

Fickle Fingers of Fate

Anna Mecagni didn't know Portuguese when she traveled through Brazil, so she had to improvise. Her fluent Spanish was enough to get a conversation started but practically useless when it came to comprehending the response. So the business student from Los Angeles opted to use the international language (or so she thought) of gestures—shrugging shoulders, cocking eyebrows, nodding her head and talking with her hands. She had the last word every time she flashed the okay sign. Brazilians consider the Rodney Dangerfield—trademark circled thumb and forefinger a vulgar reference to the female anatomy. Mecagni had to fumble her way through more than a few apologies once she realized the error of her ways.

The lesson: Never assume that the routine body language of home will be universally understood. In countries like Brazil (and Russia and Germany, where the okay sign translates simply to "you asshole"), an innocent, misdirected digit can lead to an instant communication breakdown, red faces and floods of foreign invective. "As an American, you get so used to flashing the okay sign, it's hard to interpret it any other way," Mecagni explains. "I got to the point where I had to physically restrain my impulse to do it."

That reflexive urge is hard to resist. Researchers say 90 percent of our emotions are expressed without uttering a single word. Apparently we wear our hearts not only on our sleeves, but everywhere else, too. "Gestures are woven inextricably into our social lives," maintains Roger Axtell in *Gestures: The Do's and Taboos of Body Language Around the World*. "Both individuals and groups still send vital messages by gesture, by pantomime, by dramatics—by a dizzy diversity of what scholars call nonverbal communications."

These signals can be powerful emotional triggers, causing friends to come to blows, creating friendships among strangers, evoking passion in the apathetic and conveying hidden intentions

Flash a thumbs-up anywhere in the world and you'll get a point across—but not always the one you wanted. Why simple gestures aren't that simple.

BY VICKY GOMELSKY

without a word spoken. Axtell cites the example of a young Western hitchhiker in Nigeria who was roughed up by a passing crew of motorists who took offense at his upturned thumb, an extremely rude gesture in those parts.



Down Under, an American couple's appreciative thumbs-up to a highway officer who decided not to fine them for a moving violation provoked a severe backlash—a litany of curses and a stiff penalty. The couple had signaled "screw you" with a vertical up-yours thumb.

"The same gestures do not mean the same things in other parts of the world. This is the first-grade part of it," declares Axtell, who has clasped hands with Arab businessmen, hugged Argentine co-workers and bowed to Japanese hosts, all part of his mission to find out what embarrassing things people around the world are saying to each other by means of errantly moving body parts.

It's the socially acquired gestures that get us into trouble, the ones that are so built into our daily lives that they

become knee-jerk responses. Of these, hand signals seem to be the biggest culprit. Besides the okay sign, other bad moves include the vertical horns—when your pinkie and forefinger stand upright like a rowdy concertgoer's—and the "V" for victory or peace sign, which, when done with the palm facing inward, invites former and current subjects of the British queen to do the same thing the upturned middle finger suggests in the U.S. George Bush insulted thousands of Australians on a 1991 visit to Australia with a V for victory that signified something less than victorious. Meanwhile, the vertical-horns gesture is an accusation of cuckoldry in Italy, a good luck sign in Venezuela. In India, it's the symbol for bovines.

Even some of the most basic gestures in your repertoire can mean something completely different somewhere else. In Greece and Turkey, for example, nodding your head up and down signals no, and shaking it side to side means yes. For most people, that's like writing with the wrong hand for a day—incredibly unnatural. And the truth is, that's the way it is with so many gestures from other cultures. They just don't feel right. But neither does a glass of Fanta tossed in your face.

Varying notions of personal space can also get body signals off to an awkward start. The Japanese maintain some of the biggest personal bubbles, routinely standing at more than an arm's length apart (except on crowded subways, where they avert their eyes and cram on in). But in the Latin world or the Middle East, you could easily bump stomachs with your newest acquaintance. In countries where zones of personal space are nonexistent, you could be grabbed for a bear hug at the drop of a vodka glass.

"In some countries, the *abrazo*, the hug, is the way, and we can't shy away," notes Axtell.

How can you minimize gesture faux pas? Ask questions and observe, advises Axtell. Find out how people in the country you're visiting would beckon a waiter. Do they point like the Americans or scratch their fingers in a beckoning

motion as in Fiji and Singapore? Do they follow the Colombians' lead and clap their hands lightly, or do they pucker their lips and make a kissing sound as in parts of Mexico? And when they order a drink, do they raise the index finger or the thumb to indicate the quantity? This is important. Some people count on their fingers from thumb to pinkie (e.g., the Italians, the French and the Germans), others from index finger to pinkie and then back to thumb to make five.

Just getting from place to place can be daunting when the local signs aren't in your dictionary. Dawn Blalock did a year-and-a-half-long stint in Johannesburg as a reporter, but figuring out the city's tricky bus-hailing maneuvers proved almost more difficult than tracking down sources. "To flag down what they call black taxis," explains Blalock, "you'd hold up one finger to go to a central business station downtown, another finger to go to another district and so on. My problem was that I knew two gestures, so I could only get

to two places—Rosebank and back."

The most sensitive and potentially charged gestures fall into the rich and varied field of somatic slurs, the business of insulting people. So obscure are some cultures' slights that those uninitiated into the silent language won't have a clue they're being slandered—probably just as well. Among Jews, pointing to the palm effectively spells "bullshit"; it's like saying "grass will grow on my palm before what I am hearing comes true." When a Frenchman takes to playing an imaginary flute, he's not doing his version of air guitar; he's saying "Your talk is boring me to death."

Some of the most derogatory movements are also, seemingly, the most mundane. In Southeast Asia, pointing your foot at another person is the equivalent of spitting in his face. To a Thai, "it would be the most grievous insult possible." And according to Flavio de Moura Srivastava, a resident of Rio's Copacabana district, "In Brazil, when you hit your open palm on top of your closed fist, for sure that means that someone is

screwed." Since the fist slap has a similar meaning in Italy and Chile, among other places, beware of killing time with mindless palm slapping.

Even being a southpaw can get you into trouble. The left hand is taboo when greeting someone or presenting gifts in India, Southeast Asia or the Middle East; it's considered the unclean one because it traditionally has been used as the official Charmin hand. Ditto for family-style dinners, where food is plucked from the community bowl using strictly the right hand.

There is one gesture that seems to translate across cultures and the world, and may qualify as the most universal of signals, understood from the streets of Milwaukee to the cobblestone courts of ancient Rome—where Caligula supposedly used it to scandalize visitors. It boasts a colorful coterie of nicknames—the bird, *digitus impudicus*, the finger, various equivalents in different cultures—but it still means pretty much the same thing: someone is a firm believer in direct communication. ☺

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