

CHAPTER**2****Reading****Cultural Diversity and Conformity****Successful Cross-Cultural Communication**

*Any word, gesture, image, sound, physical object, event, or element of the natural world can serve as a symbol as long as all the people involved in the communication recognize that it carries a particular meaning. While sociologists consider symbols as central to a society's culture, unfortunately, symbols are not all universally understood. Different cultures use symbols in very different ways. For example, while direct eye contact is generally accepted as showing attentiveness among Americans, in many cultures it is considered rude or disrespectful. As the global village becomes smaller, it is increasingly important to understand these subtle differences between cultures. In his book *Nonverbal Behavior in Interpersonal Relations*, Richard McCroskey shares some examples.*

People from different parts of the world differ substantially in their gesturing. The biggest differences are in the use of emblems . . . [or] gestures that can substitute for language equivalents. Cultures have very different emblems that they use to communicate the same meaning. Some emblems are shared by two cultures, but they represent different meanings. Also, there are emblems employed by one culture for which another culture may have no equivalent, and vice versa.

The use of our hands can mean many different things in different cultures. For example, an Ethiopian puts one finger to her or his lips to show silence when motioning to a child, but uses four fingers when motioning silence to an adult: Ethiopians consider it disrespectful to use only one finger when motioning to an adult. In the United States, we use only one finger to the lips for both children and adults. The OK sign references totally different meanings in different cultures. In Japan, it references money. It could represent female genitalia if a man uses it in front of a woman he is attempting to seduce. When directed toward a man, it can be an indication about what the person making the gesture thinks of his masculinity. Therefore, the OK emblem can be interpreted many different ways. It depends on the culture. It is also clear that this one emblem could create many communication misunderstandings across cultures.

According to Helmut Morsbach (*Essential Japanese: A Guidebook to Language and Culture*, Penguin USA, 1990), in Japan the little finger pointed straight up can refer to a girlfriend, wife, or mistress. Rapidly crossing the index fingers refers to a fight. Lastly, licking an index finger and then drawing it over an eyebrow is a way of suggesting that someone is a liar. Morsbach says that instead of the latter gesture, the word “mayutsuba” can be uttered in the appropriate context, which enables a Japanese person to imply lying and deception without saying the equivalent of the word liar.

The use of the head often creates communication misunderstandings. In some parts of the East and parts of Africa, a person nods her or his head

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when in disagreement and shakes her or his head when in agreement, whereas in the United States we do the reverse. . . .

In Japan, the head nod may only mean continued attention, not necessarily agreement. You might find that a Japanese person totally disagrees with you, but he or she will nod out of respect until you have finished speaking. . . . In Korea, shaking one's head from side to side means "I don't know." In North American culture, shrugging one's shoulders means "I don't know."

. . . The handshake as a form of greeting is a Western import to Japan. Cosmopolitan Japanese and Americans often shake hands and bow simultaneously.

In Kuwait, the more westernized men will shake hands with other men in a greeting situation. A few Kuwaiti men will shake hands with Western women, but many will not. They are simply not used to interacting with Western women. A more traditional greeting between men in Kuwait follows this pattern: "Men grasp each other's right hand, placing the left hand on the other's right shoulder, and exchanging kisses on each cheek" (Morrison, et al. 1994). Imagine how comfortable American men feel when approached with the traditional Kuwaiti greeting. When greeting or eating in Saudi Arabia, only use the right hand, even if you are left-handed. The left hand is reserved for hygiene duties and should never be used in eating or greeting another person.

In Romania, shaking hands occurs all the time, when greeting, meeting, leaving, and acknowledging. No matter how many times a Romanian sees another person during the day, there is always a handshake exchanged. A man will wait for the woman to extend her hand before shaking it. Occasionally, more traditional Romanian men kiss a woman's hand.

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UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOU READ After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions in the space below.

1. Why is it important to understand the gestures of other cultures? _____

2. What might happen if an American put one finger to his or her lips to indicate silence to an Ethiopian adult? _____

ACTIVITY Interview someone who has lived in or visited another country to learn about some of that country's gestures. Also, present some American gestures, such as shaking hands or giving the thumbs-up, to determine their meaning, if any, in the other country. Write a brief paragraph explaining what you learn.