

This list of gestures represents broad categories of emotion: openness, defensiveness, expectancy, suspicion, readiness, cooperation, frustration, confidence, nervousness, boredom, and acceptance. By visualizing the movement of these gestures, you can raise your awareness of the many emotions the body expresses without words.

#### Openness

- Smiling
- Open hands
- Unbuttoning coats

#### Aggressiveness

- Hand on hips
- Sitting on edge of chair
- Moving in closer

#### Defensiveness

- Arms crossed on chest
- Locked ankles & clenched fists
- Chair back as a shield
- Crossing legs

#### Cooperation

- Sitting on edge of chair
- Hand on the face gestures
- Unbuttoned coat
- Head tilted

#### Expectancy

- Hand rubbing
- Crossed fingers

#### Frustration

- Short breaths
- "Tsk!"
- Tightly clenched hands
- Wringing hands
- Fist like gestures
- Pointing index finger
- Palm to back of neck
- Kicking at ground or an imaginary object

#### Evaluation

- Hand to cheek gestures
- Head tilted
- Stroking chins
- Gestures with glasses
- Pacing

#### Confidence

- Steepling
- Hands joined at back
- Feet on desk
- Elevating oneself
- "Cluck" sound
- Leaning back with hands supporting head

#### Suspicion & Secretiveness

- Sideways glance
- Feet or body pointing towards the door
- Rubbing nose
- Rubbing the eye

#### Nervousness

- Clearing throat
- "Whew" sound
- Whistling
- Fidget in chair
- Tugging at ear
- Hands over mouth while speaking
- Tugging at pants while sitting
- Jingling money in pocket

#### Boredom

- Drumming on table
- Head in hand
- Blank stare

#### Acceptance

- Hand to chest
- Touching
- Moving in closer

# Dangerous Body Language Abroad

by [Matthew Link](#)

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You are in a foreign country, and don't speak the language. You order something indecipherable off the menu, and when the waiter brings you a plate of delicious noodles, you smile and make an OK sign at him with your thumb and forefinger linked in a circle. He then picks up the dish and throws it in your lap.

What happened? Welcome to the wonderful world of international hand gestures, where nothing is quite as it seems. Making what we Americans see as the positive OK hand sign has a dizzying array of translations around the globe. In parts of Europe, it can mean "okay" or it can mean "zero." In other parts of Central and Mediterranean Europe as well as in Brazil, it denotes an unmentionable orifice-and that the person it is directed at is indeed a living manifestation of that unmentionable orifice. In several countries in South America, it's a slur that means homosexual. And, as a recent *Budget Travel* [article](#) points out, even pointing your foot in the wrong direction can be considered extremely offensive.

"We call these gestures *emblems*," explains Janine Driver, a body language expert and author of the *New York Times* bestseller *You Say More Than You Think*. "Emblems are territorial, sometimes specific to just a part of a country, like gang signs." And these slights can be a bigger deal than just momentarily annoying your neighbor. "It's not enough for us to understand and respect these emblems, we need to accept them if we want to succeed in international relationships," says Driver. "Ten years ago, polls showed that other countries looked at the U.S. as the proper way to do things. But now less than 50 percent do."

Here's a cheat sheet to help you decipher the different international nuances that turn "It's OK" into a decidedly non-OK situation.



## Thumbs Up

In America and in most of the world, the thumbs-up sign has a similar connotation to the OK sign: All is good. Tradition has it that this gesture came about during Roman times when the audience would use a thumbs up or thumbs down gesture to express if they would like a gladiator to live or die. The gesture was called *pollice verso*, meaning "with a turned thumb." But the thumbs up is especially problematic in certain parts of the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and Southeast Asia, where the thumbs up is a more aggressive gesture that is basically flipping the bird to someone. The Philippines takes this thumbs-up birdie to a higher level, by swiping an upward pointed thumb by the side of the head. It's interesting to imagine what people in these regions think when an American hitchhikes, or when U.S. soldiers happily stick their thumbs up to the locals. Or what about politicians' famous thumbs affirmations during speeches?



## Fig Sign

The "fig sign" is a gesture where the hand is in a fist with the thumb poking out between the index and middle fingers. It's either a wonderful good luck charm or the worst insult you could ever give someone, depending on where you happen to be at the time.

In ancient Rome, an image of a hand in the fig sign (*mano fico*) was worn as an amulet to protect against the evil eye. It was affiliated with female genital reproductive powers, as the Italian word for the female vulva, *fica*, means fig. In modern Portugal and Brazil, many people still wear fig sign trinkets as jewelry. The fig sign's repulsive power could also account for its use as an obscene gesture. In places like Indonesia, China, Russia, and some

Mediterranean regions (particularly Turkey), the sign can have an insulting meaning roughly equivalent to "screw you." Before you think you would never make such a gesture, one wonders what the locals think when visiting American parents play the "I stole your nose" game with their children.



### V Sign

Oh, what a difference the back of the hand can make. Winston Churchill flung up a celebratory victory sign at the end of World War II, with his arm outstretched to reveal the index and middle finger in a V-shape. Hippies later used the same gesture as their calling card, meaning "Peace." Well, as anyone who has traveled in the Anglo world (specifically the U.K., Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand) knows, by simply turning your hand around so the palm faces the signer, and adding a few thrusts upward, you've instantly made overseas enemies. Like the fig sign in other parts of the world, this back-handed V sign means "screw you" in most of the English-speaking world. George Bush, Sr., was said to have unwittingly flashed the offensive sign when he meant to show the peace sign to protesting farmers while touring Australia.



### Devil Horns

Best known as a heavy metal headbanger concert sign that became popular in the late '60s, the devil's horns origins stretch back much further. The sign of the horns, or *corna*, was an ancient European guard against the evil eye (like the aforementioned fig sign). However, in Mediterranean countries (particularly Italy) and in Cuba, you'll see the devil's horns flash their ugly head often on the motorways, where irate drivers express to each other that their wife is, uh, not of the sexual moral standing that she should be.

The "Hook 'em Horns" hand gesture at the University of Texas at Austin Longhorns' football games does not translate well overseas either. Lifting ones pinky and index fingers and thumb all at the same time may mean "I love you" in American sign language, but when George Bush, Jr. gave the Longhorns' sign during his second inauguration festivities in 2005, Nordic newspapers printed accounts that they were sure he was flashing the sign of the devil. And according to *The Definitive Book of Body Language*, five Americans were arrested in front of the Vatican while dancing and flashing the devil's horns after a Longhorns victory.



### The Moutza

The *moutza* is a famous Greek hand gesture to denote displeasure towards the recipient. Similar to the 90s American talk show staple "talk to the hand," the offended spreads their fingers out and thrusts their palm out towards the offender. If you really want to start something, try a double *moutza* with both hands on top of each other and see if you can make it out of an Athens bar in one piece. The origin of the gesture is said to be Byzantine, when criminals were shamed by rubbing palm-fulls of cinder (*moutzos*) all over their faces.

In addition to Greece, showing the palms of one or two hands in considering insulting in parts of the Middle East and Africa, and in Mexico, a palm to the face, often with the thumb and forefinger creating the letter C, can mean to the receiver "you're gonna see!" or "there's more to come!"

Or, basically, shut the hell up.

*Credits: Thumbs Up: Getty Images; Fig Sign: Getty Images; V Sign: Getty Images; Devil Horns: Marc Broussely/Redferns, Getty Images; The Moutza: Alamy*