

Body Language and Cultural Customs

What Your Body Says Without Words

Every day we communicate with other people in many different ways. Of course, we use words – but our body also sends messages. The way we move, smile, touch, or even stand can tell others how we feel or what we think. This type of communication is called **body language**. What is interesting is that body language is not the same in every country. In fact, some gestures that are perfectly normal in one culture can be rude or confusing in another.

Take smiling as an example. In many Western countries, such as the United States or Australia, people often smile at strangers on the street. A smile is a way of being friendly and open. However, in some other cultures – for example, in parts of Eastern Europe or East Asia – people do not usually smile at people they do not know. This does not mean they are unfriendly. It simply means that a smile has a different **social meaning** there.

Nodding your head is another example. In most countries, nodding up and down means 'yes', and shaking it from side to side means 'no'. But in Greece and Bulgaria, it is the opposite! Nodding there actually means 'no'. You can imagine how confusing this could be if you visited these countries for the first time.

Pointing is also something that changes from culture to culture. In many Western countries, it is normal to point at something or someone with your index finger (the finger next to your thumb). However, in parts of Southeast Asia and the Middle East, pointing with your index finger is considered very rude. Instead, people use their whole hand or their thumb to indicate direction.

Personal space is another important aspect of body language. Everyone has a kind of invisible '**comfort zone**' around their body. When someone enters this zone without permission, we often feel uncomfortable. The size of this zone depends on the culture and also the relationship between people. In Northern Europe and North America, people usually prefer more personal space – around 60 to 90 centimetres in a typical conversation. In many Middle Eastern or Latin American countries, people are comfortable standing much closer to each other.

Finally, let's think about the soles of your feet and hands. In Thailand, showing the sole of your foot to someone is considered very impolite because the foot is seen as the lowest and 'dirtiest' part of the body. Similarly, when giving something to another person in Japan, you should always use both hands. Using only your left hand can be seen as disrespectful.

The key lesson here is simple: when you travel or communicate with people from different cultures, try to learn a little about their customs. What feels natural to you might be strange – or even offensive – to someone else. Being aware of these differences is an important step towards better communication and understanding.

A. Answer the questions in full sentences.

1. What is 'body language'? Give your own definition based on the text.
2. Why might a person from Eastern Europe seem unfriendly to an American tourist? What is the real reason for the difference?
3. What does nodding mean in Greece and Bulgaria? How is this different from most other countries?
4. Why is it important to use both hands when giving something to a person in Japan?
5. According to the text, what is the main lesson about communicating across cultures?

B. True, False, or Not Mentioned? Write T, F, or NM.

Read the sentences. Write T (True), F (False), or NM (Not Mentioned) on the line.

1. In most countries, nodding your head up and down means 'yes'. _____
2. In Thailand, it is polite to show the sole of your shoe to a teacher. _____
3. People in the Middle East prefer to stand further apart than Northern Europeans. _____
4. In Australia, smiling at strangers on the street is completely normal. _____
5. In parts of Southeast Asia, pointing with the index finger is considered rude. _____
6. Body language courses are popular in Japan. _____

C. Match the words with their definitions.

Match each word or phrase (1–6) with the correct definition (a–f).

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|------------------------|--|
| 1. body language _____ | a. the empty space around a person that they feel belongs to them |
| 2. gesture _____ | b. a movement of the hand or head that communicates a message |
| 3. comfort zone _____ | c. to show where something is using your finger or hand |
| 4. to point _____ | d. communication through movement, facial expressions, and posture |
| 5. offensive _____ | e. likely to upset or insult someone |
| 6. custom _____ | f. a traditional way of behaving in a particular society |

D. Fill in the gaps.

Use the words in the box to complete the sentences. There are two extra words you do not need.

comfort zone | indicate | offensive | smiling | custom
social meaning | gesture | unfriendly | soles | polite

1. Bowing when you meet someone for the first time is an important _____ in Japan.
2. In Thailand, showing the _____ of your feet to another person is very rude.
3. A thumbs-up can have different _____ in different parts of the world.
4. If someone stands too close to you, they have entered your _____.
5. In the Middle East, pointing with your left hand can be considered _____.
6. When people don't smile at strangers, it doesn't mean they are _____.
7. Instead of pointing with one finger, people often use their whole hand to _____ direction.
8. A _____ is a movement of the body that communicates a message.

Follow-up Discussion Questions

- Have you ever experienced a misunderstanding because of body language or cultural differences? What happened?
- How do you usually greet people you know well? How about people you meet for the first time?
- Do you think it is more important to learn the language of a country you are visiting, or its customs and body language? Why?
- In your experience, do people in your country prefer more or less personal space compared to what the text describes?
- Can you think of any gestures or customs from your own culture that might surprise a foreign visitor?
- The text says that smiling has a different 'social meaning' in different cultures. Can you think of other examples of things that have different meanings in different countries?
- Do you think social media and globalisation are making body language more similar around the world? Why or why not?
- Is it always necessary to follow the customs of the country you are visiting? Are there any situations where it might be acceptable not to?