



WHAT DO THEY MEAN BY *THAT* ???

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Books have been written on it, courses taught, articles penned. "It" is variously called sign language, hand gestures, body language and it is both universally used and universally misunderstood.

Not long ago a picture was printed and broadcast around the world showing an Iraqi man whacking a poster of Saddam Hussein with the bottom of his shoe. Many observers commented that this sort of insulting action would have been unthinkable only a few weeks earlier. But the full import of the act was seldom explained. In the Arabic world it is improper and rude to show another person the sole of one's shoe, since the soles are the lowest and possibly dirtiest part of the body. In essence, the man was communicating a very specific attitude, saying "You are lower than the dirt beneath my feet!"

There are other examples of widely known body actions that convey messages that are more subtle than most know. For example, it is well known that in Japan people bow to each other as a greeting and a sign of respect. But the ritual has complexities that most Americans are unaware of. For example, the degree to which one inclines the torso depends on the relationship between the people involved and the situation in which the bows are exchanged. Foreigners may think that a deep bow best conveys their respect and should not attempt more than a slight bow to show courtesy, and should never bow in jest.

Since we are talking about greetings, how about handshakes? They come in three varieties: gentle, firm and finger crunching. Handshakes can be one handed for formality, or two handed for extra warmth or intimidation. They can include back patting, bear hugging, cheek kissing and elbow grabbing. Probably the most passionate greetings are found in Latin America where the greeting, un abrazo (embrace), not begins not with a handshake, but an arms open hug. This can catch the uninitiated off guard, so do not forget to move your head to the left or right or you will smash noses!

These examples can go on and on, but the bottom line is that we use hand or body gestures in our daily lives, without even thinking, whether it be the diner getting the attention of a waiter or taxi driver, a business person gesticulating to drive home a point how about the ground attendant guiding an airline pilot into their intended gate at the airport!

Think of the gestures one sees while driving. They range from the hand wave that thanks a driver for allowing you into a line of cars to expressions of road rage that make use of a certain appendage in a way that is seldom misunderstood anyplace in the world.

Anthropologists, you may not be surprised to hear, divide these unspoken verbal communications into three extremely broad categories: instinctive, coded and acquired. Instinctive gestures are those that we perform unconsciously, such as

reacting to a dubious statement by raising our eyebrows suspiciously. Coded gestures are created by "pre-established agreement" to establish uniformity of communications and understanding. People who use coded gestures include referees, umpires and users of American Sign Language, which, by the way, is the third most popular language in the United States after English and Spanish! Finally, acquired gestures are the ones that have no known origins, no commonly identified purpose and are the most likely to communicate a sentiment of which we are consciously unaware. Examples in this third category include folded arms (defensiveness) and hands clasped behind head (judgment of what another person is saying).

What does this all mean for people who travel abroad? It means simply that it pays to be informed about the communication patterns and meanings of every country you visit. This will help you avoid embarrassing social and business gaffes and from wild misinterpretations of others' gestures on the basis of home country standards.

If you arrive in a country without having done your homework, it may pay to keep your hands at your sides and your feet planted firmly on the floor. After all, the "thumbs up" sign that means "way to go" in America will in some parts of the world like Australia communicate rude and unappreciated sexual signal.