
*A Cross-Cultural Study of Hand Gestures
in the War Zone Area*

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1. Introduction:

Gesture and speech are co-expressive and complementary channels of a single human language system. While speech carries the major load of symbolic presentation, gesture provides the imagistic content. Thus, a gesture is a form of non-verbal communication made with a part of the body, used instead of or in combination with verbal communication. The language of gesture is rich in such a way for individuals as to express a variety of feelings and thoughts, from contempt and hostility to approval and affection. Most people use gestures in addition to words when they speak, some ethnic groups and languages use them more than others do, and the amount of such gesturing that is considered culturally acceptable varies from one location to another. As the global village continues to shrink and cultures collide, it is essential for all of us to become more sensitive, more aware, and more observant of the myriad motion and gestures that surround us each day. And as many of us cross over cultural borders, it would be fitting for us to respect, learn and understand more about the effective, yet powerful "silent language" of gestures.

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2. The Problem and Hypotheses:

The problem of the present paper is to state whether the Iraqi students in the Department of English understand the hand gestures used by the Occupational Forces. The reason for choosing students from the English Department is that because when learning a language it is necessary to learn it verbally and non-verbally, i.e. the gestures used by English speaking people.

The aim of this study is to microscope some hand gestures used by the Occupational Forces when they try to communicate with Iraqis. But the hidden objective is to warn the Iraqis that these gestures could be used either for or against them.

Since non-verbal communication and in particular "gesture" is not part of a language but an essential concomitant of it, the study hypothesizes that: (1) understanding gestures may eliminate ambiguity or misunderstanding in face to face conversation particularly in Iraq as a case in point. (2) grasping the importance of gestures on the part of second language teachers and learners does not only help to avoid misunderstanding but to know something about the western culture.

3. What is Meant by Paralinguistics:

Paralinguistics has developed as a branch of semiotics to refer to non-verbal communicating activities which accompany verbal behaviour in conversation. Some writers such as Trager (1958), Crystal (1969), and Crystal and

Quirk(1964) restrict the term to the vocal features that accompany spoken language; others like Hill (1958) and Abercrombie (1967) widen it so as to include both vocal and non- vocal features (cited in Witwit, 1986: 1-12). Vocal paralinguistic features include all elements which are loosely referred to as "tone of voice". Non- vocal features consist of all communicative activities other than speech which are part of a conversational interaction, i.e. those which contribute to and presuppose language. They are listed under "kinesics", and include such features as gestures, facial expressions, eye-movement, hand signal, head-nods, body postures, etc.

In short, paralinguistics refers to non-verbal elements of communication used to modify meaning and convey emotions according to our study (Clark, et al., 1981: 17).

3.1 What is Non-verbal Communication?

Non-verbal communication is a silent infiltrator having broad influence over our social environment. It provides us with a mode for conveying messages without the use of verbal language. It may enhance or detract from a verbal communication, regulates relationships by affecting the likelihood of introduction and continued interaction. We are able to infer emotion through non-verbal communication and influence others' perception of our competence, power and vulnerability (Payn, 1998: 1-2).

Non-verbal communication also plays a role in the perception of the actual message we are trying to convey and affect our lives in myriads of ways from childhood throughout adulthood, as long as we intend to communicate with others.

Thus, non-verbal communication is defined as the process by which non-verbal behaviors are used, either singly or in combination with verbal behavior, in the exchange and interpretation of messages within a given situation or context (Shen, 2003: 1-2).

3.2 Why is Non-verbal Communication Important?

Basically, it is one of the key aspects of communication (and especially important in a high-context culture). It has multiple functions:

1. It is used to repeat the verbal message (e.g. point in a direction while stating directions).
2. It often complements the verbal message but also may contradict (e.g. a "nod" reinforced a positive message (among Americans); a "wink" may contradict a stated message).
3. It regulates interactions (non-verbal cues convey messages when the other person does not speak).
4. It may substitute for the verbal message (especially if it is blocked by noise, interruption, etc. – i.e. gestures (finger to lip to indicate need for being quiet), facial expressions (i.e. a nod instead of a yes).

(Shen, 2003: 1-2)

3.3 Gestures: One form of Non-verbal Communication:

A. Studies of Gestures:

The first full length study of gesture was published by John Bulwer in 1644. Bulwer analyzed dozens of gestures, and provided a guide on how to use gestures to increase eloquence

and clarity for public speaking. Today, one of the most prominent researchers in the field of gesture research is Adam Kendon 1981. He has investigated many aspects of gestures, including their role in communication, conventionalization of gesture, integration of gesture and speech, and the evolution of language. Other prominent researchers in this field include Susan Goldin-Meadow 1985 and David McNill 1991 (cited in Wikipedia, 2005 a: 1-3).

B. What is a Gesture?

Gestures are the moment-to-moment variations superimposed on the overall posture, which may involve only a part of the body, like the hand, arm, or head gestures or minor movements of the whole body. While a person speaks he makes use of these gestures which are closely coordinated with speech to form part of the total communication system (Witwit, 1986: 42).

In addition to paralinguistic gestures, there are gestures with conventional meaning which are part of a culturally relative arbitrary code. Conventional gestures are independent and can stand for verbal elements such as hitch-hike gesture or clapping, beckoning and so on (Witwit, 1986: 47).

Thus, gestures are a limited set of social signals and are as specific to a society as is the language accompanied by them; a common gesture in one society may have an extremely different significance in another and this fact has on occasions been the source of a great deal of confusion, misunderstanding and embarrassment (Payn, 1998: 5).

Finally, conversational gestures or a more up-to-date name gesticulations support verbal messages and are also used as when the verbal power fails to describe shapes or being in a shop in a foreign country. Thus these types of gestures are supplements rather than substitutes. There are two types of gestures: haptic and non-haptic. Haptic gestures are those gestures which involve touch e.g. kiss, hug, slap etc. while non-haptic gestures involve no touch (Wikipedia, 2005 a: 4 and Witwit, 1986: 17-18).

The forthcoming study sheds light on non-haptic hand gestures, it seems necessary therefore, to focus on the different classifications of the hand movements.

3.4 Hand Movements:

The hands are marvelously articulate: seven hundred thousand hand signals are possible if combination of arm, wrist and finger movements are included (Davis, 1975: 92). Paralinguistic hand movements according to Imai (2001: 3) and Witwit (1986: 70-85) can be classified as follows:

1. Illustrative Gestures:

These are signals that illustrate speech which include:

- A.** Pointing to people (including oneself).
- B.** Showing a spatial relationship (under, inside).
- C.** Showing spatial movements (through, round).
- D.** Showing a bodily action.
- E.** Drawing a picture in the air.

2. Directive Gestures:

These gestures are employed in directing people to a certain destination, or to do something, such as pressing, the

index finger against the lips (hush) or the finger-snapping of the impatient diner (waiter)

3. Mimic Gestures:

These gestures are preformed to imitate an action, a person, or an object such as the gestures of eating, drinking, smoking, or firing a gun. Mimic gestures can usually be understood even by strangers since they try to copy real objects or actions.

4. Baton Gestures:

Baton gestures emphasize the rhythm of words and are such an integral part of our speech that we make use of them even when it is not as necessary as when speaking on the phone.

5. Symbolic Gestures:

These gestures represent moods or ideas as in the signal indicating stupidity.

6. Expressive Gestures:

These are not intended to communicate, but they reflect emotional states or the level of excitement of the speaker such as fist-clenching to express aggression, face touching expressing anxiety, face scratching indicating self-blame, forehead wiping reflecting tiredness, straining or clutching hands to express anxiety, rubbing the face showing self-assurance, playing with parts of the body like the hair or moustache or picking at the fingernails expressing anxiety, playing with objects such as a cigarette or one's eyeglasses to release tension, women's clapping the hand to the mouth simultaneously with a sharp intake of breath and men's clapping the hand to the forehead expressing a kind of panic at

having forgotten something. These gestures may have a role in self-presentation as they reflect, or at least give some impression of the speaker's personality. Unlike emotional hand gestures which consist largely of self-touching, those expressing attitudes to others consist of moving the hands towards others such as the hands across the body representing defense, restless movements of the hands representing flight from others, etc.

4. Gesture Characteristics:

In performing any gesture, other aspects have an effect on that gesture such as: personal characteristics, conversational distance and cultural differences.

4.1 Personal Characteristics:

Individuals differ in their transmission and perception of gesture. A gesture seen as such by someone may not be recognized by another. Within any culture individuals possess varying degrees of ability to control their paralinguistic behavior and interpret that of others. The variables that seem to rule out this behavior may include the following: sex, age, status, occupation, psychological state, physical characteristics and situation (Witwit, 1986: 135-156)

4.2 Conversational Distance:

Unconsciously, we all keep a comfortable distance around us when we interact with other people. This distance has had several names over the years, including "personal

space ", "interpersonal distance", "comfort zone", and "body bubble". This space between us and another person forms an invisible wall that defines how comfortable we feel at various distances from other people (Wikipedia, 2005 a: 6).

The amount of space changes depends on the nature of the relationship. For example, we are usually more comfortable standing closer to family members than to strangers. Personality also determines the size of the area with which we are comfortable when talking to people. Introverts often prefer to interact with others at a greater distance than do extroverts. Culture styles are important too, for westerners, the usual distance in social conversation ranges from about an arm's length to four feet. Less space in the American culture may be associated with either greater intimacy or aggressive behaviour. However, for the Arabs the usual distance in social conversation ranges about 2 to 3 feet according to the Islamic religion and especially when talking to the opposite sex, but when talking to the same sex a close distance is usually noticed (Paul, 2001: 7).

So culture does not always determine the message of nonverbal communication. The individual's personality, the context, and the relationship also influence its meaning. However, like verbal language, nonverbal language is linked to person's cultural background. People are generally comfortable with others who have "gestures" similar to their own (Fisher, 2006: 1-4).

4.3 Cultural Differences:

Communication usually expresses meaning or feeling with or without words. Universal emotions, such as happiness, fear, sadness are expressed in a similar gesture throughout the world, thus, different gestures have different meanings, different nationalities have specific gestures. Thus, what is considered usual or polite behavior in one culture may be seen as unusual or impolite in another, One culture may determine that snapping fingers to call a waiter is appropriate, whereas another may consider this gesture "rude". Thus due to the different background and culture, even the same gesture has different meanings for different people in certain contexts (Imai, 2001: 5).

Thus, as the global village continues to shrink and cultures collide, it is important for all of us to become more sensitive, more aware, and more observant of the myriad gestures that surround us each day especially in our case after the occupation, and because both sides (i.e. Iraqi people and Occupational Forces) do not know how to speak each other's language, thus it is important to know the common gestures of each culture to avoid any misunderstanding (Paul, 2001: 1-3).

A. A Bird's Eye View on the Western Culture:

The westerners are careful and polite with their friends (especially if the friend is black). If a friend asks for a favor, it is not considered rude to say no. In a conversation, westerners do not touch each other and stand inches apart which is considered the "comfort zone" (Wikipedia, 2005 a: 10).

Westerners talk when necessary and take turns in a conversation, i.e. wait till the other person finishes "but in a black community it's the opposite". In conversations, gestures are used a lot and are culture specific (Imai, 2001: 6 and Paul, 2001: 6-7).

B. A Bird's Eye View of the Iraqi Culture:

Iraqis are very generous, loyal and polite to their friends. If a friend asks for a favor, it is considered very rude to say no. When talking, Iraqis may touch each other and stand closer together if they are of the same sex.

Iraqis talk a lot, and loudly, repeat themselves often and interrupt each other constantly. Conversations are highly emotional and full of gestures. some common Iraqi gestures are:

1. Hand moving away from the body (the palm facing down) means "go away".
2. Hand reaching out while opening and closing (the hand palm facing up) means "come here".
3. Right hand on heart after shaking hands means "show of sincerity".

(Tariq, 2002: 1-2)

After giving a brief account of the western and Iraqi cultures, there may be reason to ask ourselves: What will happen if one culture tries to impose its force and cultural habits of thinking and acting on the other? Let us take a look on what happened to Iraq after occupation.

C. Iraq after the Occupation:

Everyone knows the story of how the invasion then the occupation of Iraq took place in 2003 by a multinational coalition force led by the United States. Although the White House gave several justifications for invading Iraq, the core reason was "fight them over there, so we don't have to fight them over here" as one of the war proponents mentioned clearly.

Nevertheless, we believed the story of freedom, right to vote, human rights, ...etc. We saw Occupational Forces with wide smiles walking unarmed in streets and avenues shaking hands, waving,...etc. Some Iraqis believed them and tried to start a conversation, others were obliged to converse with them because of their sudden search in our houses. And because not knowing each other's language "gestures" were an appropriate substitute. But as the masks started to fall, Occupational Force soldiers started to use rude and aggressive gestures, simply because the majority of Iraqis do not comprehend what these gestures are (Muhi Al-Deen, 2007: 1-2 and Wikipedia, 2005 b: 1-3).

5. Data Analysis:

The following study deals with 50 male and 50 female Iraqi college students. Ten gestures were shown to the test subjects. Each gesture was presented through an oral context presented by the researcher herself. Each subject was given a questionnaire to tick or write what s/he believed was true. The questions given were as follows:

- Have you seen this gesture before?

Yes No

- Do you think that this gesture is

Positive Negative

- Is there an equivalence in Arabic?

Yes No

- What did you understand this gesture to be according to the context?

- Is there a certain event at which you saw an American using this gesture?

Gesture (1):



Gesture (1)

This gesture means Quote the unquote. 46% have noticed this gesture whereas 50% have not. However, others have given no answer. 24% believe it is a positive gesture whereas 60% negative. 20% believe that there is an equivalence in Arabic whereas 76% do not. Many opinions have been given by the students; some believe it is a bunny sign, others a curse or an exclamation but those who have

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come across this gesture recognized it easily. The idea of this gesture is given by one of the first grade students who eventually saw an American opponent of the war perform this gesture on T.V.

Gesture (2):



Gesture (2)

This gesture means not good and is usually accompanied by a boo sound. 54% have noticed this gesture whereas 41% have not. 25% believe it is a positive gesture, while 69% believe it is negative (which is correct). 39% believe there is an equivalence in Arabic gestures, while 53% do not see any equivalence. However, 3% of the students match this gesture with a gesture used by Iraqi boys selling gasoline on the roads. The gasoline gesture, i.e. thumb down was changed to another gesture ever since one of the sellers was brutally hit by some American soldiers who understood the boy's sign as a boo one and not as a gasoline sign.

Gesture (3):

Gesture (3)

This gesture means OK or perfect. 27% have noticed this gesture whereas 70% have not. 20% believe it is positive whereas 72% do not. 70% believe there is an equivalence in Arabic gestures whereas 25% do not. Those who have seen this gesture knew the meaning while others made an overlap with a curse gesture used by Iraqi males. 3% of the students have seen American soldiers use this gesture while others have seen it on T.V.

Gesture (4):

(A)



(B)

Gesture (4)

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This gesture means an American black fist which represents strength or power. American soldiers are occasionally seen using this gesture when they order Iraqis to stop their cars. If any Iraqi disobeyed their order he or his car would be shot. Gesture (A) has been confused with the universal gesture (B) which means "stop". 48% have noticed it whereas 50% have not. 27% believe it is a positive gesture to stop whereas 77% do not. 23% believe there is an equivalence in Arabic gesture, while 74% do not. However, there is no gesture like this in Arabic, i.e. black fist. Most of the students who have seen this gesture used by American soldiers believe it is a usual stop sign but actually it is a threat.

Gesture (5):

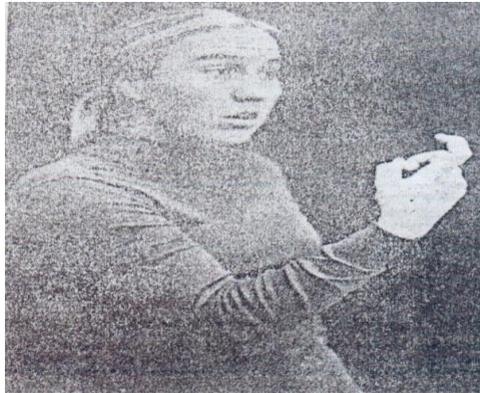


Gesture (5)

This gesture means a demanding "now" used by a high-ranking person, i.e. general to soldier. 31% have noticed this gesture whereas 67% have not. 22% believe it is positive,

while 74% believe it is negative. Others believe it is neutral. 60% believe there is an equivalence in Arabic but with only the finger gesture and not necessarily a person of a higher rank, e.g. friend to friend is acceptable and common. Only one student witnessed a general calling his soldier to come soon. Afterwards, the student's father told the interpreter that some of his wife's gold jewellery had been stolen following a thorough search of the house by the Americans.

Gesture (6):



Gesture (6)

This gesture means beckoning. 72% have noticed this gesture whereas 23% have not. 10% believe it is positive whereas 82% do not. 81% believe that there is an equivalence in Arabic gestures, while 15% do not. Most of the students realize this gesture as "a come here" sign but belittling or threatening the other side. 21% of male students have witnessed the American soldiers calling them by using this gesture.

Gesture (7):



Gesture (7)

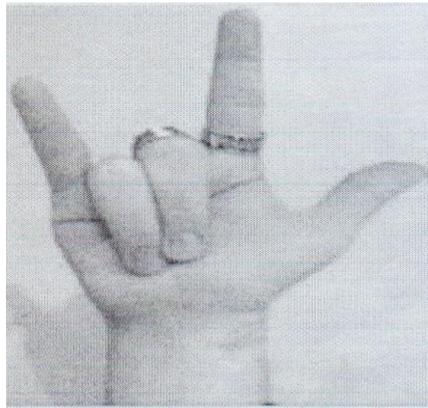
This gesture means wish me good luck. 20% have noticed this gesture whereas 72% have not. 52% believe it is a positive gesture, while 52% do not. 12% believe that there is an equivalence in Arabic. 2% have actually seen an American soldier on his tank using this gesture. However, 13% of the male students believe that when the same gesture is used behind the back it means "I'm tricking you" unlike the English gesture which means "I'm telling a lie".

Gesture (8):



Gesture (8)

This gesture means you are a loser. 25% have noticed this gesture whereas 70% have not. 37% believe that it is a positive gesture, while 57% do not. None believe that there is an equivalence in Arabic. This gesture is taken from three students who have seen American soldiers using this gesture, whereas others have seen it on T.V.

Gesture (9):

Gesture (9)

This gesture means "I love you". 11% have noticed this gesture whereas the majority 75% have not. 21% believe it is a positive gesture, while the rest thought it is negative, i.e. 75%. None believe that there is an equivalence in Arabic gestures. The majority of the students have not understood the gesture from the context, they thought it is a curse sign, while a few knew it from watching T.V. Only two students from Alhaweja witnessed this gesture and unfortunately did not understand it.

Gesture (10):



Gesture (10)

This bent elbow gesture means an exuberant version of "the finger". 31% have noticed this gesture whereas 63% have not. 11% thought it is a positive gesture, while 85% do not. None have seen an equivalence in Arabic. This gesture has been seen either by using the arm or finger only or accompanied by the word verbally. This gesture is familiar to male students rather than female because it is used a lot in American action films.

6. Conclusion:

Nonverbal communication involves those nonverbal stimuli in a communication setting that are generated by both the source [speaker] and his or her use of the environment and that have potential message value for the source or receiver [listener]. Basically, it is sending and receiving messages in a variety of ways without the use of verbal codes (words),

intentionally or unintentionally. One type of nonverbal communication is gestures.

Gestures can be made with different parts of the body but our study deals with those related to the hand and which were seen in Iraq (by American soldiers).

According to the analysis, students show a lot of misunderstanding and overlapping among the ten gestures. What is funny is that these students will become graduates from the English Department and do not grasp the importance of gestures in everyday life. Therefore, teachers of the English Department should use a lot of gestures during their lectures; First, to gain some information about gestures and which gestures are considered to be acceptable and which are rude. Second, to understand the numerous gestures which are used a lot on T.V. series or even made by politicians in the western culture. Third, to avoid ambiguity or misunderstanding in face to face confrontation with the American soldiers since they use gestures. Forth, educate the non-graduates from the English Department about the problems of not understanding the gestures used by the Occupation Forces, e.g. the upside down OK sign caused a serious problem for a boy selling gasoline.

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دراسة ثقافية مقارنة للإيماءات اليدوية في المنطقة الساخنة

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الملخص

تساعد الحركات الإيمائية على التعبير وتعد قنوات مكملة للنظام اللغوي البشري الواحد. تقدم الحركات الإيمائية المحتوى الصوري في حين يحمل الكلام الثقل الرئيسي للعرض الرمزي. لذلك تعد الإيماءات شكل من أشكال التواصل غير الكلامي التي تتم باستخدام إحدى أطراف الجسد والتي تستخدم بدلاً عن التواصل الكلامي أو مرافقة له. وتعد لغة الإيماءات ثرية بالنسبة إلى الأفراد كي يعبروا عن مختلف المشاعر والأفكار والتي تتراوح ما بين ازدياء وعدائية إلى موافقة وعاطفة. يستخدم أغلب الناس الإيماءات إضافة إلى الكلمات أثناء تحدثهم. وتستخدم بعض المجتمعات العرقية واللغات الإيماءات أكثر من غيرها. كما وأن مقدار الإيماءات التي تعد مقبولة اجتماعياً تختلف من موقع لآخر. وبما أن القرية العالمية آخذة بالتقلص والتغيرات تنهار فإنه أمر جوهري بالنسبة لنا جميعاً أن نصبح أكثر حساسية وأكثر وعياً وأكثر ملاحظة للعواطف الجياشة والإيماءات التي تحيط بها. وحيث أن الكثير منا يتخطى حدود الثقافات فإنه من الملائم أن نحترم ونتعلم ونفهم أشياء أكثر عن اللغة المؤثرة ولكن الصامتة، القوية للإيماءات. وهكذا فإن الهدف الأساسي لهذا البحث هو إظهار كيفية استخدام الإيماءات بشكل كامل في المنطقة الحربية "العراق". وكذلك بسبب أن غالبية الشعب العراقي وقوات الاحتلال يجهلون لغة بعضهم البعض، وهنا يأتي دور استخدام الإيماءات.

لقد أجريت الدراسة عن طريق مقابلة (100) طالب عراقي يعيشون في مدينة الموصل (والذين يمثلون مختلف الثقافات العراقية) بعض الإيماءات التي يستخدمها الأمريكيان وبشكل أدق القوات الأمريكية في العراق. وبالمقابل ذكر العينات ماذا تعني كل إيماءة بالنسبة وإذا ما هنالك مكافأة لها في لغتهم. وهكذا تمثل هذه الدراسة محاولة لإظهار الاستخدامات غير المفهومة للإيماءات اليدوية بالنسبة للعراقيين.

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