

4. Symbols that can be combined in an infinite number of ways to communicate abstract thought is a definition of

- language
- symbolic culture
- communication
- numbers

5. Sociologists would not say that “talk is just talk” because talk

- is more than just talk
- is never finished—some people can go on forever
- is a way that people express themselves
- allows us to build shared understandings of events

6. The sociological significance of language is that it

- consists of words that communicate abstract thought
- provides an endless flow of information
- allows culture to develop
- can be translated from one language to another

7. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis challenges our common sense because it indicates that rather than objects and events forcing themselves into our minds

- we make sense of our world by classifying objects and events
- our language contains ways of perceiving objects and events
- our thought process is based on collective experiences
- we do the perceiving as we navigate our everyday lives

8. Sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel says that his native language, Hebrew, does not have separate words for jam and jelly. When he learned English, he understood the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis better because he

- was able to see the difference between jam and jelly
- learned that they existed
- learned that one comes from trees and the other from bushes
- found out that his native language was wrong

9. Fred thinks of girls as pretty, plain, and ugly. Bob thinks of girls as smart and dumb. Harry thinks of girls as big, just right, and skinny. (Phil just thinks of girls all the time, so we won’t count him.) Fred, Bob, and Harry

- could broaden their categories, and life will be better for them
- will not approve of one another’s girlfriends
- could put their heads together and have a more complete perception of girls
- will have different perceptions of the same girl

# UNIT

## 3.4

### Symbolic Culture: Gestures

#### WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO LEARN?

After you have read this unit, you should be able to

State what gestures are and to what extent they are universal.

In addition to language, we use **gestures**, movements of the body, to communicate with others. Gestures are shorthand ways to convey messages without using words. Although people in every culture of the world use gestures, a gesture’s meaning may change completely from one culture to another. North Americans, for example, communicate a succinct message by raising the middle finger in a short, upward stabbing motion. I wish to stress “North Americans,” for this gesture does not convey the same message everywhere.

I was surprised to find that this particular gesture was not universal. I had internalized it to such an extent that I thought everyone knew what it meant. When I was comparing gestures with friends in Mexico, however, this gesture drew a blank look. After I explained its intended meaning, they laughed and showed me their rudest gesture—placing the hand under the armpit and moving the upper arm up and down. To me, they simply looked as if they were imitating monkeys, but to them the gesture meant “Your mother is a whore”—the worst possible insult in that culture.

Gestures not only facilitate communication but they can also, because they differ around the world, lead to misunderstanding, embarrassment, or worse. One time in Mexico, for example, I raised my hand to a certain height to indicate how tall a child was. My hosts began to laugh. It turned out that Mexicans use three hand gestures to indicate height: one for people, a second for animals, and yet another for plants. They were amused because I had used the plant gesture to indicate the child’s height. (See Figure 3.1.)

**gestures** the ways in which people use their bodies to communicate with one another

**FIGURE 3.1** Gestures to Indicate Height, Southern Mexico

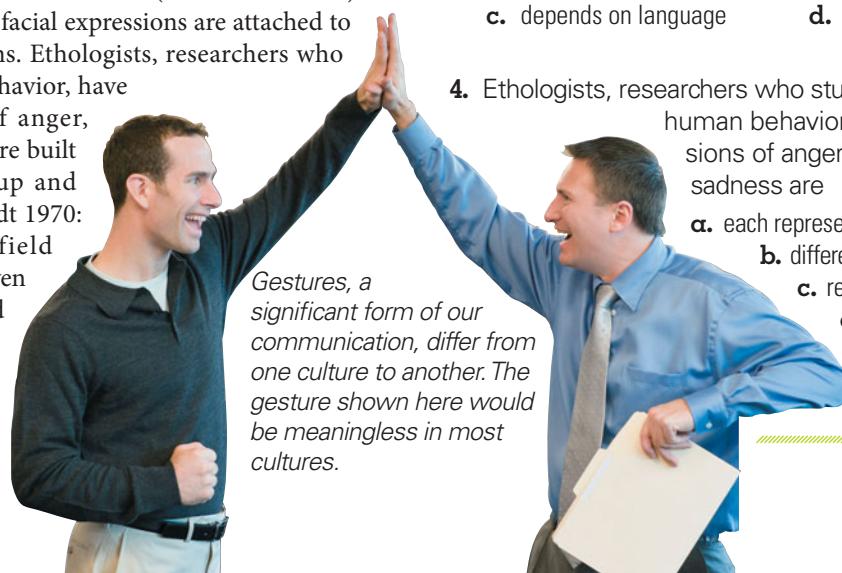


Source: By the author.

To get along in another culture, then, it is important to learn the gestures of that culture. If you don't, you will fail to achieve the simplicity of communication that gestures allow and run the risk of appearing foolish, and possibly offend people. In some cultures, for example, you would provoke deep offense if you were to offer food or a gift with your left hand, because the left hand is reserved for dirty tasks, such as wiping after going to the toilet. Left-handed Americans visiting Arabs, please note!

Suppose for a moment that you are visiting southern Italy. After eating one of the best meals in your life, you are so pleased that when you catch the waiter's eye, you smile broadly and use the standard U.S. "A-OK" gesture of putting your thumb and forefinger together and making a large "O." The waiter looks horrified, and you are struck speechless when the manager asks you to leave. What have you done? Nothing on purpose, of course, but in that culture this gesture refers to a lower rear part of the human body that is not mentioned in polite company (Ekman et al. 1984).

Is it really true that there are no universal gestures? Some anthropologists claim that no gesture is universal. They point out that even nodding the head up and down to indicate "yes" is not universal, that in some parts of the world, such as areas of Turkey, nodding the head up and down means "no" (Ekman et al. 1984). Apparently, though, certain facial expressions are attached to some fundamental emotions. Ethologists, researchers who study biological bases of behavior, have found that expressions of anger, fear, pouting, and sadness are built into our biological makeup and are universal (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1970: 404; Horwitz and Wakefield 2007). They point out that even infants who are born blind and deaf, who have had no chance to *learn* these gestures, express themselves in the same way.



## UNIT 3.4 // TESTING MYSELF

### DID I LEARN IT?

ANSWERS ARE AT THE  
END OF THE CHAPTER

1. Gestures, movements of the body to communicate with others,
  - are more flexible than language
  - go back to the time when people had no language and they had to use their hands to communicate with one another
  - may differ from culture to culture
  - are basically the same from one culture to another
2. The example of the American "A-OK" gesture being used in a restaurant in Italy illustrates that a gesture in one culture that indicates something highly positive
  - must be translated in order to be understood
  - can indicate something highly negative in another culture
  - can have different meaning for men and women
  - almost always indicates something positive in other cultures
3. Nodding the head up and down to indicate "yes"
  - is not universal
  - is universal
  - depends on language
  - communicates different things in different cultures
4. Ethologists, researchers who study biological bases of human behavior, report that expressions of anger, pouting, fear, and sadness are
  - each represented by two basic gestures
  - different from one culture to another
  - related to one another
  - built into our biological makeup and are universal