

SMART OR CRAZY? HOW ONE GESTURE CHANGES MEANING AROUND THE WORLD

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KALIT SO'ZLAR:

This paper exposes how even one gesture, which is the tapping of head, can convey two different meanings in different cultures. The message that is usually delivered by this movement in Western Europe is one of intelligence, cleverness, or a call to think twice. But in Eastern Europe and Latin America, the same gesture connotes the fact that one is irrational or crazy. By comparing these opposing interpretations, the article shows how nonverbal communication is extremely culturally dependent, particularly in terms of mental health and rationality. It is stressed in the discussion that despite the apparent universality, gestures develop separately in diverse societies and are conditioned by their history, values, and social attitudes. This paper has highlighted the significance of cultural awareness in global communication by examining the various meanings made by the temple-tapping gesture. Knowledge of how even the small gestures can have unintended messages can make people more sensitive, respectful, and understanding when interacting with the cross-cultural (sensitive) individuals.

Introduction

Suppose you knock your head on the temple, to say, Think!-- but your foreign friend is offended. You freeze, confused. What appeared to be an innocent, even beneficial act is

suddenly clumsy. What was the reason of such a mistake due to a simple blow on the head? It is interesting to learn that body language is not universal as most individuals consider. There are two cultures, one of which is the culture you are describing, and the other is the culture where the very same movement will transmit the identical message, though in the opposite way.⁹²

An example of such gesture is tapping the temple with a finger. This movement is interpreted as a gesture of brightness or witty thinking in most parts of Western Europe. A teacher may also be tapping his or her temple to make the students utilize their brains or a friend may do that jokingly to compliment a good idea.⁹³ It is good, light-minded, and in many cases, it is believed to be considerate or clever. But cross the Atlantic or go along towards the east and the same gesture may have quite a different meaning. In some regions of Eastern Europe and Latin America, hitting your temple might be taken to mean that one calls someone crazy or irrational.⁹⁴ What will be considered as a compliment by one culture will be perceived as an insult by another.

Such an astonishing contrast shows something very interesting about human ways of communication: the use of gestures is not a sound language of communication, but it speaks volumes, and its language varies with a border. Body language is not universal as it is commonly believed unlike words which can be translated. However, it is quite easy to confuse, embarrass, or even offend with this assumption when individuals of diverse background have to deal with each other.⁹⁵ All cultures create their own nonverbal symbols founded on the history, humor, and social expectations. These differences are presented in the temple tap. It is mental sharpness in some, and mind instability in others.⁹⁶

⁹² Matsumoto, D., & Hwang, H. S. (2013). *Nonverbal Communication: Science and Applications*. Sage Publications.

⁹³ Pease, A., & Pease, B. (2006). *The Definitive Book of Body Language*. Bantam Books.

⁹⁴ Morris, D. (2011). *Peoplewatching: The Desmond Morris Guide to Body Language*. Vintage.

⁹⁵ Axtell, R. E. (1998). *Gestures: The Do's and Taboos of Body Language Around the World*. John Wiley & Sons.

⁹⁶ Samovar, L. A., Porter, R. E., & McDaniel, E. R. (2010). *Communication Between Cultures* (7th ed.). Wadsworth Cengage Learning.

Such minor differences in culture now matter more than ever in an increasingly globalized world. The social media, international education, and traveling across the world have united people who belong to different societies, but it has also increased the chances of misunderstanding. Such a simple action intended to convey the message of being smart may end up telling a person that they are crazy.⁹⁷ By understanding the fact that gestures may have opposite meanings we can go through with communication with thinking. It reminds us that culture does not merely influence what we say, it influences how we will say it or even without saying, it influences our speech. One stroke of the temple can bring or split understanding, according to the part of the globe where you are.

Description of the Gesture

This is an uncomplicated, short, and apparently universal gesture: an individual hands up his or her hand to the side of their head and hits the temple either with a small index finger or in a small circular motion around it. In most cases, the gesture is supplemented with a significant facial expression (a raised eyebrow, a smile, a serious expression) which depends on a given context. The temple tap is very simple, and has a immensely different meaning in different places of usage.⁹⁸

In Western European, the gesture normally means clever thought or intelligence. One may even tap his or her temple as a sign of the idea being smart, or he or she will tap it in an attempt to urge another person to think twice. It is mostly regarded as a good, even entertaining, reminding of the need to use the brain. Conversely, even in Eastern European and Latin American societies the same movement, especially when accompanied by a sarcastic tone or overdone expression, is taken as an insult that someone is irrational or insane. The definition is entirely different although the actual act of doing it is the same.

This comparison shows that there is a significant aspect of nonverbal communication: the gesture can be reasonable, but the meaning is not innate, but acquired culturally rather than biologically. An action that is perceived to be natural and healthy in one social setting may

⁹⁷ Knapp, M. L., Hall, J. A., & Horgan, T. G. (2014). *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction* (8th ed.). Cengage Learning.

⁹⁸ Pease, A., & Pease, B. (2006). *The Definitive Book of Body Language*. Bantam Books.

be incomprehensible or even outrageous in a different social setting. In most cases, people believe that body language is universal but studies have always proved that most gestures are cultural signals and not natural signs. When misunderstood, they may give rise to embarrassing or even destructive cross culture encounters.

Meaning in Western Europe

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Meaning in Eastern Europe and Latin America

Unlike in Western Europe, where the gesture of tapping the temple has a positive connotation, in Eastern Europe and Latin America, the gesture acquires a very different meaning, and a negative one in most cases. In such places, the same gesture, striking the temple with the index finger or circling about it with the index finger, is widely used to indicate that the other person is irrational, foolish, or even crazy. Rather than indicating an

intelligent or discerning attitude, the gesture expresses questions regarding the mentality or judgment of a person.⁹⁹

In some countries like Russia, Poland, and Hungary, e.g., the gesture can be employed in a sarcastic or mocking way, and a dismissive facial gesture is usually added to it. It may be used by a human being in reaction to an unfamiliar remark or choice as though to say, What the matter with thee? or That does not add up. This movement tends to be more exaggerated or more intense than the western version and it is based on ridicule but not encouragement. In much the same way, even in Latin American cultures such as Argentina, Mexico, or Colombia the same temple tap or circular movement around the head generally communicates the notion that one is crazy (estas loco) or in touch with reality.¹⁰⁰

Although a friend or a relative may find it funny, the act can be easily interpreted as an insult or an insult to a person in a serious discussion. Since debate on mental stability or logic is usually a sensitive subject matter, applying this gesture improperly results in confusion or insults. It emphasizes the influence of cultural norms of politeness and expression of emotions on the perception of nonverbal behavior. Gestures that challenge the mental state of an individual can be considered disrespectful or even aggressive in these societies where upholding social harmony and respect is an important aspect.

This converse meaning is an illustration of the fact that the same physical movement can bring opposite feelings in different cultures admiration in one country and mockery in another. It reminds us that gestures are not universal but constructed symbols which are culturally constructed. The temple-tapping gesture in detail can be viewed as a bright illustration of how collective human behavior may be divided into totally dissimilar meanings in accordance with regional views on intelligence, reasoning, and sanity.

Cultural Interpretation

The contrasting interpretations of the gesture of tapping the temple in different regions reflect that cultural background provides meaning to nonverbal message. Despite the fact

⁹⁹ Poyatos, F. (2002). *Nonverbal Communication Across Disciplines, Volume 2: Paralanguage, Kinesics, Silence, Personal and Environmental Interaction*. John Benjamins Publishing.

¹⁰⁰ Kendon, A. (2004). *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance*. Cambridge University Press.

that the physical movement is the same, when people witness it, it is filtered through their cultural values, beliefs and social norms. These discrepancies are usually based on the perception of societies on mental health, rationality and emotional expression, which are highly entrenched in history and tradition.¹⁰¹

The gesture in Western Europe where the focus has long been on rational thought and intellectual success suggests a positive correlation between the mind and intelligence. A stroke on the temple is an indication of thought work- a call to reason or be imaginative. Western culture tends to appreciate individual expressiveness and mental acuity and thus the gesture has become an expression of approval or praise. It expresses the respect of problem solving and cleverness which are appreciated and honored in society.¹⁰²

In Eastern Europe and Latin America, on the other hand, a different system of social attitudes determines the same gesture. Traditionally, in these areas, mental health has been a more private or even stigmatized subject of conversation. Consequently, the gestures suggesting instability (and, therefore, the ones tapping on the head) bear the negative connotation, which can be used to refer to foolishness or irrationality. In addition, nonverbal communication in most of these cultures is more emotional and gestures are more involved in emotional exchange. This expressiveness can be used to make the crazy meaning of the temple tap more straightforward and familiar in social life.¹⁰³

The difference in the interpretations is also an example of how gestures develop on their own. Although the globalization process has disseminated some of the signs (such as the thumbs-up sign or the peace sign) across the boundaries, numerous gestures continue to have local associations due to centuries of cultural development.¹⁰⁴ However, with time, a common ground and a repetition make the societies assign symbolic significance to

¹⁰¹ Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond Culture*. Anchor Books.

¹⁰² Argyle, M. (1988). *Bodily Communication* (2nd ed.). Methuen.

¹⁰³ Axtell, R. E. (1998). *Gestures: The Do's and Taboos of Body Language Around the World*. John Wiley & Sons.

¹⁰⁴ Burgoon, J. K., Guerrero, L. K., & Floyd, K. (2016). *Nonverbal Communication* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

movements. Therefore, even such a small gesture as the temple tap can tell the attitude of the whole culture to intellect, reason, and mind.

In the end, it is the difference in definition that helps us to remember that communication is not all about movement, but also about shared meaning. The smallest universal cue, which appears insignificant, may tell a lot about the way people think, are sane, and respectful. This way, the temple-tapping gesture can be more than just a mere gesture; it is a reflection of how humans comprehend the very notion of the mind itself based on culture.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

The temple-tapping gesture is a strong signifier that the tiniest gestures can hold very different meanings in various cultures. What western Europe views as a sign of a friendly intelligent gesture can be viewed as an insult to the Eastern Europe or Latin America. These disparities expose the way of perception by culture, particularly on sensitive concepts such as rationality and mental health. Gestures do not include any sounds; however, they are symbols of values, beliefs and social attitudes of people using gestures.

In a highly globalized world, it is necessary to know such differences to communicate respectfully. Understanding that gestures are not universal is useful in avoiding misinterpretations and fostering cultural understanding. The simple, yet complicated, temple tap shows that body language is more than a movement, it is meaning, which is shaped by history and experience. One touch of the temple may hold you together or tear you apart, according where you are and according your interpretation of it.

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