and the thumbs-up sign. The policeman became enraged, ordered the couple out of the car, called a backup, searched the car, and finally gave the driver an expensive ticket. Later, back in their hotel and recounting their experience, the tourists learned that in Australia the thumbs-up gesture means "screw you!"

And so we see that the same American gesture (signifying "Great!") has dire consequences in Australia as in Nigeria, a half world away.

Conversely, gestures can simply be fun, impulsive, and irresistible.

Examples

In 1990, *National Geographic Magazine* lined up all the members of the U.S. Supreme Court for an official photograph. Justice Sandra Day O'Connor found herself standing behind Justice Byron White. According to news reports, Justice O'Connor apparently could not resist the impulse shared by children and adults for decades—she quietly formed a "V" with her fingers and held them just above White's head, forming the old "rabbit ears" sign. Even the loftiest jurists in the land cannot resist the urge to flash an impish gesture from time to time.

And, speaking of lofty people, former First Lady Barbara Bush also experienced an incident where a particular gesture played tricks. In an interview on life at the White House she described being seated at a state dinner next to Russian president Boris Yeltsin who, she learned later, turned to his interpreter and asked, "What does it mean in the United

States when a woman places her foot on a man's foot," adding that "in my country it means the woman loves the man." The reason for Yeltsin's query was that, without realizing it, Mrs. Bush had been grinding his foot into the ground with her own foot. Later, Yeltsin autographed his menu with this note to Mrs. Bush: "You stepped on my foot, you knew what it meant, and I felt the same way."

Gestures and body language communicate as effectively as words—maybe even more effectively. Take a baby's smile. Can words possibly duplicate that wonderfully unique sight? It is not by accident, it seems, that as infants we learn the signal of smiling before we learn to talk. Also, according to a 1991 report in *Science* magazine, deaf babies "babble" with their hands in the same way hearing babies string sounds together before they learn to speak. Deaf babies form repetitive signals with their hands before they are ten months old, paralleling hearing infants who begin trying out sounds that evolve into spoken language.

Some anthropologists divide our actions and gestures into three broad categories: instinctive, coded, and acquired.

- *Instinctive* gestures are those we do almost unconsciously. For example, Desmond Morris writes that when humans around the world greet one another we all do the "eyebrow flash"—that is, we automatically raise our eyebrows and wrinkle our foreheads. This, he says, is a signal of openness where we are leaving the eyes unprotected. Another common instinctive gesture is when we are suddenly shocked or surprised: We tend to slap the back of our heads. A subcategory is found among psychologists who claim that certain unconscious body movements are telltale signs of what is going on inside a person's mind. For example, when one crosses one's arms in front of the chest, it is a signal of defensiveness. On the other hand, perhaps the person is merely chilly. Some followers of this school also suggest that scratching one's nose can sometimes be an indicator that a person is telling a lie. Or maybe that person's nose itches. If this branch of subconscious gestures and body language interests you, I suggest you read Julius Fast's book, *Body Language* (MJF Books), first published in 1970. Over 3 million copies of this book have been sold in ensuing years.

- *Coded*, or technical, gestures are created by preestablished agreement. Examples are hand signals used by TV directors, referees, umpires, and brokers in the stock and commodity markets. Also, as every schoolchild knows, Native Americans developed a signing system that was widely used among separate tribes and then later with the first white settlers. Today, perhaps the best-known coded language is American Sign Language, which, as you'll learn in Chapter 3, is the third most popular language in the United States after English and Spanish.

- *Acquired* gestures, meaning our socially generated and acquired gestures, will be the focus of this book. Many of these gestures have no known origins (e.g., the "O.K." sign) or no rhyme or reason (e.g., waving the hand, as in hello or good-bye). Others can have only loose connections with their meaning (e.g., the phallic symbol can be signaled in several different ways). This grouping of gestures has been loosely and informally collected among separate societies with no particular logic except that they are widely used and understood among a certain group of people.

And that is the crux of this book. Identical gestures often mean different things among different societies. Each culture seems to adopt its own set of rules. As we just learned, in America holding a thumb upright means "Great!" and is also a hitchhiker's sign, but in Nigeria it is an insult. Which is correct? The answer depends on *where* you are.

Example

Nowhere in the United States, or in many other countries for that matter, can a person in any public situation casually pat or pinch another person on his or her derriere. In Rome, on the famous Via Veneto, a pinch may be accepted with impunity, but it's absolutely forbidden in other places around the world. In fact, in many places one might even get arrested for trying it.

But there is one exception—an aberration that occurs among football players in America (and soccer players in Europe). Surely you've noticed; from defensive back to tight end, these bruisers seem to have a fetish for fanny-patting. To compliment a teammate or exhort him to play harder, hulking linemen on American professional football teams slap the rumps of other team members. And it is perfectly acceptable behavior. But—and this is important—while they can pat and slap, *they must never linger!* That would send quite a different signal indeed.

THE SCIENCE OF GESTURES

Next time you step on to an elevator, try this experiment. It demonstrates how, even in the most mundane situations, we have a silent set of rules for bodily behavior in public settings.

Here is the setting:

> If there are only one or two people on an elevator, they usually lean against the walls of the elevator. If four people board the elevator, the four corners are usually occupied.
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> However, when the population reaches five or six people, everyone begins to obey more complex rules of elevator etiquette. It is almost like a ritualistic dance. They all turn to face the door. "They get taller and thinner," as psychologist Layne Longfellow describes it. "Hands and purses and briefcases hang down in front of the body—that's called The Fig Leaf Position, by the way. They mustn't touch each other in any way unless the elevator is crowded, and then only at the shoulder or lightly against the upper arm. Also, there is a tendency to look upward at the illuminated floor indicator. If they speak, it is definitely *sotto voce*."
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> If you doubt this is standard—almost sacred—elevator behavior, then try this. Next time you walk on to a crowded elevator, *don't turn around and face the door*. Instead, just stand there facing the others. If you want to create even more tension, grin. Very likely the other passengers will glare back, surprised, grim, and upset. Reason? You have broken the rules.

One person who tried this experiment actually heard someone in the back of the elevator whisper. "Call 911. We've got a real weirdo here."

When I related all this to my son, at the time a psychology major at the University of Texas, he expressed disbelief. "Is that really true? I'll ask my professor about it." A week later, he called back excitedly: "Dad, it works. I told my professor and we decided to make it a class experiment by trying it in office buildings here. We've got people freaking out on elevators all over town! And we've got one guy who *added* something." "Added what?" I asked. "Well, he does like you said, stands staring at them, gets them all upset and nervous, and then just before the elevator doors close . . . he jumps *backward* off the elevator! Then, he runs up to the next floor. And when the doors open, he tells them, 'I heard what you said about me.'"

The technical term for such behavior is *elevator proxemics*, meaning how people space themselves on elevators. In fact, *proxemics* is an acknowledged area of study within psychology. There are kindred branches as well. For example, *kinesics* is the study of body motion. Kinesicists analyze body movements in slow motion. Anthropologists have studied the kinesics of different cultures and substantiated that an Arab, an Englishman, and a Latino signal to each other in notably different ways.

A pioneer researcher in kinesics is Ray Birdwhistell, but there are many other respected authorities. The British social anthropologist Desmond Morris gained considerable celebrity in 1967 with his book *The Naked Ape* (Jonathan Cape, London). In 1977, he produced the wonderfully illustrated and written hallmark book in this field, titled *Manwatching* (Abrams). We owe a great deal to Morris for his keen observations and dedicated research.

Another communications expert, Mario Pei, once estimated that humans can produce up to 700,000 different physical signs. Birdwhistell estimates that the face alone is capable of producing 250,000 expressions and reports that researcher M. H. Krout identified 5,000 distinct hand gestures that he believed had verbal equivalents while another researcher in kinesics, G. W. Hewes, has cataloged 1,000 different postures and their accompanying gestures.

How does verbal communication compare to nonverbal communication? Author George du Maurier once commented that "[The spoken] language is a poor thing. You fill your lungs with wind and shake a little slit in your throat, and make mouths, and that shakes the air; and the air shakes a pair of little drums in my head . . . and my brain seizes your meaning in the rough. What a roundabout way and what a waste of time."

Social scientist and author Flora Davis claims that gestures are shortcuts. They are much stronger than punctuation or the underscoring of words in boldface type or italics, she says. "They are like the maestro's baton to each musician in the ensemble."

Finally, *Time* magazine, in an essay written by Frank Trippett and titled "Why So Much Is Beyond Words," contends that "Homo sapiens, as a communicator, does not seem to have come all that far from the time when grunts and gesticulations were the main ways of getting messages across. Both individuals and groups still send vital messages by gesture, by pantomime, by dramatics—by a dizzy diversity of what scholars call nonverbal communications."

While any book on gestures and body signals would naturally draw from the science of kinesics, or nonverbal communications, this is not a scientific text. Instead, it deals only with the first thin layer of that science: the collection of gestures and body language floating on the surface of a culture. But it is precisely that assortment of signals a world wanderer first encounters as a tourist, a student, or a businessperson.

GESTURES ARE IMPORTANT

Gestures and body language have been called "the silent language." The collection of true stories that follows demonstrates how that "silence" has its own special volume—and its own direct impact on our lives.

- In 1988 in Los Angeles, an entertainer from Thailand was convicted of the second-degree murder of a twenty-nine-year-old Laotian. The entertainer was singing in an after-hours Thai cabaret when the Laotian, a patron, put his foot on a chair with the sole directed at the singer. When the cabaret closed, the entertainer followed the man and shot him. Why? Among Southeast Asians, showing or directing the sole of the shoe to another person is considered a grievous insult.

- In Nairobi, Kenya, in 1990, a ruling party boss urged his followers to chop off the fingers of people who flashed a two-fingered salute in support of permitting opposition parties. The leader told members of his party's youth wing this would discourage others from flashing the opposition's salute.

- In the fiercely conservative village of Muabda in southern Egypt, according to news reports in 1995, a wedding ceremony took place that resulted in two deaths and three people being wounded. Why? Because after the ceremony the groom took his bride's hand to lead her to their new home. It seems the brother of the bride became incensed by such a public display of affection. According to centuries-old traditions largely ignored today, the couple were not supposed to display any affection in public before the marriage was consummated. The brother therefore told the groom's uncle that his nephew was not raised properly. Tempers flared, guns appeared, and both the uncle and the brother died while three other guests were wounded in the melee. All because a married man and woman held hands.

- From acts of violence like the examples just mentioned, to the opposite end of the emotional spectrum—signs of love—our body actions are powerful signs. David Givens, author of *Love Signals* (Crown, 1983), claims that men and women unconsciously shrug their shoulders when they find each other attractive. Also, a woman attracted to a man will tilt her head down and to the side, then look in his direction in a coy or coquettish way. Let's look at some other examples.

- An American woman gets into a car with an American man, slides over to his side, and kisses him on the cheek. A common enough occurrence that probably happens hundreds of thousands of times each day in the United States. But in this case it happened in Saudi Arabia, where public displays of affection are disliked, even forbidden, and marriage is sacrosanct. The incident is reported by author Margaret K. Nydell, in her fascinating book *Understanding Arabs* (Intercultural Press, 1987). Nydell writes that the meeting between the man and woman happened to be seen by a captain of the Saudi National Guard who then demanded proof that the two were married. They were, but not to each other. "The woman was sent out of the country and the man, who compounded his problem by being argumentative, was sent to jail," Nydell writes.

- Just as love and affection can be signaled through actions and gestures, so can courage. A twelve-year-old American boy known as "David" was born without an immune system to shield him against disease. He lived his entire life inside a sterile plastic bubble and thus became known as "the bubble boy." It was not until the final fifteen days of his life when death was imminent that he emerged and, for the first time, experienced the touch of a hand unprotected by a glove, his mother's kiss, and the sensation of his mother running a comb through his long hair. As he lay dying he was conscious to the last. He made jokes and his final gesture, before he slipped into a sedated sleep that ended in death, was a wink at his doctor.

- Even the Queen of England has adopted special nonverbal signals. For example, you will probably never see her seated with her legs crossed *at the knees.* This is likely a vestige of Victorian days when "ladies" did not assume such a revealing posture. Instead, for English royalty, crossing the legs *at the ankles* is both proper and preferred.

- Queen Elizabeth II has also gone so far as to adopt certain body motions to signal messages to her entourage. Raymond Fullager, who writes and lectures about the royal family, claims Her Majesty uses *her purse* to send some twenty different signals to her staff. For example, when she shifts her handbag from her right arm to her left, it is a signal to her bodyguards to "Come and rescue me from this situation!"

- Winston Churchill is probably credited with putting the "V" for Victory sign in both our history books and our contemporary usage. During World War II, the picture of Churchill flashing the famous "V" became a familiar sight. In fact, it became a rallying point for the Allied forces against the Axis armies. So powerful was this gesture that even today statues can be seen of Churchill and his "V" frozen in time. (For a full account on the use of the "V" for Victory gesture, see pages 47–49).

- In 1995, Bill Richardson, a U.S. Congressman from New Mexico, traveled to Baghdad for an audience with Saddam Hussein to try to negotiate the release of two American men who had strayed into Iraqi

territory and were retained for two months. Richardson shook hands with Hussein, sat down, and crossed his legs . . . whereupon Hussein rose abruptly and walked out of the room. Richardson had unwittingly insulted Hussein with his body language. In some Arab cultures, it is an offensive gesture to show the sole of one's shoe to another person because it is considered the lowest, dirtiest part of the body. Hussein later returned and the meeting resumed. Much later, the Americans were released, but it is correct to say Richardson had literally started negotiations off on the wrong foot.

- When American military forces were mobilized for the "Desert Shield" operation in Saudi Arabia, along with weapons, ammunition, and desert gear they packed a forty-page booklet on gestures and body language among the Arabs. For example, GIs were cautioned to refrain from gawking at Arab women and not even to consider trying to date them. Other tips: Don't be upset if Arabs stand very close, even touch you, when conversing; don't admire an Arab's possessions because he may then feel required to give you the object of your admiration as a gift on the spot. He also will expect a gift in return. Finally, the "O.K." gesture (thumb and forefinger forming a circle) may be interpreted there as giving a curse.

- Milton Neshek is an American lawyer and officer of a Japanese-owned company located in the North American Midwest. He once accompanied the governor of his state on a trade mission to Japan where the governor addressed a large and distinguished audience of Japanese officials. At the conclusion of the presentation, the visibly upset governor cornered Neshek and lamented, "My speech was a disaster! I shouldn't have delivered it. Why didn't my staff warn me?" Confused, Neshek asked, "What made you think it was so bad?" The governor complained he had seen many members of the audience asleep, even nodding their heads. Relieved, Neshek quickly explained that among the Japanese a common way to show concentration and attentiveness was to close the eyes in contemplation and nod the head slightly, up and down. What the governor read as boredom was actually a signal of respect and attention.

- The U.S. State Department recognizes the importance of bodily actions among other cultures. When I made my first business trip to the People's Republic of China in April 1976, our group was given a special briefing in Washington, D.C., because we were among the first businesspeople to travel to China after the détente arranged by President Nixon and Chairman Mao. Here are two relevant points extracted from that briefing:

  — Chinese generally do not touch a drink at the dinner table without proposing a toast to others at the table, even if only by raising the glass and making eye contact. Only a symbolic sip need be taken in reply. It is perfectly acceptable to explain that one does not drink at all, providing one is consistent.

  — Chinese are very sensitive to problems of precedence at doorways, in automobiles, and so on. Even a token gesture of yielding the right of way or the seat of honor to a Chinese is appreciated; failure to make the gesture when expected could be interpreted as arrogance.

- Eugene Theroux is a widely traveled international legal expert, having managed his law firm's offices in both the People's Republic of China and in the former USSR. "I was once startled," he writes, "in a negotiation in China to notice that the chief negotiator on the other side suddenly bent forward and began to press his temples with the two first fingers of each hand. I thought perhaps my negotiating style had driven him to the breaking point, until he smiled and explained that this is an acupressure technique for reducing stress." Theroux added, "And by the way, it works!"

- In commercial transactions, some Chinese buyers and sellers may be seen using an ancient, esoteric method of hand gestures to conduct business in secret. It is a secret bidding code. A buyer and seller will each place one hand under a cloth or some other cover. Then the bidder says only "hundred" or "thousand" out loud. Meanwhile, under the cloth, the bidder extends certain fingers of the hidden hand to indicate how many units he is bidding. If he says "thousand," and extends two fingers, that means 2,000; if he extends four fingers, it means 4,000, and so on.

- Author Helen Colton, in her book *The Gift of Touch* (Seaview/Putnam, 1983), graphically describes how different cultures react with varying gestures. In this case, she poses an embarrassing situation and tells how various people around the world would react. The situation: You suddenly come upon a strange woman in her bath. The varied reactions of that woman would be as follows:

  — A Mohammedan woman would cover her face.

  — A Laotian woman would cover her breasts.

  — A Chinese woman (before the Revolution) would hide her feet.

— In Sumatra, the woman would conceal her knees.

— In Samoa, she would cover her navel.

— In the Western world, she would cover her breasts with one arm and her genital area with the other hand.*

- In 1968, the international sports world was shocked by a single arm and hand gesture. The scene appeared in photographs on newspaper front pages all over the world. At the 1968 Olympic games in Mexico City, two black Americans were strongly favored to win medals in the 200-meter race. Tommie Smith and John Carlos were students at San Jose State College and members of a group of athletes organized to protest the treatment of blacks in the United States. Smith won the gold and Carlos the bronze medal. At the medal awards ceremony, when the U.S. national anthem was played, spectators were stunned to see Smith and Carlos ascend the platform in bare feet, bow their heads, and raise one black-gloved hand in the Black Power salute. They later explained that their clenched fists symbolized black strength and unity and their bare feet signaled a reminder of black poverty in the United States. Their bowed heads, they said, signaled their belief that the words of freedom in the U.S. national anthem applied only to Americans with white skin. Their actions created a sensation and the U.S. Olympic Committee suspended the two athletes and commanded them to leave the Olympic village.

- At the end of many sporting contests in the United States and internationally, it is an act of good sportsmanship to shake hands with your opponents, right? Not always, it seems. At a California high school, baseball players were prohibited from shaking hands with their opponents for fear the ceremony would turn into fistfights. Some of the players were spitting on their hands before the handshake; some muttered insults; increasingly, some threw punches. Apparently it wasn't a game anymore.

- Virtually everywhere in the world clapping one's hands together in applause is a signal of honor, adulation, enjoyment, or approval. (Incidentally, you can detect whether a person is right-handed or left-handed by observing the way they applaud. A right-handed person will slap that hand down into and on top of the left palm; a left-handed person will make the left hand dominant.) In the United States, clapping at large public events is often accompanied by whistling; however, in much of Europe, such whistling is a signal of derision and disapproval. In China, the customary way to greet visitors is with applause.

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- How do the *deaf* signal applause? After all, they cannot hear the gratifying sound produced by applause. The answer is that they have adopted their own unique method of signaling enjoyment or approval. They raise their hands to shoulder or head height, palms outward, and shake them with a fast, almost shiveringlike motion. Seeing an audience waggling their hands in that fashion can be just as rewarding as hearing a thundering round of applause.

- One would naturally believe that conducting a philharmonic orchestra relied solely on one sense: hearing. But the conductor of the Buffalo, New York, Philharmonic Orchestra, interviewed on National Public Radio, explained that "Conducting is, in fact, a visual art. Through small gestures one influences the whole performance and its outcome."

- Some examples of gestures can seem almost amazing, even miraculous. Moments after being blessed by John Paul II at the Vatican, Jan Lavric, a visiting doctor from London, stunned bystanders by abruptly standing up, getting out of his wheelchair, and walking away. What appeared as a miracle was explained later by Lavric: "I was tired and sat down in an empty wheelchair. Suddenly, a nun wheeled me off, and before I could explain, the Pope blessed me."

- Gestures can also be a valuable form of opinion polling. According to *People* magazine, at least one U.S. politician had his own system of gauging his popularity. "I watch the crowds waving to me," he explained, "and I count the number of fingers they're using."

CONCLUSION

This book is intended to put you *en garde*—appropriately, a classic protective stance from the sport of fencing. As the global village continues to shrink and cultures collide, it is more and more essential for all of us to become *en garde,* figuratively speaking, to the myriad motions, gestures, and body language that surround us each day.

Another apt French expression is *beau geste.* It means, literally, a "beautiful gesture." It also served as the title of a well-remembered movie of the 1930s that related a heroic act of courage. It is an appropriate term

for this book, and one worth remembering. As more of us cross over cultural borders, it would be our *beau geste* to learn, understand, and respect more about the silent but powerful language of gestures and body language.

The chapters that follow will help us do exactly that.