

UNDERSTAND BODY LANGUAGE

Using body language in everyday life (page 2) How you can make a good first impression (page 16) Master the art of small talk (page 18) How to attract the opposite sex (page 24) Make your body strong at work (page 36) The skills you need for better body language (page 50) Let your gestures do the talking (page 83) Know when to touch – and when not to (page 115) How to win with body language (page 153) Learn more online (www.teachyourself.com)



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Understand Body Language

Gordon R. Wainwright
Revised by Richard Thompson

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Introduction

Language is about communication. We tend to think that means *spoken*, but you may be surprised to learn that 90 per cent of what we communicate with each other is *unspoken*, in the form of non-verbal ‘signals’ we give each other through eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, postures and a variety of sounds and other sensory cues. This is the language of the body. We use it all the time, some of us more effectively than others, and a lot of the time without even realizing we are using it. We start learning it in childhood, just as we learn to speak our own mother tongue by picking up words and meanings from our parents and those around us. But the difference is that while mistakes in our spoken language tend to be corrected, they can be missed, or misinterpreted, in our body language – so you can grow up not realizing you are communicating badly, or ineffectively. Hence the reason for this book.

These signals and cues transmit information about our motives, intentions and feelings. We use the language of the body to convey all kinds of messages and meanings and most of us take this process for granted, never realizing that it takes place at a *subconscious*, rather than a *conscious*, level. Just think about it for a minute. Winks, blinks, nods, sighs and grunts – how many of these are you really *aware* of in the process of communication? The point is that language doesn’t have to be in the form of words for your meaning to be grasped by someone else. The way you use your body to emphasize or suggest, to inform, illustrate, or even manipulate, is like ‘punctuation’. Without it, meaning and emphasis is lost.

You only have to think about the people you most admire, or dislike, to understand the significance of this body talk – the charismatic ones who seem to draw people to them like magnets, the irritating ones who always seem to get in your way, the ones you envy who never seem to put a foot wrong, the quiet ones whose eyes are like rapiers. Something about their physical presence ‘talks’ to you. Very often the actual words we use to describe behaviour are reflected in our body language. For example, moody people tend to look ‘down in the mouth’, confident people are said to be ‘laid back’, assertive people ‘reach out’, and so forth. Because we’re not very good at recognizing the connections between body language and states of mind, we often fail to make the best of ourselves, or the relationships we have with others.

It’s only when we look more closely that we begin to reveal things about ourselves and others that we’ve missed in the course of our busy, everyday lives. If you don’t think you are making the best of yourself in personal relationships, at work, or just in your everyday contact with people, the explanations, exercises and experiments at the end of each chapter should help. You probably want to know how to become more skilled in the use of body language and in understanding other people’s use of it. A lot of research has been carried out on non-verbal communication over the past few decades in strangely named disciplines like paralinguistics, proxemics, chronemics, kinesics and neurolinguistic programming. But don’t worry about the specialist terms, body language isn’t rocket science. Improving your communication skills is a combination of common sense, accurate observation, reflection and application. It’s a bit like looking at the stars through a telescope for the first time. Things you have missed with the naked eye come sharply into focus – adding definition and meaning to what you have always taken for granted.

So let’s get started. First of all, here’s a summary of what you will find in each of the forthcoming chapters:

Part one looks at the different situations, or contexts, in which body language plays such an important part in everyday life.

Chapter 1 examines **cultural differences** in the use of body language. We look at the importance of understanding and respecting variations in non-verbal behaviour and examine some of the more unusual, unexpected and significant differences.

Chapter 2 considers the importance of body language in **everyday encounters**, from initial impressions, breaking the ice and small talk, to how we learn to get on with each other and recognize when we are being deceived.

Chapter 3 examines the role of body language in **personal attraction** and considers how non-verbal behaviour can be used to enhance our best assets as well as improve our presentation and relationship skills.

Chapter 4 explores the role of **body language at work** and looks at how self-presentation and performance skills can be enhanced in face-to-face occupations such as nursing, teaching, television interviewing, retail sales and commercial business.

Part two looks in detail at the skills and techniques needed to become a confident body language communicator, and offers an integrated approach to achieving this.

Chapter 5 considers the importance of **eye contact**. A potent form of non-verbal communication, eye contact can be spell-binding, intimidating, informative and central to the making and breaking of relationships. As an indicator of sexual attraction it has no equal. We have to be careful what we are doing with our eyes.

Chapter 6 deals with **facial expressions**. The smile is one of the few universals in body language, as is the 'eyebrow flash' of recognition and greeting. Our faces may not always be our fortunes, but they are certainly where some of the most powerful non-verbal signals originate.

Chapter 7 examines **head talk** – literally the way in which we use our heads to communicate non-verbally. The role of head movements in social interaction is explained and their importance when listening to others is discussed.

Chapter 8 shows how **gestures** and **body movements** are a language in themselves. They 'direct' communication and provide the cues that determine how we relate to each other. Cultural differences in gesture use are also discussed.

Chapter 9 examines the role of **posture** in body language. Once the focus of etiquette and deportment lessons, today posture is seen as a key conveyor of non-verbal signals about our state of mind during communication.

Chapter 10 examines the importance of **personal space** and how we defend it against unwanted invasion through our body language and territorial awareness. How we use **body orientation** to indicate our feelings about people is also discussed.

Chapter 11 deals with **bodily contact** and **touching**. The main distinction between the two is that bodily contact is defined as accidental, whereas touching involves the intention to make physical contact, usually with the hands.

Chapter 12 discusses our obsession with **shape, size** and **looks**. Simple changes to appearance and physique can have a significant effect upon our ability to interact successfully with others.

Chapter 13 considers the importance of **time** and **timing** in our lives and how we

synchronize with each other during positive interaction. Making time work for you improves performance and leads to greater self-confidence.

[Chapter 14](#) examines our use of **signals** and **words** and looks at how non-verbal aspects of speech back up, extend and illustrate what we are saying. Pauses, ‘ums’ and ‘ers’, pitch, tone, pace and accent are more important than you might suppose.

[Chapter 15](#) considers what **being a success** means and to what extent self-motivation is the key to personal growth and self-improvement.

Hopefully, by the time you reach the end of the book you will understand what body language can do for you in your everyday life and how you can use it to improve your relationships and interactions with others.

Part one

**Body language in everyday
life**

Before we examine the skills and techniques needed to become a confident body language communicator, it's important to recognize some of the everyday life situations, or contexts, in which non-verbal communication plays such a significant role. The chapters that follow will evaluate differences in body language recognition and how we can use this knowledge to enhance our personal and working relationships.

Cultural differences

In this chapter you will learn:

- *about cultural differences in the use of body language*
- *how taking account of such differences makes you a more effective communicator.*

Body language is complex enough when you are dealing with people from your own culture, let alone those from other parts of the world where cultural differences may count for a lot in personal and professional communication. Because things can so easily go wrong as a result of misunderstandings or inadvertent mistakes, it may be useful to consider some of the difficulties to be encountered, and how to avoid them.

The world today is a much smaller place than it was even 50 years ago. Travel is relatively easy, and far cheaper than it used to be. We can go to distant places which were once inaccessible to us because of cost, difficult terrain and political boundaries. We watch television pictures from the other side of the globe beamed to us by satellite, chat online thanks to the power of the internet, and text each other on mobile phones from all over the world, at a fraction of the cost it used to be.

The revolution in communications has made all this possible. As a result, the differences between the peoples of the world are diminishing. We know more about each other now than ever before. We share ideas and copy each other's fashions and technical innovations – but we don't always understand how our traditions and customs differ. Just because you can back-pack across China, fly to a conference in Managua, or sleep rough on a Greek holiday beach, doesn't mean you understand or respect the values and uniqueness of the people and places you visit.

Cultural diversity offers huge opportunities for learning about, and integrating into, each other's cultures, yet all too often little or no effort is made to do so. Historical factors are partly to blame for this, such as the 'we're better than them' attitudes which still exist as a hangover from the colonial era. But there is no room for this today. Failure to respect the customs, values and traditions of other countries and peoples is a recipe for disaster in a multicultural, inter-dependent world.

Silent language

The anthropologist, Edward Hall, coined the phrase 'the silent language' to describe out-of-awareness aspects of communication. People of western European descent, he argued, live in a 'word world' and often fail to realize the significance of the 'language of behaviour'. If we don't at least try to understand this language, we can only blame ourselves when things go wrong. He gives instances in which inappropriate non-verbal behaviour, coupled with general cultural insensitivity, can cause poor communication, or even cause it to break down altogether. Take the case in which negotiations between American and Greek officials had reached stalemate. Examination revealed that the American habit of being outspoken and forthright was regarded by the Greeks as indicating a lack of finesse, which made them reluctant to negotiate. When the

Americans wanted to limit the length of meetings and to reach agreement on general principles first, leaving the details to be sorted out by sub-committees, the Greeks saw this as a device to pull the wool over their eyes. The basic difference between the two negotiating styles was that the Greeks preferred to work out the details in front of all concerned – regardless of how long it took.

In another case, an American attaché, new to a Latin country, tried to arrange a meeting with his ministerial opposite number. All kinds of messages came back that the time was not yet ripe for such a meeting. The American persisted and was eventually granted an appointment. When he arrived, he was asked to wait in an outer office. The time of the appointment came and went. After 15 minutes, he asked the minister's secretary to make sure the minister knew he was waiting. Time passed. Twenty minutes, 30 minutes, 45 minutes. At this point, he jumped up and told the secretary he had been 'cooling his heels' long enough and that he was 'sick and tired' of this kind of treatment. What he had failed to grasp is that a 45-minute waiting time in that country was equivalent to a five-minute waiting time in America.

Effective cross-cultural communication is so important in the modern world that breakdowns like these need to be studied for the lessons they can teach us. They also make it increasingly important that people who live and work in countries other than their own should be given training so that they recognize differences in local body language as well as the local spoken language. While quite a lot of research has been carried out on differences in the way various peoples around the world use body language, it has tended to focus on the Americans, the Japanese, the Arabs and some European countries. More needs to be done to include people from other cultures given the far greater mobility afforded by open borders and cheaper travel today.

Eye signals

In research into the use of eye contact, for instance, it has been observed that Greeks look at each other more in public places, whether in direct communication or just observation. In fact, they feel quite upset if other people do not show an equal curiosity in them and feel they are being ignored. On the other hand, Swedes have been found to look at each other less often than other Europeans, but they look for longer.

Arabs are very dependent on eye contact when conversing. They look at each other when listening and when talking, however they interact less successfully with someone whose eyes cannot be seen. The Japanese look at other people very little and tend to focus their eyes on the other person's neck when conversing. Americans and British, on the other hand, tend to be relatively restrained in their facial expressions, while Italians tend to be much more expressive. The Japanese keep a straight face in public and make more use of smiles when greeting others, particularly in business and formal meetings.

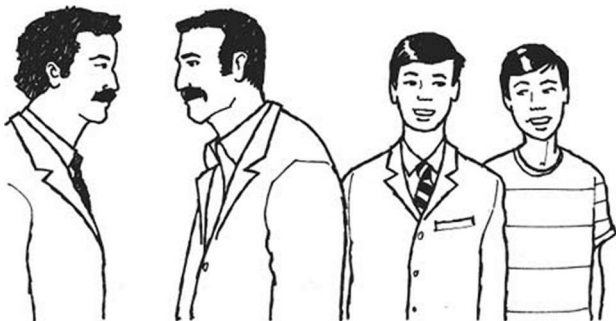


Figure 1.1 Eye contact.

Thoughts and actions

We communicate using gestures and body posture far more than we realize. Gesticulations, facial expressions, head movements, in fact all kinds of actions involving the face, hands and body, take the place of words on many occasions. It's as if we are dancing to the tune of our thoughts, investing what we say with additional meaning and weight. Sometimes thoughts and feelings make themselves known without us intending them to do so – what we mean by *betraying our thoughts*.

In many cases actions speak louder than words. How a person stands can indicate how they are feeling about something. We call someone 'uptight' when they seem taut and controlling, and 'defensive' when they cross their arms and hunch their backs. The Japanese bow when greeting and saying farewells, with persons of lower status bowing lower than those of high status. Germans on the other hand maintain a more upright posture than people from Latin countries. Italians and Arabs stand closer to other people when conversing, whereas Germans stand further apart.

The Japanese use formal gestures to summon others to them, such as extending the arm with palm downwards and fluttering the fingers. To suggest that someone is a liar, they lick a forefinger and stroke an eyebrow. The British are more likely to nod and look downwards, saying nothing, yet signifying their doubt.

In the USA, you can signal that everything is OK by forming a circle with the thumb and index finger and spreading out the rest of the fingers, but in Japan the same gesture means money, in France it means 'zero', in Scandinavia and parts of central Europe it is regarded as vulgar, and in some south American countries it has obscene connotations.

In Hindu and Muslim cultures it is customary to use the right hand when preparing and eating food because the left hand is considered unclean due to its use in bodily hygiene. Equally, pointing the soles of your feet towards another person is considered offensive – something that globe-trotting backpackers should note.

Westerners tend to think that a smile always reflects warmth or happiness, yet in some parts of Asia it can also indicate displeasure since overt expression of negative feelings is discouraged. Silence is similarly misinterpreted. Whereas the Japanese are

comfortable with silences, particularly during negotiations, Americans and British often find them unnerving. We shall return to this subject in more detail in [Chapter 8](#).

Touch and tone

Latins touch each other more readily in everyday social situations than northern Europeans, while Arab men will frequently hold hands while walking and talking – something which Europeans often misinterpret. The Japanese touch each other very little in public, though they have a tradition of bathing together without any connotation of immodesty. Western women kiss, hug and touch each other socially, while it is frowned upon for Arab women to be touched at all in public.

We often pat children on the head as a sign of affection, but in Muslim countries the head is regarded as the seat of mental and spiritual powers. Accordingly, it should not be touched. In the West we scratch our heads when we are puzzled, while in Japan, the same action is interpreted as showing anger.

Amongst other non-verbal forms of communication tone of voice is particularly important across cultures. Emotions can be gauged from how people speak even if the spoken language is not properly understood. But a word of warning here: Latin languages are often spoken with far greater emphasis than, say, English, and are accompanied by similarly expressive hand and arm movements. To the more reserved northern European this can sound like shouting, or even criticism, when it is simply uninhibited conversation. In other words, it is up to you, the listener, to recognize and appreciate cultural differences in the way we communicate, not to over-react to types of behaviour with which we are unfamiliar. Just because something does not conform to our own notions of acceptability, doesn't mean that it is wrong.

PERSONAL SPACE

Americans generally prefer more personal space than people in Mediterranean and Latin American cultures, and more than men in Muslim cultures. This is because space is associated with independence and individual rights to privacy. In a recent study, a Brazilian man working as a waiter in an American restaurant found that his habit of casually touching his colleagues when talking resulted in him being rejected. Confused as to why this was happening, he started to observe how Americans interact and eventually realized that they dislike being touched by people they don't know.

In another case, an American student, who was reading philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris, was surprised to find that his Algerian neighbour had a habit of standing and talking barely inches from his face. Not wanting to seem rude by backing away, the student admitted that such close proximity made him extremely uncomfortable. If an American was to get that close, he said, he would have reacted quite differently.

What this tells us is that different cultures have different 'rules of engagement' and that breaking them, even without knowing, can have negative results. Having said this, it is rare for people to have confrontations over personal space, probably because it's hard to tell someone from another culture to back off without appearing offensive. Much more likely is that we will angle our bodies in such a way as to create a buffer zone between them and us. Essentially there is no difference between us and the rest of the animal kingdom in this respect. Animals don't take kindly to being touched by strangers, so why should we? (See [Chapter 10](#) for more.)

Universal body language

So what does all this tell us? Essentially, it is that while we may be very different from

each other, there are nevertheless universally understood examples of body language which bind us together. For example, Ekman and Friesen found that people of 13 different cultures were able to distinguish accurately between the non-verbal expressions of joy, surprise, fear, anger, sadness and disgust, while Michael Argyle identified seven elements which commonly occur in greetings:

- *close proximity and face-to-face orientation*
- *the eyebrow flash (raised up on greeting)*
- *smiling*
- *direct eye contact*
- *bodily contact, even in most otherwise non-contact cultures*
- *presenting of the palm of the hand, either to shake or simply to be seen*
- *upward head toss or nod in the form of a bow.*

Though it is generally the case that people smile when they are happy and scowl when they are angry, there are lots of ways in which we show non-verbal dissatisfaction with another's behaviour – the shrug, for example. To minimize the risk of causing offence, or of being offended, it is important to use those aspects of body language that have universal currency as much as possible. Smiles, eyebrow flashes, cocking the head, presenting the palm of the right hand in greeting – all help to ease you through the initial phases of encounters, enabling you then to use other descriptive gestures to indicate what you want to say or do.

Generally speaking, a friendly expression and an indication of interest in the other person will help to smooth over awkwardness and embarrassment. If this is supported by some attempt to learn key words and phrases from the spoken language, communication is immediately enhanced. This way, your opposite number will almost certainly meet you half way. Even those who live in quite formal cultures, like the Japanese, respond very favourably when appropriate body language is accompanied by a few carefully chosen words.

Business body language

There are pitfalls to be avoided when conducting business in other countries, particularly in our use and understanding of body language differences. As we have seen, awareness of the passage of time varies across cultures. In the USA, the obsession with time and scheduling means that punctuality and efficiency are expected, and competitiveness encouraged. Americans prefer a brisk, businesslike approach and are gregarious at first meeting. Differences in status are minimized.

By comparison, in Arab countries, persons of senior rank and status tend to be recognized first. Arabs like expressiveness and periodic displays of emotion. Group-style business meetings with several things happening at once are typical. It is not unusual for participants to enter into close, personal discussion whatever other conversation is going on around them.

Africans like to get to know someone before getting down to business and the general chat at the beginning of business meetings can seem like time-wasting to foreigners. Time is flexible and people who appear to be in a hurry are mistrusted. Lateness is a normal part of life. Respect is expected to be shown to older people.

In China, people do not like to be singled out as unique and prefer to be treated as part of a team. Women often occupy important posts and expect to be treated as equals. Long-standing relationships are respected and are worth taking time to establish. Even in the age of email, personal contact is highly valued. Several negotiating sessions will normally be required, as the Chinese do not like to rush things.

Robert Moran graphically illustrates how things can so easily go wrong when you fail to observe local cultural differences in body language. For example, if you wish to catch the attention of a waiter at a business lunch in Western countries a common way is to hold a hand up with the index finger extended. In Asia, however, this is the way you would call a dog or some other animal. In Arab countries, showing the soles of your feet is an insult. An Arab may also insult someone by holding their hand in front of the person's face.



Figure 1.2 Finger signals – European.

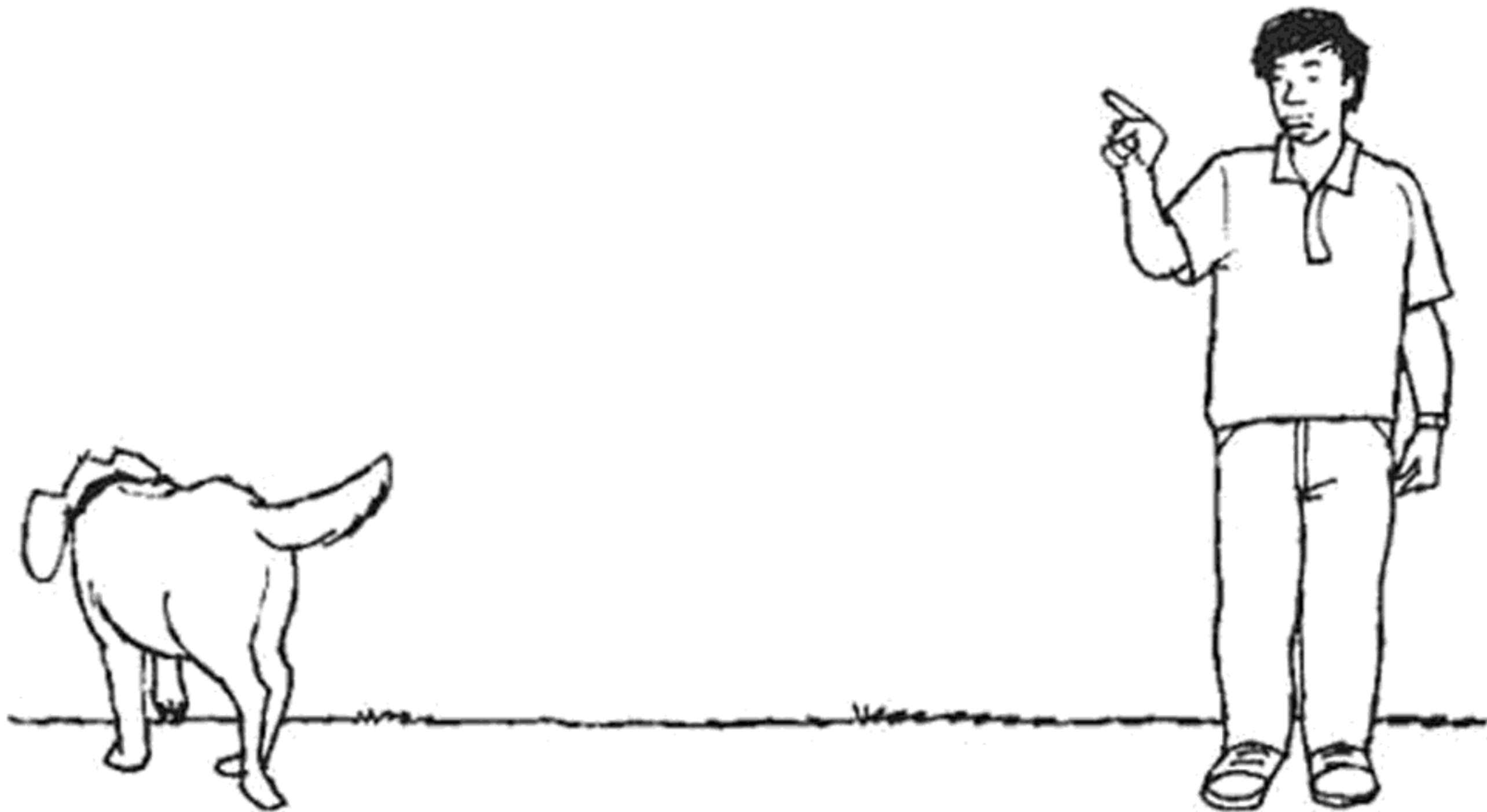


Figure 1.3 Finger signals – Asian.

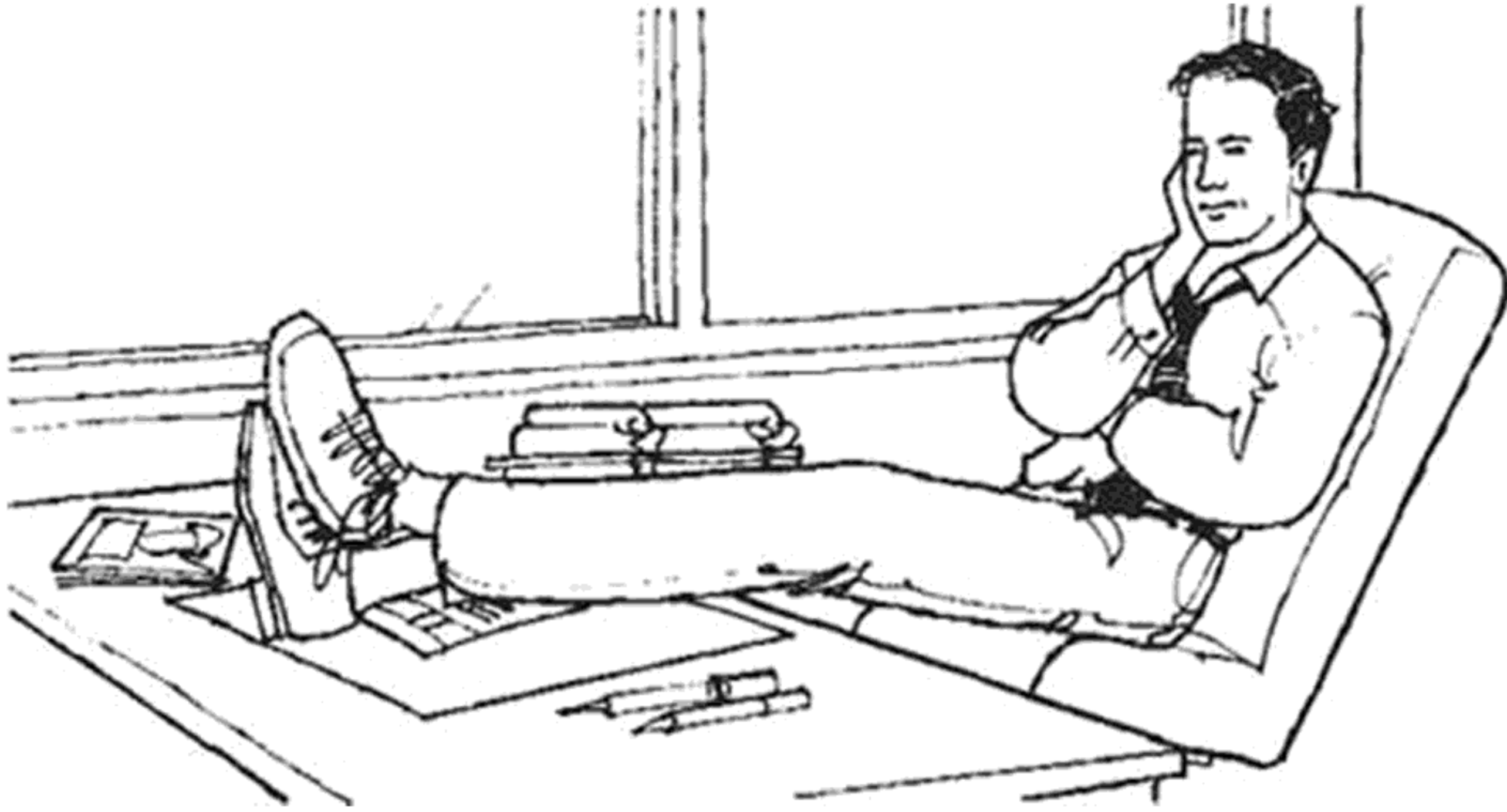


Figure 1.4 This would be an insult to an Arab.

In most parts of the world, shaking the head means 'No', but in Arab countries and in parts of Greece, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Turkey, a more usual way is to toss the head to one side, perhaps clicking the tongue as well. In Japan, a person may move his right hand backwards and forwards to communicate a refusal or disagreement. In Africa agreement is shown by holding an open palm upright and smacking it with a closed fist. Arabs will show agreement by extending clasped hands with the index fingers pointing towards the other person.

Clearly, anyone who undertakes international business should do a little research beforehand in order to find out what body language pitfalls need to be avoided. It may make the difference between success and failure. In a highly competitive world, the businessperson who fails to appreciate the power of body language can end up paying a high price.

You can improve your knowledge of body language as you go along by recording your responses electronically, or in a notebook. This way, you will have something to refer to when you read through the review section following each exercise.

Exercise 1: Multicultural body language

Select five people from different cultures and observe how their body language differs. How do they greet each other, or say farewell? How close do they stand or sit? Are there variations in facial, hand and body movements and postures? Do they observe silences more or less than each other? In particular, note the role of women in the company of men from different parts of the world.

Make notes (discreetly) about clothing styles, including colours, formality of dress, patterns, and the extent of covering-up. Record as much detail as you can about eye contact patterns, facial expressions, gestures, proximity and bodily contact.

When you have collected as much information as you reasonably can, analyse it. What seem to be the main differences between them? What are the similarities? What differences are there between the sexes? What are your thoughts on these?

EXERCISE REVIEW

These preliminaries are usually followed by stereotypical exchanges of the ‘How are you?’ ‘I’m fine, how are you?’ variety. At this point, the conversation will either move on to more substantial matters, or conclude naturally. If it continues, body language tends to settle down with facial expressions and head movements altering to reflect what is being said. Posture relaxes and gestures emphasize the points being made. Within a very short space of time you will be unconsciously harmonizing, or *synchronizing*, with your opposite number. (See [Chapters 8 and 9.](#))

During investigations of non-verbal communication in encounters, Mark Knapp and his colleagues identified a number of body language behaviours that indicate when conversations are coming to an end. Referred to as ‘the rhetoric of goodbye’ these include breaking eye contact, pointing the body in the direction one intends to leave, increased head and leg movements and smiling. If seated, uncrossing the legs and striking a foot against the floor while using the hands to lever oneself out of the chair, makes clear the intention to go.

Small talk

Vague, inconsequential chats about nothing in particular may seem hardly worth spending time on, yet they can be more important than you think. During small talk, what is being said is often less significant than what is being conveyed in body language terms. Next time you encounter someone for a casual chat, or meet a stranger at a party, try noting his or her body language and consider how it is being used, for example:

- **Eye contact** *Do they appear to want more or less of it? How dilated are their pupils? Do they keep looking around at other people, or is their full attention given to you?*
- **Facial expressions** *Are they positive or negative? Are there smiles and signs of interest, or scowls of disgust? Are there few or many changes in expression? Can you spot momentary changes in expression?*
- **Head movements** *Do they show interest by cocking their heads? Do they encourage you to speak with head nods? Do they respond to your head nods? Does the rhythm of their head movements fit the rhythm of their speech?*
- **Gestures** *Few or many? Are they expressive? Are they appropriate? Are they open or closed? Are the arms folded in front of themselves? If they cross their legs, which way do they cross them, towards you or away from you?*
- **Posture** *Is it upright or stooping? Which way is the individual leaning?*
- **Proximity and orientation** *Do they approach closely or not? If you move closer, do they back away or turn away from you? Is their orientation direct or indirect? Is it symmetrical or asymmetrical? Horizontal or vertical?*
- **Bodily contact** *Do they use any? In greetings only? Are they touchers or non-touchers? Which parts of the body do they touch most frequently as they are talking? Arms, hands, shoulders, backs or elsewhere? Are you comfortable with it?*

Next, assess their appearance and physique and how you feel it affects your response to them. Do you find them attractive? Are they taller than you or shorter? Do you like their body shape? Does it matter to you? Then ask yourself if you are *synchronizing* – meaning that the discussion you are having dovetails neatly together – or do you find yourselves both speaking at the same time. If so, why? On the other hand, is the failure to synchronize due to nervousness or some other factor? Finally, listen to the non-verbal aspects of their speech. Do they make many errors? How fast do they talk? Loud or soft? Harsh or smooth in tone? How do you respond?

There are, of course, many other questions that can be posed, but these should provide you with a simple, yet systematic method of evaluating how other people use body

language in everyday encounters. Don't worry if you can't find answers to all of them at this stage. We will be dealing with them in greater detail in [Part two](#).

Body lies

The one thing none of us really wants is to find out that someone is deceiving us, because it implies that they aren't what they *appear* to be. Most people don't set out to deceive others, but we're all guilty of it sometimes. We like to call minor deceptions 'white lies' and to *appear* honest – even if we aren't being totally honest with ourselves. But appearances can be deceptive. US Presidents Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton both faced impeachment because they tried to cover up the truth. As in everyday life, deception gets found out. 'In law and in journalism, in government and in the social sciences', wrote the American philosopher Sissela Bok, 'deception is taken for granted when it is felt to be excusable by those who tell lies and who tend also to make the rules.'

So, in real life, being deceived is an everyday hazard and we need to be on the look-out for it. Certain kinds of body language occur more often when people are lying than when they are telling the truth. For example, what is called *leakage* refers to non-verbal behaviour which an individual fails to control, such as shuffling the feet, twitching the toes, crossing and uncrossing the legs. Facial expressions may be capable of control, and an accomplished liar may be able to maintain eye contact with his listener, but the movements of the hands are less easily controllable. One gesture commonly associated with deception is the **hand shrug** in which the hands are rotated so as to expose the palms. It is as if deceivers try to enlist our sympathy to cover the deception – 'what, me?'



Figure 2.1 Sign of deception – hand shrug.