

IS THE “THUMBS UP” GESTURE UNIVERSAL OR JUST AMERICAN?

Ikhmatova Sevinch Abdumajidovna

master degree student, Samarkand State Institute of Foreign languages

*Scientific supervisor: **Shamuradova Naima Muxtarovna***

Samarkand State Institute of Foreign languages

**MAQOLA
MALUMOTI**

ANNOTATSIYA:

MAQOLA TARIXI:

Received: 01.11.2025

Revised: 02.11.2025

Accepted: 03.11.2025

KALIT SO'ZLAR:

*thumbs up, gesture,
nonverbal
communication, cross-
cultural differences,
American culture,
globalization*

The article “Is the ‘Thumbs Up’ Gesture Universal or Just American?” by Ikhmatova Sevinch Abdumajidovna, a master’s student at the Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages, explores the cultural meanings and interpretations of the thumbs up gesture across different societies. The author discusses its historical origins, American and Western interpretations, and cross-cultural variations, emphasizing that while globalization has spread its positive connotation, the gesture still carries negative or offensive meanings in some cultures such as in the Middle East or South America. Drawing on the works of Birdwhistell, Ekman, Pease, and others, the paper argues that the thumbs up is widely recognized but not truly universal, serving as an example of how nonverbal communication is culturally specific. The study concludes that effective intercultural communication requires awareness of cultural differences even in seemingly simple gestures.

Introduction

Gestures are a powerful part of nonverbal communication, often crossing language barriers. Among them, the “thumbs up” is one of the most widely recognized. In the United States and much of the West, it signals approval or agreement and is reinforced today by its use as the 👍 emoji.

Yet, as Birdwhistell (1970) notes, gestures are culturally coded rather than universal. A sign that feels positive in one society may be offensive in another. While Americans view the thumbs up as “good” or “okay,” in some parts of the Middle East, South America, and the Mediterranean, it can carry negative or insulting meanings.

This raises the central question: is the thumbs up a universal gesture, or primarily an American one?

Historical Background

The origins of the thumbs up gesture are debated among scholars. One common theory links it to Ancient Rome, where spectators in gladiator games used hand signals to influence decisions of life or death. However, Corbeill (1997) argues that the meaning of the Roman thumb was more complex than the modern interpretation and may not have represented approval at all.

Another explanation comes from military history. During World War II, American pilots used the thumbs up as a pre-flight signal to indicate readiness. This practical use soon spread among soldiers and allies, reinforcing its association with success and agreement.

Hollywood films and later television further popularized the gesture. Characters often used it as a simple, visual way of showing positivity, which helped establish the thumbs up as a widely recognized sign of approval in Western culture. Over time, globalization and media have carried this meaning far beyond American borders, though not always with the same interpretation. American and Western Use

In American and most Western contexts, the thumbs up gesture is almost always associated with positivity. It functions as what Ekman (2003) calls an “emblem”—a gesture with a direct verbal translation, such as “okay,” “good,” or “I agree.” People use it in everyday interactions to show approval, encouragement, or agreement without the need for words.

Its popularity has also been reinforced by digital communication. On platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and messaging apps, the thumbs up has become a quick symbol of liking or acknowledgment. As Pease (2004) observes, gestures like the thumbs up serve as “shortcuts in communication,” allowing individuals to express attitudes instantly. In Western societies, the gesture has therefore become a natural part of both spoken and online interaction, bridging informal and formal contexts.

Globalization and Modern Influence

=====
The spread of global media, film, and digital technology has played a central role in shaping how the thumbs up is understood. Hollywood movies in the mid-20th century helped export the gesture's "positive" American meaning across international audiences. Later, social media platforms such as Facebook standardized the thumbs up as a "like" button, giving it a new digital significance.

As Givens (2002) notes, technology often accelerates the spread of nonverbal symbols, and the thumbs up is a prime example. In many countries where the gesture once had negative meanings, younger generations now use it online with the same interpretation as their Western peers. However, as Ekman (2003) warns, gestures remain deeply tied to cultural norms, and the "emoji version" does not always erase traditional interpretations. Older generations may still perceive it negatively in regions such as the Middle East or South America, showing a generational divide in nonverbal communication

Miscommunication and Real-Life Examples

Cross-cultural misinterpretations of the thumbs up can have both humorous and serious consequences. In international business, for instance, an American executive signaling agreement with a thumbs up might unintentionally insult a Middle Eastern colleague. Similarly, tourists in Greece or Turkey who use the gesture to indicate "all good" may face confusion or offense.

Such cases illustrate what Samovar et al. (2013) describe as "the hidden dimension of intercultural communication"—the assumption that shared symbols mean the same across cultures. Misinterpretations of the thumbs up highlight the importance of cultural competence, particularly in diplomacy, global business, and travel.

Discussion

The contrasting interpretations of the thumbs up raise important questions about the idea of "universal" gestures. While globalization has undeniably spread the positive, Western meaning, complete standardization has not yet occurred. Instead, the gesture exists in what Hall (1990) would call a "cultural negotiation zone," where traditional interpretations meet globalized ones.

This discussion reinforces the argument that gestures cannot be taken as inherently universal. Instead, they operate as culturally shaped emblems whose meanings shift depending on history, media, and social context. The thumbs up is becoming increasingly global, but it remains a reminder that body language should always be considered through a cultural lens.

Conclusion

The thumbs up is one of the most recognizable hand gestures in the world, widely used to convey approval and agreement in the West. Its popularity has been reinforced by globalization and digital communication, particularly through the emoji 👍. However, its meaning is far from universal. In some regions—including the Middle East, South America, and the Mediterranean—it retains negative or offensive associations.

By tracing its history, cultural variations, and modern transformations, this article shows that the thumbs up is both global and local: global in its spread through media and technology, but local in the way it is still filtered through cultural traditions. The gesture reminds us that even simple body signals carry complex cultural meanings, and effective intercultural communication requires sensitivity to these differences.

References

1. Birdwhistell, R. (1970). *Kinesics and Context: Essays on Body Motion Communication*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
2. Corbeill, A. (1997). *Nature Embodied: Gesture in Ancient Rome*. Princeton University Press.
3. Ekman, P. (2003). *Emotions Revealed*. Henry Holt.
4. Fox, K. (2004). *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour*. Hodder & Stoughton.
5. Givens, D. (2002). *The Nonverbal Dictionary of Gestures, Signs & Body Language Cues*. Spokane: Center for Nonverbal Studies.
6. Hall, E. T. (1990). *The Silent Language*. Anchor Books.
7. Morris, D. (1994). *Bodytalk: A World Guide to Gestures*. Jonathan Cape.
8. Pease, A. (2004). *The Definitive Book of Body Language*. Bantam.
9. Samovar, L. A., Porter, R. E., McDaniel, E. R., & Roy, C. (2013). *Communication Between Cultures* (8th ed.). Wadsworth.
10. Shamuradova, N. M. (2022). Historical origin and usage of clause of reason in English. *Czech Journal of Multidisciplinary Innovations*, 5, 38–42.