

# The Three Most Common Cross-Cultural Gestures

Allan and Barbara Pease

## 1. The Ring

This gesture was popularised in the USA during the early nineteenth century by the newspapers that were starting a craze or using initials to shorten common phrases. There are any different views about what the initials 'OK' originally stood for, some believing it stood for 'all correct' which was regularly misspelled as 'oil korrekt', while others say that it means the opposite of 'knock-out' that is, KO.



'OK' to a Westerner,  
'money' to a Japanese,  
'zero' to the French  
insulting to the Turks and Brazilians

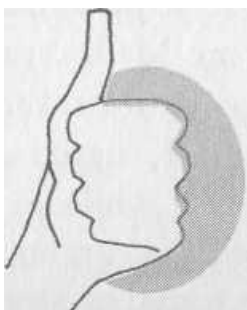
Another popular theory is that it is an abbreviation of 'Old Kinderhook', from the birthplace of a nineteenth-century American president who used the initials as a campaign slogan. It's obvious that the ring itself represents the letter 'O' in the 'OK' signal. The 'OK' meaning is common to all English-speaking countries and its meaning is fast spreading everywhere due to American television and movies, but it has other origins and meanings in certain places. For example, in France and Belgium it also means 'zero' or 'nothing'. In a Paris restaurant one evening, the waiter showed us to our table and asked, 'Is the table OK?' We flashed him the OK signal and he responded, 'Well, if you don't like it here we'll find you another table...' He had interpreted the OK signal as meaning 'zero' or 'worthless' - in other words, he thought we had communicated that we didn't like the table.

*Use the 'OK' gesture to tell a French person their cooking is wonderful and they'll probably throw you out.*

## 2. The Thumb-Up

In places that have strong British influence, such as Australia, the USA, South Africa, Singapore and New Zealand, the *Thumb-Up* gesture has three meanings: it's commonly used by hitch-hikers who are thumbing a lift; it is an OK signal; and when the thumb is jerked sharply upwards it becomes an insult, meaning 'up yours' or 'sit on this'. In some countries, such as Greece, the thumb is thrust forward and its main meaning is 'get stuffed'!

As we have already demonstrated, when Europeans count from one to five, they use the *Thumb-Up* to mean 'one', the index finger becomes 'two', whereas most English-speaking people count 'one' on the index finger and 'two' on the middle finger. In this case the *Thumb-Up* will represent the number 'five'.



This can mean 'Good', 'One',  
'Up yours' or 'Sit on this'  
depending where you live

### 3. The V-Sign

This sign is common in Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain and carries an 'up yours' interpretation. Winston Churchill popularised the 'V for victory' sign during the Second World War, but his two-fingered version was done with the palm facing out, whereas the palm faces towards the speaker for the obscene insult version.



This can mean 'two' to an American, 'Victory' to a German and 'Up yours' in Britain

Its origin can be traced back centuries to the English archers who used these two fingers to fire their arrows. It was considered the ultimate degradation for a skilled archer to be captured and, rather than be executed, have his two shooting fingers removed. The two-fingered V sign quickly became used as a goading signal in battle by the British to show their enemies 'I've still got my shooting fingers.' In parts of Europe, however, the palm-facing-in version still means 'victory' so an Englishman who uses it to tell a German 'up yours' could leave the German thinking he'd won a prize.

### To Touch or Not to Touch?

*Allan and Barbara Pease*

Dr Ken Cooper also studied touch frequencies in a number of countries and recorded the following results for touches per hour - Puerto Rico 180, Paris 110, Florida 2, London 0. From our research and personal experience, here's a ready reckoner of places where it's acceptable to touch or not:

#### **Don't touch**

Germany  
Japan  
England  
USA & Canada  
Australia & New Zealand  
Portugal  
Northern Europe  
Scandinavia

#### **Do Touch**

Middle East  
Parts of Asia  
India  
Turkey  
France  
Italy  
Greece  
Spain

Pease, Allan and Barbara, *The definitive book of body language*, Australia: Pease International, 2004, print.

# Gestures in practice

## **True-Life Story: The Lying Job Applicant**

we were interviewing a man who was explaining why he had quit his last job. He told us that there had been insufficient future opportunity available to him and that it was a hard decision to leave as he got on well with all the staff there. A female interviewer said she had an 'intuitive feeling' that the applicant was lying and that he had negative feelings about his former boss, despite the applicant's continual praising of his boss. During a review of the interview on slow-motion video, we noticed that each time the applicant mentioned his former boss a split-second sneer appeared on the left side of his face. Often these contradictory signals will flash across a person's face in a fraction of a second and are missed by an untrained observer. We telephoned his former boss and discovered the applicant had been fired for dealing drugs to other staff members. As confidently as this applicant had tried to fake his body language, his contradictory micro-gestures gave the game away to our female interviewer.

The key here is being able to separate the real gestures from fake ones so a genuine person can be distinguished from a liar or impostor. Signals like pupil dilation, sweating and blushing cannot be consciously faked but exposing the palms to try to appear honest is easily learned.

## **Italian Without Words: Using Hand Gestures in Conversation**

By Dianne Hales

Italians, with their innate passion to communicate, have never let words get in the way. In Italy the shrug of a shoulder, the flip of a wrist or the lift of an eyebrow says more than a sacco di parole (sack of words).

Gestures are to Italian conversation what punctuation is to writing. Hands become exclamation points, periods, commas, question marks. Italian gestures are a huge part of what makes an Italian, well, an ITALIAN!

Even before the law banned talking on cell phones while driving, Italians would pull over to the side of the road because they couldn't drive and carry on a conversation. In the old days of telephone booths, Italians would step outside so they would have space to express themselves fully.

[<http://www.gonomad.com/1766-italian-without-words-using-hand-gestures-in-conversation>]

## **Italian hand gestures trump deaf sign language**

By William Mager See Hear

In Italy, the local sign language for deaf people isn't legally recognised. But the well-known, expressive hand gestures have their own dictionary and wider appeal, to the frustration of deaf people.

There are many things we associate with Italian culture - espresso coffee, scooters, gelato, expensive designer clothing. But perhaps more central to the Italian character is the way they use their hands to animate their speech.

Whether rubbing thumb and forefinger to signify money, flicking the chin to show how little you care, or even tapping underneath the eye with an index finger to show agreement, gesture is widely used and understood.

Prof Isabella Poggi at Roma Tre University recently formally categorised around 250 gestures in a detailed research paper that also explored the use of rhetoric, irony and context.

She told See Hear, the BBC's programme for the deaf community, that gestures may be more important in Italian culture than in any other. "We inherited the language of gestures from the Greeks," she says. "When the Greeks moved to southern Italy and colonised Naples, the Italians used gestures as a way to communicate without being overheard [but] the gestures continued to have a tradition as a way of communicating."

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[<http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-ouch-26737781>]