

OK SIGN: ONE GESTURE, DIFFERENT MEANINGS — AN INTERCULTURAL ANALYSIS

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Meanings — An Intercultural Analysis," written by Tursunova Sarvinoz Otabek qizi, investigates how the same gesture may express drastically different meanings across cultures. Although the OK sign, made by forming a circle with the thumb and index finger, is often used to show agreement or satisfaction in many Western countries, its significance changes dramatically around the world. In some regions, such as Brazil, Turkey, and Greece, the gesture carries vulgar or offensive implications. The paper aims to highlight the historical roots, intercultural meanings, and semiotic features of this gesture, underlining that nonverbal symbols are not universal but culturally specific. Understanding such differences is crucial for avoiding intercultural misunderstandings and achieving effective global communication.

Introduction

Communication is not limited to words; it includes a vast system of nonverbal expressions that convey emotions, attitudes, and cultural identity. Among these, hand gestures are especially powerful because they can communicate meaning instantly — yet their interpretations differ from one culture to another. The OK sign, one of the simplest and most recognizable gestures, is performed by connecting the thumb and index finger into a circular shape while extending the other three fingers. In the United States and much of

Europe, it is associated with positivity and approval. People use it to mean “okay,” “all right,” or “good job.”

However, the same gesture can lead to offense in other cultural contexts. In South America, the Middle East, and parts of Europe, it is viewed as rude or obscene. Such contradictions demonstrate that nonverbal symbols, despite appearing universal, are deeply shaped by cultural experience. This article explores the complex meanings of the OK sign and emphasizes the need for cultural awareness in interpreting body language.

Literature review

The origins of the OK sign can be traced to the 19th century in the United States. Linguistically, the abbreviation “OK” first appeared as a humorous form of “oll korrekt” (“all correct”) and gained popularity during Martin Van Buren’s 1840 presidential campaign, when “Old Kinderhook” — his nickname — became a slogan represented by the initials “OK.” As communication evolved, the word took on a visual gesture form. During World War II, American pilots used the OK sign to indicate readiness for flight. Later, the gesture spread among soldiers and civilians as a symbol of success and well-being. In Japan, the gesture took on a completely different meaning — “money” — because the circle formed by the fingers resembles a coin. In France, however, it came to mean “zero” or “worthless.” This diversity in interpretation illustrates how gestures evolve through history, travel across regions, and acquire new connotations through cultural adaptation.

Results

Cross-Cultural Interpretations

The OK sign’s meaning varies widely across societies. In the United States, Canada, and Western Europe, it is a positive symbol expressing approval or agreement. In Japan, it signifies money or financial matters. In France, it means “zero” or “worthless.” In Brazil, Turkey, and Greece, the same gesture is offensive, comparable to showing the middle finger in Western contexts. In underwater diving, however, it has a universal safety meaning — “I’m okay.” These examples reveal the cultural relativity of gestures. What seems friendly and polite in one region may be disrespectful in another. According to Ekman (2003), gestures are “emblems” — culturally agreed-upon signs that require shared understanding within a community. Thus, gestures cannot be taken as universal languages; they are culturally encoded systems of meaning.

Globalization and Modern Media

With globalization and the rise of social media, gestures have gained new symbolic power. The OK sign, represented by the “👌” emoji, has become part of digital communication worldwide. On platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, users employ it to express positivity, agreement, or humor. However, as Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel (2017) point out, digital spread does not erase traditional cultural boundaries. While younger generations often interpret emojis as harmless, older or more traditional communities may still associate them with negative meanings. Globalization, therefore, has not unified all nonverbal codes — it has instead created layers of meaning, where traditional and modern interpretations coexist. The OK sign is an example of how technology can both connect and confuse people across cultural lines.

Miscommunication and Cultural Sensitivity

Cross-cultural misinterpretations of gestures often lead to unintended offense. For instance, an American tourist in Brazil who uses the OK sign to express approval may unknowingly insult locals. Similarly, an international diplomat using the gesture in Turkey could provoke misunderstanding in formal meetings. Such cases underscore the need for intercultural competence — the ability to recognize and respect cultural differences in nonverbal behavior. As Hall (1990) noted, “the silent language” of culture often speaks louder than words. Understanding gestures, therefore, is not merely about etiquette but about empathy, awareness, and global communication skills.

Discussion

The OK sign perfectly illustrates the semiotic diversity of nonverbal communication. From a semiotic perspective, a gesture’s meaning is not fixed but constructed through context and shared understanding. As Birdwhistell (1970) argued, no movement or gesture has meaning in isolation — it becomes meaningful only when interpreted within a cultural system. The OK sign’s transformation from a symbol of approval to one of offense in different regions proves that context defines meaning. This understanding has practical importance in education, diplomacy, and international business. Teachers, translators, and global leaders should be trained not only in language but also in nonverbal literacy — the ability to interpret gestures and expressions across cultures

Conclusion

The OK sign — a seemingly simple gesture — embodies a rich web of historical, cultural, and symbolic meanings. Its positive interpretation in Western societies and negative connotations in others remind us that communication is never culture-free. Even

the smallest hand movement can carry centuries of meaning. Recognizing this complexity is vital for promoting respect, avoiding misunderstandings, and fostering harmony in multicultural environments. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, learning to “read” gestures like the OK sign accurately will be as important as mastering any spoken language.

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