

Nonverbal Communication

Gestures around the world

Submitted by Shinobu Imai
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I. Introduction to Gestures

I was interested in gestures because I found the American ones are very different from Japanese ones. I have heard that before, so I've already known about some things. For example, the gesture which means "come" in Japan doesn't mean that in America; it means "go away". This is a well-known gesture, so many people are aware of it. Therefore, I want to learn more specific ones which are different in other countries.

Then, when do people use gestures? Generally speaking, gestures are helpful when talking with others who have different cultures and languages. Actually, when speaking another language, we use hands or arms more compared to when we are speaking our mother tongue. This is because we can make up the information which we can't tell by speaking. In addition, people use gestures when they can't or don't want to speak as their signs. Everyone can understand the meaning, so they are very convenient. On the other hand, as I stated, we have to remember that the gestures are different in each country so that we can avoid misunderstanding one another.

II. Important Japanese Gestures

The most well-known and important Japanese gesture is bowing. Japanese people often bow when they meet somebody. It is very important especially in business, so the Japanese have made it a rule to bow since they were children. In Japan, all students have to stand up, bow, and sit down before the classes begin. I did that for 12 years. I didn't know why I had to bow before class, but it was a rule. It is said that bowing was from China.

People convey that they will obey you by this gesture. In Japan, people should respect elder people, so this is important.

Another important gesture is to join the palms together. When I was a child, I was told to do that before eating meals. I don't have to do it now, but instead of that, I say "Itadaki masu". English has no phrases like this, because it came from Buddhism. The way of thinking of Buddhism is that we can live for the sake of other living things. Therefore, Japanese people should appreciate them by doing this gesture or saying that phrase.

There are other important gestures that have different meaning in the America. These are the gestures for "come" and "go away". If you want someone to come, you should turn your palm down and scratch. However, this gesture means "go away" in America. If Americans want someone to come, they turn their palm up and wave it to themselves. This is rude in Japan. We shouldn't do that in Japan. Then, if Japanese people want someone to go away, they turn their hand down and wave it to him or her. So, for Americans, this may be complicated. I have experience with this. I wanted my friend, who is from America, to come, and I used that gesture in Japan. In that situation, he had no choice to come, however, he didn't move at that time. He was confused then. He wanted to come closer to me, but my gesture meant "go away" in America. So, I explained the confusing gesture to him. After that, he did that gesture in Japan. He had never used it before when he wanted me to come closer to him, so I couldn't move. I didn't think he used it. I thought it was a complicated thing.

III. Important American Gestures

I found Americans more often shake hands than I expected. I think shaking hands is the most common gesture. When my friend introduced his friend to me, I had baggage in my both hands. In America, people usually shake hands when they meet their friends ,even when they meet for the first time. I forgot it, and we couldn't shake hands. Then, he pushed my elbow with his. I couldn't understand at first, but I found that he did that instead of shaking hands. I was surprised a little. I didn't think shaking hands was so important. However, it is important here. This is because when people shake hands, they don't have any weapons. So they imply they are friends by shaking hands.

Another important gesture is used for conveying "good" or "OK" to others. Americans use "thumb up" gesture or they make a circle with their thumb and forefinger (P). These are also used in Japan; however they are not used very often compared to America. However, the circle one means zero in France. So, it is not good there. We have to remember this.

In addition, Americans cross their forefingers and middle fingers when they want to convey "good luck". This gesture means "dirty" in Japan. In China, it means "ten". In Hong Kong, it means "close relationship". This gesture has many meanings. So, it may lead to misunderstandings. We have to be careful when we go to another country.

IV. Gestures From My Interview

I interviewed nine people who are from El Salvador, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Bahrain, America, Korea, Senegal, Spain, and Japan. I asked them these following questions.

1. When you don't understand or know something, what's your gesture?
2. When someone talks to you and you aren't sure that he or she wants to talk to you, you will ask him or her "Me?" to make sure. What's your gesture?
3. Greeting: When you meet someone for the first time, what do you do?
4. Are there any bad gestures in your country?
5. When you say yes, what's your gesture? When you say no, what's your gesture?

A. El Salvador

Veronica (2002) answered them;

1. She moves her eyes or shrugs her shoulders.
2. She puts her hand on her chest.
3. She doesn't use any gestures. She says just "Hi".
4. She raises her middle finger.
5. YES- She nods. NO- She shakes her head side to side.

B. Bulgaria

Stefan (2002) answered them;

1. He sticks his chin out.
2. He points at his chest.
3. He shakes hands.
4. He bends one of his elbows and touches the other arm. (P)
5. YES- He shakes his head side to side. NO- He nods.

C. Cyprus

Silvia (2002) answered them;

1. She knits her eyebrows.
2. She put her hand on her chest.
3. She shakes hands.
4. Nothing.
5. YES- She nods. NO- She shakes her head side to side.

D. Bahrain

Vineeth (2002) answered them;

1. He doesn't remember.
2. He puts his hand on his chest.
3. He joins his palms together. Women especially do this.
4. He raises his middle finger.
5. YES- He shakes his head side to side. NO- He nods.

E. America

Tom (2002) answered them;

1. He shrugs his shoulders.
2. He puts his hand on his chest.
3. He shakes hands.
4. He raises his middle finger.
5. YES- He shakes his head side to side. NO- He nods.

F. Korea

Alicia (2002) answered them;

1. She scratches her hair.
2. She puts her hand on her chest.
3. She bows.
4. Nothing
5. YES- She shakes her head side to side. NO- She nods.

G. Senegal

Moustapha (2002) answered them;

1. He shakes his head from left to right.
2. He touched his ear.
3. He shakes hands and hug and smile.
4. He makes the sound "Chit" with his face disapproval.
5. YES- He shakes his head side to side. NO- He nods.

H. Spain

Floid (2002) answered them;

1. He shrugs his shoulders.
2. He puts his hand on between his chest and his shoulder.
3. He shakes hands and kiss.
4. He raises her middle finger or bends one of his elbows and touches the other arm
5. YES- He shakes his head side to side. NO- He nods.

I. Japan

Takeo (2002) answered them;

1. He tilts his neck.
2. He points his nose with his forefinger.
3. He bows.
4. Nothing.
5. YES- He shakes his head side to side. NO- He nods.

V. Conclusion

I learned there are many gestures around the world. One gesture has many different meanings. Gestures are one of the cultures. I found gestures are interesting because they have backgrounds, like the Japanese bow, and the American handshake. It is interesting to learn them, and the more I learn them, the more helpful it is to understand the culture. So, when we learn a foreign language, we should study the gestures and that background. It is the best way to understand one another when we talk with people from another country.

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APPENDIX I