

Body Language

Article by Elizabeth Kiritani and illustrations by Kiritani Itsuo

When indicating himself, a Japanese will point his index finger directly at his nose, perhaps alluding to his brain. An American will point to his chest, most likely referring to his heart. When I first saw Japanese pointing at their noses in this way, I thought the gesture was crude and offensive, although I cannot explain why.

Communication barriers exist on all levels. Even when we understand words, often our gestures and different cultural values send off signals that cause disastrous misunderstandings.

One such example is the cold impression that is often made by Japanese when they are trying to be just the opposite while communicating in English. Many translate their Japanese conventions for politeness directly into English. The result is that instead of showing their esteem with warmth as would be transmitted in their own society, the native English speaker recoils from the frostiness of their ultra formal English.

Through body language, we are also sending the listener messages, often messages that we never intend. Behavior that may be natural or positive in one country sometimes, without our being aware of it, comes



across as insulting or rude in another.

U.S. President Bill Clinton often sends negative messages to Asian viewers without even knowing it. I have seen him on CNN talking to the press with one hand jauntily shoved into a pocket, leaning against a lectern—a relaxed, cordial attitude from an American's point of view. He is being informal and friendly. In

Japan, to talk to someone with your hands in your pockets is a sign of disrespect and poor upbringing. Unless they have lived abroad for many years, most Japanese don't realize that this standard isn't universal. Imagine the bad notions and images evoked everyday in the CNN-watching Japanese audience.

The acceptable way to talk to someone here in Japan is with your hands straight down at your side or placed lightly on your thighs. Folded arms, hands on hips or behind one's head, as well as weight shifted to one foot or leaning on a desk or chair are offensive.

It took me over ten years to realize this. My Japanese husband had been a host on a TV program introducing the old scenic areas of Tokyo. He is an artist and a free spirit by Japanese standards. He chatted his way through the program admirably, I

thought. Several weeks later, though, a man in his late 20s approached my husband and told him that he had seen the program.

After talking with us for a while he mentioned to Itsuo, "You had your hands in your pockets as you walked around your neighborhood. It gave me an awful impression. Frankly, I didn't think you would be such a nice

person.”

I filed this piece of information. If a young man gets a bad impression from something like that, it's something that does make a difference.

Although such poses often have positive value in the West, hands in the pockets or on the hips send subliminal negative messages that register, even if a Japanese can't always put his finger on the reason why he is getting a bad impression.

Take the famous photograph of General MacArthur posing next to the Showa Emperor during the occupation. MacArthur had his hands on his hips while he was standing next to the Emperor. Even today, many in Japan consider this an insult. I doubt that this was what the General had intended. He was probably just striking another of his dashing poses without realizing the implications.

The necessity of taking one's shoes off inside the home in Japan is fairly well-known. But how many of you understand the reverberations of this particular custom? Foreign businessmen often place their briefcases on the floor of a subway or even casually put a shoe on them. This will send shivers down the spines of most Japanese. Similarly, a woman placing her handbag or day pack on the floor elicits the same response. Here in Japan, this type of behavior is seen as slovenly and unsanitary.

Years ago when I first visited Japan, the Japanese doctor who was guiding my friend and me was mortified because we were walking around the fashionable Ginza area eating ice cream cones. We couldn't understand his pleas for us to either throw them out or go back into the shop while we finished them. From our point of view that's what the cones were for—to walk around with. Unless it's a cherry blossom viewing party, it is still not good form to consume food on the street.

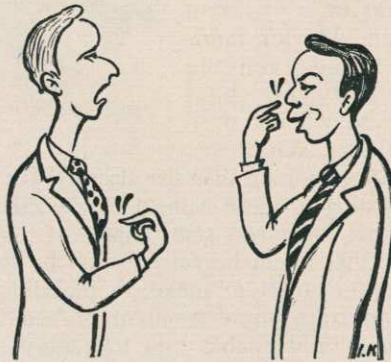
These days you see more and more young Japanese eating on subways and drinking soda and coffee outdoors like

people do in the United States. But unless you are very young and very hip, I advise you to shy away from this in Japan. It's best to go into a coffee shop or stay inside the fast food place until all is gone. “Energy drinks” are the one exception. The contents of these mini-bottle mixtures can be slugged down at kiosks or pharmacies with impunity. They are made expressly for businessmen with no time and little energy who are on the run.

When in Japan, it's wise to keep in mind that even by such harmless gestures, you are constantly sending off signals about yourself. Signals which many here will interpret as ill-manners, a lack of interest or a lack of high standards.

A friend of mine who was translating Waller's book “The Bridges of Madison County” into Japanese for practice got stuck at the scene where the two lovers part. Francesca Johnson, the married woman, is sitting cross-legged on the ground with her head in her hands weeping while the photographer, her middle-aged boyfriend, is getting ready to leave. It's supposed to be a romantic, parting scene.

My friend's comment surprised me: “What an unpleasant, unromantic and



unladylike pose. Why did the author make his heroine so unattractive?” Sanae didn't like the protagonist sitting cross-legged. Her image of the woman was ruined.

“Why didn't she do something more natural and feminine like squat there and cry?” she added. With a jolt, I realized that to me, an American, having her squatting would be the most disgusting pose imaginable; certainly not feminine or romantic. But to a Japanese, squatting is a far more palatable pose for a woman than sitting cross-legged.

Correct interpretation of Japanese behavior and gestures is also a problem. In a meeting or conference, the important people rarely speak up until the very end. Those whom you suspect are taking naps may be deeply concentrating or formulating strategy. As in the world of Kabuki theater and traditional dance, the last to perform are always the very best and most important. The noteworthy people may only say a few words, but they'll do so with perfect timing.

The savvy traveler should keep in mind that the word “yes” as said by a Japanese means “I understand you,” and not “I agree.” The same goes for nodding one's head—this merely indicates that he is listening to you. Also, if you make a proposal or suggestion that someone responds to by sucking in their breath, beware. This signals that there is a real problem, an embarrassment or that you are putting him or her on the spot.

There is no fail safe way of piloting around the nuances and impressions that cling to culture. For westerners, it's good to keep in mind that there is more than one way of looking at things and more than one way of interpreting responses. It is just this ambiguity, or course, that adds to the charm of foreign travel and to the headache of the businessman. **JTI**

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