

Body language (*kinesics*)

This includes body movement, body position, and facial expressions, as well as dress.

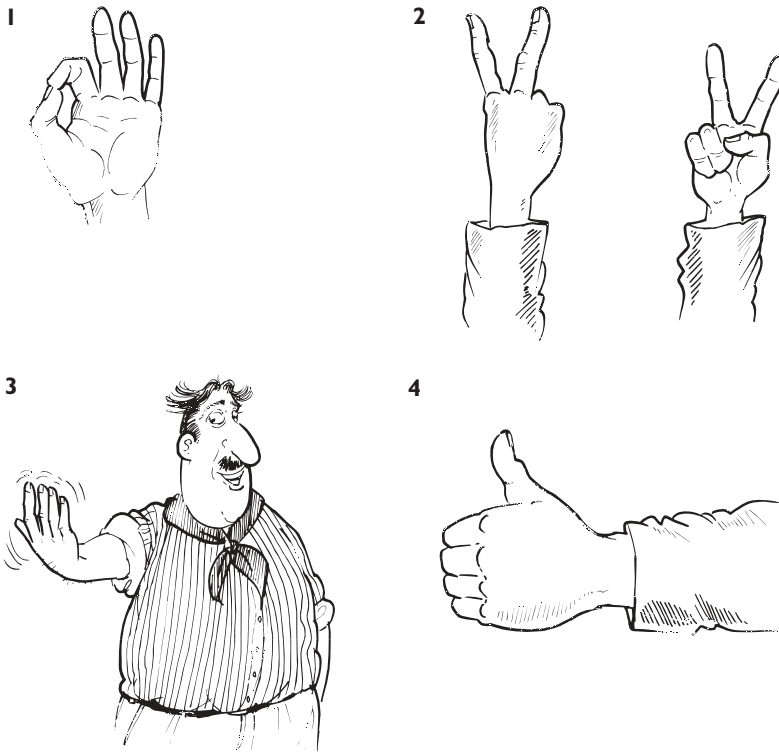


Figure 2.2: Gestures (Axtell 1991)

Exercise 11

Look at the pictures in Figure 2.2, and say what each of the gestures means to you.

Suggested answer

The same gesture can mean different things to people from different cultures, as shown in the following examples.

- 1 In the USA, this means 'A-OK', in France, 'zero', in Japan, 'money', and in Tunisia, 'I'll kill you.'
- 2 In Germany, this means 'two', or victory; in Britain, it means 'victory' if the palm of the hand is facing outwards, but is a rude gesture if the palm is facing inwards.
- 3 In Greece and Italy, this means 'goodbye', in the USA, it means 'come here'.
- 4 In many cultures, this means that everything is fine. In Nigeria and Australia, it is a rude gesture.

Even the way people dress for business differs widely across cultures. One famous example is that of a businessman from continental Europe, wearing a sports jacket and tie, arriving for a meeting in London with his British counterpart wearing a suit, to be greeted with the words, 'Did the airline lose your luggage?' To the British partner, the other man's choice of a sports jacket suggested inappropriate informality. As always, it is not only national cultural differences that are important; corporate culture can differ widely, too, even within the same industry: a Microsoft executive, for example, might be dressed very differently from someone employed by IBM.

Critical incident 1

What do you think is happening here?

Sales representatives from Germany and Britain are in a difficult negotiation. Things are getting tense. Franz Bauer sits upright and is disturbed as Jim Banks relaxes in his chair. Franz Bauer feels that Jim is not taking the negotiation seriously. Jim feels that Herr Bauer is getting more and more aggressive.

Comments

The German's upright position indicates the seriousness with which he is taking the situation, while Jim's posture in the chair indicates his wish to defuse the situation. The two people misinterpret each other's behaviour, and so the situation escalates. In some cultures travellers should be careful to avoid exposing certain parts of their body. In some Arab cultures, for example, the sole of the foot is considered dirty, and should never be shown, so anyone who adopts the local custom of sitting on the floor, for instance, has to take care to avoid doing this.

Eye contact (oculistics)

Critical incident 2

What do you think is happening here?

- 1 A British expatriate living in Germany complains about being stared at in the underground train. 'They stare at me straight in the face as if I've come from another planet', he said.
- 2 A US manager reports problems with Japanese staff. 'I asked them how the project was going and, of course, not much has been done. I was suspicious when they didn't even look me in the eye', he said.

Comments

The length of time that it is acceptable to look directly at someone can also differ from one country to the next. In some cultures, looking someone in the eye is taken as a sign of interest and honesty. In others, however, this can be

seen as a sign of disrespect. Visitors gradually learn not to look too directly at the person they are talking to, in case they are thought to be staring intrusively.

Touch (haptics)

Critical incident 3

What do you think is happening here?

A European manager who came to work in the US subsidiary of an insurance company was pleased to find that he had an excellent secretary. After she had completed yet another piece of work long before the deadline, he went up to her, tapped her on the shoulder, and said, 'Pat, thanks again. It really is such a help that you are here.' Her response was to complain to the manager's boss.

Comments

Where, how, and how often people touch each other varies widely across cultures. Even in the business world there are large variations. In the USA, the actions of some male employees in touching female employees, whether innocently or otherwise, has given rise to law suits for sexual harassment.

When and how often people shake hands varies widely, too. A group of British investment bankers felt that their German colleagues shook hands excessively, and advised a British colleague going to a meeting in Germany that they should 'shake hands with anything that moves'. In other cultures, hugging or kissing are more appropriate forms of greeting, even in a business context.

Body distance (proxemics)

Critical incident 4

What do you think is happening here?

Julio, an Argentinian student who is keen to improve his English, is attending a course in Business English. He often stays behind after the class to ask the British lecturer, Jim Ford, some questions. When Julio approaches, Mr Ford looks uneasy and begins to move away. Julio wonders whether Mr Ford doesn't like him, if he is asking too many questions, or whether students are not supposed to ask questions after class.

Comments

How close you get to another person when talking to them differs widely across cultures. Research has shown that in the USA the 'comfort zone' is about an arm's length. In Latin America, the tendency is for people to get closer to each other than people, for instance, in the UK. The fact that this is a tendency doesn't, of course, mean that all British people do this. Julio's

Turn-taking

Critical incident 6

What do you think is happening here?

Researchers looking into intercultural communication asked an Italian and a Japanese businessman to find out particular information from each other. They interviewed them separately after the conversation. The Italian said ‘He seemed like a nice enough guy, but he never really said anything’; the Japanese said ‘He was very friendly, but he never gave me a chance to speak.’

Comments

The way that turn-taking works in a conversation, and the role of silence, also differ between cultures. In some it is acceptable, and even desirable to interrupt, whereas in some others it is normal to wait for your partner to finish speaking before making your point. In some other cultures, a period of silence between contributions is accepted as the norm.

Trompenaars illustrates this in Figure 2.4.

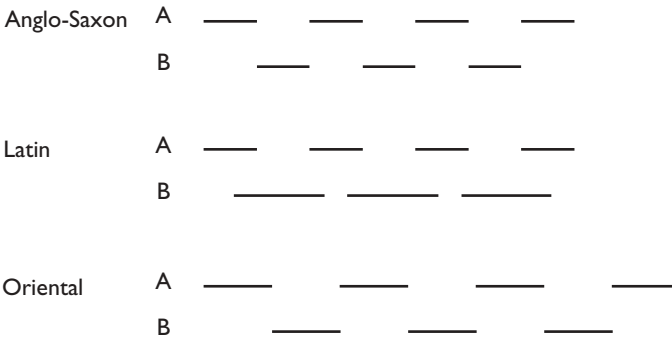


Figure 2.4: Turn-taking (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997)

Communication style

Context

Critical incident 7

What do you think is happening here?

The US marketing manager of a major car producer was finding it increasingly difficult to work in Japan. In meetings, the Japanese colleagues hardly ever said anything. When they were asked if they agreed to his suggestions