

BOOK REVIEW

Roger E. Axtell (1991). GESTURE: THE DO'S AND TABOOS OF BODY LANGUAGE AROUND THE WORLD. Toronto: John Wiley & Sons Inc.
Paper 227 pages. \$13.95 Reviewed by David Johnston.

Whereas Subtext and Gestures are essentially about the same subject, body language, the treatment in each case is quite different. Julius Fast, author of Subtext, emphasizes hidden meaning. Encouraging the reader to be aware of subtle cues in order to master situations and to communicate more effectively in order to ensure that one's gestures are in congruence with one's will. In contrast, Roger Axtell informs the reader in a matter of fact way about acquired routine gestures around the world. He does so by writing in an easy to read often humorous anecdotal style, using historical and contemporary references. The book also comes amply illustrated with amusing cartoons.

Gestures is divided up into five chapters. It begins with numerous examples that indicate the effective power of body language and gestures. For example, Churchill's famous 'V' for victory became a rallying sign for Allied Forces during the Second World War. Chapter two concentrates on the most popular gestures and initiates the reader into understanding that people can react to the same situation with different body language according to one's society, geography and ethnic influences. Consider, for example, how women from different cultures might react to being interrupted by the presence of a male stranger while taking a bath. A Mohammedan woman would react by covering her face, a [pre-

revolutionary] Chinese woman by covering her feet and a Western woman by covering her breasts and genital areas.

Moreover, people throughout the world react to the identical gesture in different ways. Take, for example, the familiar circle formed with the index finger joining the thumb, which means A. O. K. to us. In France, it means zero or worthless, in Japan, money and, in Latin America, 'screw you,' something Richard Nixon learned to his chagrin during a goodwill trip to that part of the world. Meanwhile, the 'thumbs up' gesture, which means 'good show' to us, in Australia, is a quiet way to say 'up yours,' roughly equivalent to the *digitus impudicus* or one finger salute, made famous in Canada by Pierre Trudeau.

The following three chapters complete the book. Chapter three, only one page long, is about the smile, the only gesture universally recognized around the world. The meaning of popular gestures in North America is then juxtaposed with what they mean elsewhere, making up chapter four. The last chapter, the longest, is basically a country by country encyclopedia of gestures.

Gestures is a handy guide for tourists and travelling business people. Although with careful on-the-spot observation, one can, with little difficulty come up with all the necessary understanding of long acquired gestures, the book gives the busy person a head start. It needs to be said, however, that it introduces the reader to the most superficial layer of international culture. Such a book would serve a

larger purpose if it stimulates the reader into studying the culture of the people being visited in more depth.