

Why do we nod our heads for "yes" and shake them for "no"?

A Straight Dope Classic from Cecil's Storehouse of Human Knowledge

March 14, 1986

Dear Cecil:

Why do we nod our heads for "yes" and shake them for "no," instead of the other way around? Are there any peoples who reverse the gestures?

— *Have to Know, Chicago*

Cecil replies:

Believe it or not, H., some people think this is a silly question. Little do they know. No less a personage than Charles Darwin looked into it and wrote up his findings in a book called *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). Darwin was interested in finding out whether there were universal gestures and expressions, so he sent out a questionnaire to missionaries and whatnot that, among other things, asked what gesticulations the locals used to convey "yes" and "no." Nodding and head-shaking turned out to be pretty common, but there were some striking exceptions. For example, certain Australian natives, when uttering a negative, "don't shake the head, but holding up the right hand, shake it by turning it half round and back again two or three times." One Captain Speedy — I can't say the name inspires much confidence — told Darwin that the Abyssinians said "no" by jerking the head to the right shoulder and making a slight cluck, while "yes" was expressed by the head being thrown backwards and the eyebrows raised for an instant. The Dyaks of Borneo supposedly raised their eyebrows for "yes" and slightly contracted them, "together with a peculiar look of the eyes," for "no." Eskimoes nodded for "yes" and winked for "no."

The only place I know of where they completely reverse the meaning of our nod and head-shake gestures is Bulgaria. There a nod means no and a shake means yes. One shudders to think of the implications this has for cross-cultural dating in that country. The Turks are almost as confusing — they say "yes" by shaking their heads from side to side, and "no" by tossing their heads back and clucking. Head-tossing for "no" is also common in Greece and parts of Italy, such as Naples, that were colonized or heavily influenced by Greeks in ancient times.

Still, cultures ranging from the Chinese to the natives of Guinea nod and shake their heads like we do, leading Darwin to believe that the gestures were innate to some extent. He noticed that when babies refused food they almost always turned their heads to the side, whereas when they had worked up an appetite they inclined their heads forward in a nodding gesture.

Other gestures are much more arbitrary. One of the most notorious of these is making a circle with thumb and forefinger, which to Americans and most Europeans means "OK." In Brazil, however, and some other places, it means something on the order of "screw you." (The actual term is more pungent, you understand.) Cecil learned this to his sorrow on a little jaunt he made to Sao Paulo some years ago. I seldom make the OK gesture at home, but once I got down south and learned its obscene significance I felt a sudden compulsion to make it 20 or 30 times a day, thus antagonizing Brazilians by the thousands. It was only with the most determined effort that I was able to stifle this low impulse and make the thumbs-up sign that, in Rio as in the U.S., signifies everything's copacetic.

Which reminds me. You probably think we make the thumbs-up gesture because that's what the Romans used to do when they wanted to spare a fallen gladiator, right? Wrong — that's a myth based on a succession of mistranslations. The truth is when the Romans were feeling merciful they hid their thumbs in their clenched fists (symbolically sheathing their swords, some historians believe). To have a guy offed they didn't turn thumbs down but rather extended their thumbs in a stabbing gesture. For whatever reason, though, thumbs-up today means OK just about everywhere — except in Sardinia or Greece, where it means "screw you." I'm told that for rookie travelers this makes hitchhiking in Athens a pretty lively experience. Caveat viator.

And now this message of moral uplift

Dear Cecil:

With reference to your column on gestures, did you leave out or just not know that in Greece the five fingers spread out and thrust forward at someone means "[poo] in your face"? I learned it as a child while living in Greektown and it really came in "handy" at times.

— Had to Tell You, Chicago

Cecil replies:

Thank you for sharing that with us, H. Just shows you how the Greeks continue to enrich civilization.

Crossed signals

Dear Cecil:

*I'd like to add some info to your column on gestures. The misunderstanding regarding the thumbs-up, thumbs-down gestures and ancient Rome began with a 19th-century French artist named Jean Leon Gerome and his painting *Pollice verso*. Gerome isn't a household word today, but he was a painter of international renown in his time, the leading academic artist of the period. He was also a learned classicist who specialized in archaeologically correct history paintings. The Jenney Latin textbooks of my misspent youth used to use Gerome's work to illustrate Roman customs. His *Pollice verso*, in which a gladiator stands astride a fallen foe and looks up to the Colosseum's bleachers for the crowd's verdict, was a tremendous hit back in 1874, and called forth considerable scholarly debate on whether the thumbs up and down he painted amidst the crowd were the correct interpretation of the Latin phrase *pollice verso*, "with turned thumb." Alexander Stewart bought the painting from Gerome, brought it to America, and published a pamphlet about the work in which he proved to the satisfaction of his contemporaries that *pollice verso* was a matter of turning the thumb up or down. Gerome's artistic reputation went into eclipse after his death, but his gladiator paintings had considerable influence on early Hollywood's epics about pagan Rome, and that's how we got our current interpretation of thumbs up and thumbs down.*

My young lady is Philippine, and she says that when Filipinos want to signal agreement or approval they raise their eyebrows. They have no analogous gesture to signal disapproval, however, shaking their heads instead.

— F.J.R., Lawrence, Kansas

Cecil replies:

It is still not totally clear what gestures the Romans used to indicate go/no go at gladiator. *Pollice verso* has been translated to mean "with thumbs turned inward," "with thumbs turned outward" (in both cases as a stabbing gesture), and "with thumbs bent back" (i.e., thumbs up). Hardly anyone contends that the phrase meant "thumbs

down." On the contrary, some say thumbs down meant "spare him." Our opposite interpretation is largely Gerome's invention. For fuller discussion of the preceding, see *Gestures* by Desmond Morris (1979).

— Cecil Adams