

Reading 5

THE POWER OF GESTURES

Humans have created thousands of expressive gestures to accompany and enrich the spoken word. Although the act of gesticulating is universal, the messages that gestures convey are uniquely cultural—and are often misinterpreted by people from other cultures. The following passage, written by Roger Axtell, describes the amazing power of human gestures and expressions and illustrates the concept of symbolic language found in Chapter 3 of Sociology and You.

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. 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 [reading] 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.

An American teenager was hitch-hiking 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 hitch-hiking (thumb extended upward) is considered a very rude signal.

Conversely, gestures can be fun, impulsive, and irresistible:

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.

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 10 months old, paralleling hearing infants who begin trying out sounds that evolve into spoken language.

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Some anthropologists divide our actions and gestures into three broad categories: instinctive, coded and acquired. When a baby laughs in response to stimuli or sucks on a nipple, such actions are clearly instinctive. Coded or technical gestures operate via pre-established agreement, such as those used by firemen, TV directors or mariners. (Sign language, including the manual alphabet, is a rich and varied example of coded gestures.)

Since we use these acquired gestures unconsciously, it behooves us to become more conscious of what we are signaling and how those signals may be misinterpreted. Each society has its own rules for gestures. Here's just one 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 their *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 them 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.

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.

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*."

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."

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.

...[C]ommunications expert, Mario Pei, once estimated that humans can produce up to 700,000 different physical signs. [Pioneer kinesics researcher Ray] 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

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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 bold-face type or italics, she says. “They are like the maestro’s baton to each musician in the ensemble.”

Roger E. Axtell, *Gestures—The Do’s and Taboos of Body Language Around the World*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1991), pp. 7-10.