

UNIVERSITY OF ATHENS
ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

A WORLD OF GESTURES

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GESTURES FROM DIFFERENT CULTURES

Can you guess what the following gesture from Japan means?



This Japanese gesture means "angry."

Can you guess what the following gesture from France means?



This French gesture means "I don't believe you."

Can you guess what the following gesture from Iran means?



The Iran gesture is extremely obscene, and means roughly "screw you."

BOW



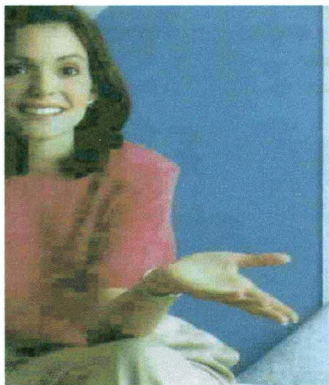
In Japan, the forwardness of one's bow reflects status; e.g., those higher in status bow less deeply to those lower in status. It is considered bad form for westerners to bow too deeply to lower status Japanese. In the Muslim world, the *body kowtow*--in which one kneels down and touches the ground with the forehead--is used in prayer to show humility before the deity.

TONGUE-SHOW



In Tibet and southern China, a brief *tongue-tip show* is used to show, "I didn't mean it"

PALM-UP



In North Africa, cradling one hand in the other with both in the palm-up position means, "I don't understand". In Saudi Arabia, the *palms up* gesture--made with the upper arms held inward against the sides of the body, and the forearms extended and held forward, horizontally-- is a religious sign imploring the deity to witness a user's nonverbal statement, "I swear!." This Saudi cue incorporates the pancultural humility of the raised, supinated human hand.

HEAD-TILT-SIDE



" In Spain, tilting the head sideways and resting the cheek in the palm of the hand is a deliberate signal which says Sissy!" .

Here are five gestures common in the U.S.A. and the English-speaking portions of Canada which may confuse newcomers to North America.



The "come here" gesture:

With the palm up, the forefinger wiggled at the person summoned.

This gesture is rarely made to a superior, but is commonly used among peers, or in summoning service personnel (such as a waiter or porter). It is also sometimes used in sexual situations, when it is archaically referred to as a "come hither" gesture. It is confusing to some foreigners, since most of the world uses a full-hand scooping motion to summon a person.

The peace sign (also known as "V for victory"):

With the palm out, forefinger and index fingers are pointed upwards and split into the shape of a "V."



This sign achieved its greatest popularity in North America during the 1960s, when it came to signify "peace." Winston Churchill popularized it in the U.K. earlier, as the "V for victory" sign during the Second World War.

The meaning of this sign does not change in the U.S.A. if it is accidentally done backwards (with the palm in rather than out). However, it becomes an obscene gesture in the U.K. when reversed in this manner. English-speaking Canadians may also recognize this meaning.

In a contemporary business setting, it is more likely to be used for its "V for victory" meaning.



Thumps up:

With an outstretched fist, the thumb is extended straight up.

"Thumbs up" as a positive gesture quickly gained popularity in the U.S.A., especially as a visual signal in noisy environments. Pilots unable to shout "All's well!" or "Ready!" over the noise of their engines used it frequently. With a slight backwards

tilt, this gesture is used for hitchhiking. However, in most of the Middle East and parts of Africa (notably Nigeria), this symbol can be obscene. In Japan, the thumb is considered the fifth digit; a raised thumb will order five of something!

The "A-OK" sign:

With the palm out, the thumb and forefinger are curled into a circle, while the other fingers are extended upwards.



While this means "all's well" in North America, in France it signifies "zero" or "nothing," and in Denmark or Italy it can be taken as an insult. In Brazil, Guatemala and Paraguay, it is considered very obscene.



Pointing:

A single outstretched finger (usually the index finger, sometimes the thumb) to designate an object or person.

Although "it's not polite to point," children - and many adults - frequently do. Pointing at objects is not considered rude, and useful for foreign nationals who don't know the name of something. Pointing at people is not polite, perhaps because of its use in court, to point out wrongdoers. In many cultures, pointing is done with a toss of the head, a thrust of the chin, or even a pursing of the lips. In Asia, the entire open hand is used, except in Malaysia, where the thumb is preferred.