

Beaux Gestes

A Guide to French Body Talk

Laurence Wylie

with Photographs by Rick Stafford

Conventional Gestures



Advanced Reasoning Forum

CONTENTS

- vii *Introduction*
- 1 *Tout Va Bien*
Self-Praise and Praise
- 11 *C'est la Vie*
Circumstance and Decision
- 23 *Le Jemenfoutisme*
Boredom, Indecision, and
Rejection
- 35 *Les Petites Misères*
Problems and Weaknesses
- 49 *Sex* *Sex*
- 55 *Aïe! Aïe! Aïe!*
Pain, Fright, and Surprise
- 63 *Jeux d'Enfants*
Menace and Mockery Among
Children
- 73 *Fais Gaffe*
Threat and Mayhem
- 78 *Index*

INTRODUCTION

WORDS ARE SO ESSENTIAL in conversation that we exaggerate their importance and overlook other signals. Many of the implications of the words, the emotions lying behind them, and indeed the dominant tones that provoke our reactions, are not conveyed by words. They are expressed by other channels of communication that make up what Edward Sapir called, “that elaborate and secret code that is written nowhere, known by none, and understood by all.” The tone of voice, the use of silence, the tension of the body, the expression of the face, the rhythm of our movements, our use of space, our gestures, and many other signals—some known, some unknown—play a crucial role in communication. We communicate not only with our voices but our entire bodies and the space around them.

Traditional language learning, dominated by a preoccupation with words, syntax, and pronunciation, has all but ignored these other channels of communication. No wonder language students complain that they do not really learn to interact with other people. I have often seen Americans with a superb command of verbal French fail utterly in their attempts to communicate with French people. They simply do not understand the nonverbal messages that reflect a great deal of the culture of a people.

Recently, a spate of books on “body language” has reminded us of our neglect of nonverbal communication. Unfortunately, these books oversimplify the problem, assuring the reader they will at once teach him to “read a person like a book”: I make no such claims for *Beaux Gestes*. I deal with only one as-

pect of French communication: gestures that some Frenchmen use and that most would recognize. I hope, however, that this book will draw attention to the need to broaden our conception of language learning.

Perhaps there should be a warning on the cover: DANGEROUS! USE ONLY AS DIRECTED! Gesturing may get you into trouble, or at least put you in difficult situations, if you do not know the cultural implications of different gestures. Of course, the same rule applies to words. The expression fellow students tricked me into learning in Poland was *psiakrew* and in Mexico *cabrón*. These words have no shocking connotations when they are translated into English, but "dog blood" and "billy goat" bring conversation to an embarrassing halt in Poland and Mexico. My friends were playing the time-honored game of teasing a foreigner, and I went along with it.

Not all of the gestures in this book are dangerous. Some are useful when words are awkward. For example, your spouse, sitting on the other side of the room at a party, wants to tell you that it is time to leave. In the United States, one usually conveys this message by tilting one's head and rolling one's eyes towards the door. With only their hands, the French can make the equivalent gesture (*On se tire*) more discreetly.

Sometimes it is distance that makes a gesture more appropriate than words: in a dance hall a young man gestures to a girl across a crowded floor to ask her for the next dance. By gesture you ask for a cigarette from someone on the other side of the room. A truck driver replies with an obscene gesture to the facial expression of protest of a driver he has blocked at a stoplight.

Yet gestures, because of their social implications, often reveal far more than the gesturer intended. Upper-class French parents severely reprimand their children for talking with their hands. Recently, my students asked a French visitor what he could tell about two young Frenchmen simply by looking at their non-verbal behavior on a thirty-second sequence of film. His

first reaction was that one was of a lower social class than the other because he used his hands and arms more when he talked.

For *les gens bien élevés*, a well-turned witticism is infinitely preferable to a gesture. So intellectuals use fewer gestures than less educated people, upper classes fewer than lower classes, adults fewer than children, women fewer than men, and sober people fewer than drunks. Obscene gestures are largely the domain of boys playing in the schoolyard, young men doing their military service, and older men standing at the bar of a P.M.U. café—but even proper people may resort to gestures in a traffic jam!

Of course, there are some refined gestures, such as kissing a lady's hand, but these, especially, should not be practiced by Americans without training in technique and an understanding of the social implications. What could be more humiliating at tea chez Madame la Marquise than a clumsy lunge at her hand? You might bump her hand with your nose. You might even touch her hand with your lips. And if you blunder into kissing her daughter's hand, you learn later that one simply does not kiss the hand of an unmarried girl.

Harder still is knowing when and how to kiss someone on both cheeks. Do you go first to the right or the left cheek? What tiny facial gesture tells you which way to go so you won't bump noses? Do you imitate those people who kiss not once but two or three times—and sometimes even more? It is better to play safe and be yourself until you learn.

I learned many of the gestures in this book from young French actors at the Jacques Lecoq School in Paris for *Mime—Mouvement—Théâtre*, where I spent the year 1972–73 studying cultural differences in body movement and nonverbal communication. Since everyone in the school was young, I had to learn about student life again. Usually I had lunch with a group of French students and, in order to follow their talk, I had to try to understand modern French student dialect. It was not the vocabulary that was difficult, since one can always memorize vocabulary. My problem was that in

their brand of French, words were undeniably less important than body movement, expression, and gesture.

At that time I had the idea of making a simple movie-dictionary of gestures. Seven French students, three women and four men, formed a sort of seminar and we spent hours at a café table making lists and definitions. Within a few days we had well over two hundred gestures. Then we went through the collection and retained those that could be clearly recognized without words and context by most French people, even though they might not use them. My colleague, Alfred Guzzetti, and I turned one of the school's practice rooms into a studio and filmed the seven students acting out the gestures. The result was a film that Guzzetti edited the following year and which we dignified with the title, *Preliminary Repertory of French Gestures*.

One unanticipated benefit of this project was that I was given lessons in making the gestures. At dinner in Paris with some Harvard graduate students, I demonstrated my new accomplishment. Another guest, Jon Randal, Paris correspondent for the *Washington Post*, decided to photograph the students making some of the more dramatic gestures. While his photographer was taking the shots, he photographed me being coached by the students. Later he decided it would be more amusing to use the photos of the American professor rather than those of the French students. His article, opening with a shot of me caught in a wild gesture, was entitled, "What Is This Man's Problem?" The article was widely reproduced and eventually gave the publishers the idea of doing this book.

When we made the film at the Lecoq School the non-French students were naturally intrigued. The Italians were openly contemptuous. *French* gestures? And with an eloquent Italian shrug they dismissed the French. Why, they asked, hadn't I filmed the real thing, *Italian* gestures?

As a matter of fact, despite their reputation, the Italians do not gesture *that* much more than the French. They look more animated because of the manner in which they gesticulate. Their movements characteristically involve the upper, as well as the

lower, arm. This manner contrasts with the opposite extreme of the Eastern European Jews who gesture a great deal but with the upper arm tightly hugging the body. The French make less use of the upper arm than the Italians but they do not press it against the ribs.

British gestures? Certainly the British, and perhaps all the people in Northern Europe, have the reputation of being singularly dull in "body talk." The clichéd "stiff upper lip" of the British upper class contributes to this opinion. At the same time, the most celebrated gesture in modern times was Churchill's "V for Victory." As far as I know, British gesture has not been studied.

As for the Americans, Jacques Lecoq pointed out to me that we frequently hold our arms still and move our heads and torsos in rhythm with our words. I noticed this when I was looking at a movie of the Kennedy-Nixon debates. Kennedy's movements were constrained (perhaps because of his bad back?) but Nixon's movements were standard American. He took the traditional stance of American orators and preachers, grasping the sides of the lectern tightly so that his arms were still, and rhythmically coordinating his verbal emphases with his body movement. There was little movement at all in the Carter-Ford debates, which is possibly one of the reasons that people found them boring.

The difference between French and American movement is very obvious. In Paris one can recognize Americans two hundred yards away simply by the way they walk. A Belgian student told me that when he returned home after three months at the Harvard Business School, his father was shocked when he saw his son walk from the plane. "You've become an American," were his first words of greeting. "You bounce when you walk!" An American often walks with swinging arms and a rolling pelvis as though moving through a space unlimited by human or physical obstacles. Jean-Paul Belmondo walked like an "uncivilized" American when he played the tough guy in his first films. In his later "gentleman" films he walked

properly: erect, square-shouldered, his arms moving as though the space around him were severely limited. From childhood the French have been told, "Don't drag your feet! Don't swing your arms! Stand up straight! *Ne t'avachis pas!*" A Frenchman who does not conform to these rules is either poorly brought up or has deliberately rejected convention.

At the Lecoq School, I was struck by the contrast between French and American behavior. To do an improvisation a French student first carefully rehearses each detail of his plan in his mind; then he assumes the dignified posture of a statue of a Maréchal surveying the world from the ledge of the Louvre. An American stands loose, a bit hunched, almost in the pose of a ready wrestler, eager for impromptu action, illustrating the very American slogans of the Boy Scouts and the Marines: "Be prepared," "Semper Paratus!" When improvising trees, the French were espaliered pear trees, and the Americans, unpruned apple trees.

Like ideas and words, gestures have a life of their own. They are born; they migrate; they change; and sometimes they disappear entirely. Unfortunately, we know little about the origin, geographical distribution, and history of gestures. Students of modern gesture can use movies, but the body movement of the past is lost. We must learn what we can from art forms depicting the human body and from literary texts describing movement.

Some gestures that are taken for granted as part of our own culture have actually had a long and cosmopolitan career. *Le pied de nez* is a good example. I had thought this was an expression used by small boys in southern Indiana in the first part of the century. Actually folklorists call it the "Shanghai gesture" and have made it the subject of a learned dissertation. It has been commonly used in the western world since at least the sixteenth century. The Germans call it *Die lange Nase*, the French *Le pied de nez*, the British "cocking a snook." The term "Shanghai," incidentally, has nothing to do with China since the gesture is not known in the Orient.

French friends tell me that *Le pied de nez* is no longer used very often, and I thought that in the United States, also, it had lost out to the more forceful Finger. I had assumed that the Finger was modern, but I could not have been more mistaken. It is much older even than the Shanghai gesture. Classicists have shown me passages indicating that Diogenes showed the Finger to Demosthenes, and that Caligula shocked the Romans by presenting his finger rather than his hand to be kissed. In Latin the gesture is known as the *Digitus obscenus* or *Digitus impudicus*. However, we do not know how the ancients held the Finger; vertically, like the Italians and Americans today, or horizontally like the French?

Cultural variations appear in many gestures that are almost universal. A common example is the gesture of waving farewell. In Italy the palm of the hand is held toward the speaker and the fingers make the motion of drawing the departing person back. In Spain the movement is the same, but the hand is held horizontally. In France the palm is frequently held facing the departing person, and the movement of the hand appears to push the departing person on his way. Some scholars think that exposing one's palm indicates surrender; so perhaps the French form of farewell implies a reassurance of nonaggression. Americans are inclined to show the palm also and move the flattened hand from left to right. A Haitian told me of a Florida beauty queen who was invited to participate in a celebration in Port-au-Prince. In the parade she sat atop her float, waving innocently to the crowd, unaware that in Haitian gesture language she was proclaiming, "Screw you! Screw you!"

This book includes only a few dozen of the hundreds of gestures in the repertory of the French students who coached me. We have chosen those which seem unusual or amusing. You will note that some are by no means uniquely French but all have a French twist to them. The Royal Shaft done by a Frenchman, an Italian, and an American may have a similar meaning, but the facial expression and the movement of the rest of the body give the gesture a cultural style.

Of course, my behavior in the photographs

of this book is incongruous. An elderly Harvard professor should not be making these gestures. No French professor would let himself be cast in this role, and I certainly did not learn the gestures from my French colleagues! But I risk the incongruity because I am not French and I trust the French will be indulgent. They are always indulgent to children who are not their own, and, after all, they know that *les Américains sont de grands enfants*. Perhaps I should add: *Peut-être surtout moi!*