

Manners And Body Language Across Cultures

What is 'body language'?

Body language refers to the kinds of cultural differences in the ways in which people use their body. But sometimes it's very easy to [misread](#) cues. For example, there was a woman I know who was giving examples of active listening as a mode of being a good teacher. And active listening means, you know, listening all the way. So she had her students, who were all teachers, role play. One would be talking and the other would be listening. The one who was listening was sitting down, the one who was talking was standing up. The listener in one case, was like this. Now most of us have had a little bit of pop psychology, and most of us believe that when we have our hands crossed in front of us, it means we are resistant to that idea, we are rejecting that idea. And, in fact, when the woman who was seated was [confronted](#) about how resistant she was, she says "no, I'm not resistant, that's not true at all, but in Vietnam, when we cross our hands, it means that we're not [fiddling](#) and [fidgeting](#) and that we are giving you our entire attention." So it was really important in that class, to show that there are different signals, that there are no universal body languages.

How do greetings differ among cultures?

I talked to a man and he had gone to New Zealand, and he was in the airport, and he was so shocked because he saw a man waiting for a passenger to [deplane](#). The passenger came out and he was all dressed in a suit, he was carrying a [briefcase](#). And yet when they greeted, they pressed their heads together and their noses together, and he did not know that that is the Maori form of [greeting](#). That is how they greet one another, but there is a deeper meaning. They are actually [inhaling](#) their essence. And it is very much related to what we used to call the Eskimo kiss. But they are really inhaling. In Hawaii, the word that we take as a negative called howly, meaning Americans, and it is kind of negative, but it really means not of the same breath. Because they used to greet that way too. They would inhale one another. I have had Filipino students say that they have gone to see their grandmother, or their grandmother for the first time, back in the Philippines. You know what she [sniffed](#) me. And it is the same thing. You learn a lot when you inhale the other person. You learn not so much about hygiene, you learn that too, you learn also about eating habits. Other places they [bow](#). Especially Japanese. This weekend I was at the Japanese-American Museum and I [ran into](#) some friends, who actually are Korean. The parents of a friend. And when they saw me, they did the bowing. Other people kiss. Kiss on one cheek, kiss on two cheeks. Sometimes kiss on three cheeks. And you have to say, are they a two cheek or a three cheek person?

How do I know how to greet someone of another culture?

I've had to learn, and I always hesitate and wait and see if a person's [leaning](#) forward. You have to understand too that customs change. When I was a [youngster](#) women did not shake hands and a man would only shake hands with a woman if she extended her hand first. Nowadays women shake hands with women. And then there's the social (kiss, kiss), which became very popular when Jackie Kennedy was first lady because she was very continental, so she knew about the protocols in Europe. So it's sort of [tricky](#), sometimes ask and just take your chances, and it's better to have less body contact than more.

How do signs of affection differ among cultures?

In our society we're so homophobic, that if you see two women holding hands, or two men holding hands, you just assume that it is a homosexual relationship, but most other parts of the world it's just the opposite, and I've had students from China in particular tell me how [upset](#) they are like two girls walking hand in hand, and then they get upset because then they're accused of having a homosexual relationship, and no matter how they feel about it or not, it's just such a reversed kind of interpretation.

Which American gestures might be interpreted as obscene by other cultures?

I laughed the first time that President Clinton was nominated because this was at the convention and at the very end he went like this. And I thought, "Oh Lord, we've just

lost some votes in the Middle East” because this is an obscene gesture. In South America, this “A-okay” is an obscene gesture. I had a student, she was from Afghanistan—she was brilliant—and she went to the office at school to see if she had passed the test, and the teacher, and the staff member recognized by her name that she was not American-born, and she wanted to let her know that she had passed the test. So she went like this to her and the girl was so [devastated](#) she ran home and cried to her brother. He laughed because he had been here longer, he understood. She was just trying to [convey](#) that she had passed the test with [flying colors](#). Pointing is very bad; I have had numerous people tell me. One in particular was a girl who worked in one of the gift shops in..., at Disneyland and a family came in, I think she said from Japan. They wanted to know where the [restroom](#) was and she said, it's over there and they became so [enraged](#) because pointing was also an obscene gesture. As this is also an obscene gesture. When I was teaching for a while English as a Second Language, I became so self-conscious of my gestures because the child..., the students were from all over and it was so easy to offend them. I tried not to use my hands which I ordinarily do. You just have to be very careful.

Why should I be careful when looking people from other cultures in the eye?

Americans believe that if you [mean](#) what you say, you look a person in the eye, and if somebody avoids contact, we interpret that very negatively. So, this is just one example of a teacher calling one of her child..., students up to talk to her and to explain something to the child. The child was [misbehaving](#) and it was a girl, and the girl was from Mexico, and the entire time that the girl was in front of her, the girl looked down. And the teacher [scolded](#) her and said, "Look me in the eye!" And the girl didn't, and she went home and she told her mother. And this mother was very intelligent and came to school the next day and said, "My daughter did not look at you because she was paying you respect. She has never even looked her grandparents in the eye. And that is a sign of disrespect if she were to look you in the eye." Well, once the teacher understood that, she understood that. So, but we impose our beliefs on top of that. Now among teenagers, if you [stare](#) somebody in the eye, that's an invitation to violence. It's sort of like daring them. It's called "mad-dogging". And if you go to Universal Studio's Universal City Walk, there's a sign that said "no [undue](#) staring". So, they understand that by staring, you're just sort of challenging another person.

How does listening posture differ among cultures?

Africans and African-Americans will often look down when they are listening, and look up when they are talking. We do the reverse, we look when we're listening and look away when we're talking, and so they're just opposite, so if somebody looks away or looks down does not mean necessarily that they're disrespecting you or ignoring you, because if you're talking and I am looking down, if I'm talking to you and you're looking down I would think "oh she's ignoring me, she's [tuning me out](#)".