

## **REPORT ON THE PROJECT OF COMPILING A DICTIONARY OF JAPANESE NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR**

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the Japanese nonverbal behavior from an on-going project for compiling a dictionary of Japanese and American body movements, which has been under way since 1982. Seventy-six listings of Japanese body movements were investigated and described based on two types of detailed questionnaires. Data I was a questionnaire for 100 Japanese in order to examine the actual meaning and usage of Japanese body movements. Data II was a detailed open-ended type of questionnaire for 5 Americans and 3 British nationals in order to collect a survey on the cause of misunderstanding in intercultural communication. As a result of Data I, some of the frequently used typical Japanese body movements for each category of usage (gender, age, intimacy, formality and politeness) are explained. From the analysis of Data II, some of the Japanese body movements, particularly postures in this paper, which may cause misunderstanding for people of different cultures are presented as well as those movements which have meanings and usage in common. Lastly an original format for describing body movements is presented for further discussion for compiling a dictionary of nonverbal behavior.

**Keywords:** nonverbal behavior, Japanese body movements,  
dictionary of gestures, communication gap.

### **1. DICTIONARY PROJECT OF BODY MOVEMENTS**

#### *1.1. Outline of the project*

This paper covers a part of an on-going project for compiling a dictionary of Japanese and American body movements which has been under way since 1982 with my colleague, Laura

Ford, under a financial subsidiary from the Toyota Foundation and Meikai University. This forthcoming dictionary will include 76 Japanese and 74 American body movements.

There are many dictionaries for languages but few for nonverbal behavior, so that selecting many kinds of nonverbal behavior as an object of examination in itself contributes to the study of this field. In fact, there are few research attempts of this subject which reach publication. Some current publications are *Handbook of Gestures: Colombia and the United States* written by Saitz and Cervenka (1972), *Gestures: their origins and distribution* by Morris in 1979, and *Body Talk* by Morris in 1994.

Japanese body movements will be focused on in this paper. Seventy-six listings of Japanese body movements were investigated and described based on two types of detailed questionnaires as explained below. In this paper, firstly the purpose of compiling a dictionary of Japanese body movements will be presented, followed by data collection methods and a summary of results from two kinds of data. Lastly the issues for compiling a dictionary of body movements will be discussed.

### 1.2. Purpose

The purpose of this project is, firstly, to compile a dictionary of body movements to provide for a lack of research and literature of Japanese nonverbal behavior in spite of the important role that nonverbal behavior fills in the process of communication. The second purpose is to analyze Japanese behavior patterns for communication based on detailed data with the intention of presenting the results to people of various cultural backgrounds in hope of lessening misunderstanding. Thirdly, this project aimed to contribute to the teaching and learning of the Japanese language. Learning a language requires understanding of the cultural background as well, and in this sense an understanding of nonverbal behavior of the culture is indispensable for learners.

## 2. METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

The procedure of the project was as follows:

1) *Selection of body movements*: First step is to select 76 daily used Japanese nonverbal behavior from Japanese comic books.

2) *Formation of Data I*: This was done by delivering a questionnaire to 100 Japanese in order to examine the actual meaning and usage of Japanese body movements found in the comics. Questions are about meaning, frequency of use, context, and rules for usage which include gender, age, and levels of intimacy, formality, and politeness as shown below.

#### <Data I: Questionnaire>

Q1: What is the meaning of this body movement?

Q2: How often do you use this body movement?

Q3: In what situation do you use this body movement?

Q4: Have you ever seen this body movement used?

Q5: What do you think is the usage of this body movement?

Gender ( male/ female)

Age ( adult/ child )

Intimacy ( close/ not close )

Formality ( formal / normal/ informal)

Politeness (polite/ normal /rude )

3) *Formation of Data II:* This was done by distributing a detailed open-ended type of questionnaire shown below to 5 Americans and 3 British nationals in order to collect a survey on the cause of misunderstanding in intercultural communication. The questionnaire asked the familiarity with each nonverbal behavior and any similarity or difference compared with the informant's own cultural nonverbal behavior from the aspects of meaning, context and rules of usage.

#### <Data II: Open-ended Questionnaire>

Q1: Can you interpret this gesture at all?

Q2: Are you familiar with this gesture in your country?

<Yes> a) What meaning does this gesture have?

b) Are there any rules for usage?

1) Male / Female 2) Adult / Child

3) Intimate relationship / general

4) Formal / Informal 5) Polite / Rude

6) Frequency of use: seldom / sometimes / often

<No> a) What part of this gesture looks strange to you?

b) What do you think it means?

c) Do you know another gesture similar in form ?

d) What does it mean?

Q3: What kind of gesture do you use to convey this meaning in a similar situation?

a) We use the same gesture.

b) We use a similar gesture, but some part is different. Write differences.

c) We don't use this gesture.

What gesture is used to convey this meaning?

4) *Analysis and description:* Data I and II were analyzed and described for each nonverbal behavior and organized to fit the original format for a dictionary.

### 3. RESULTS OF DATA I

Concerning the results of Data I, here, I will especially focus on the results of question 5 of the questionnaire above for Japanese which is related to usage. The typical nonverbal behavior of each category recognized by the greatest percentage of informants are presented here.

*Gender:* As for a mimic gesture using hands to show playing a Chinese game of “mah-jong” (illust. 1), 95% of the informants answered that this gesture is used by men rather than women. On the other hand, crying gestures covering the face by both hands (illust. 2) are recognized by 95% of the informants to be used by females. Also covering the mouth with a hand when laughing (illust. 3) is recognized as a female gesture by 94% of the informants.

*Age:* Wiping cold sweat with a folded handkerchief (illust. 4) is perceived as an adult gesture by 69% of the informants. As for a child gesture, a young boy lifting his chin towards a man in defiance (illust. 5) received 45%. No sub-divisions of the age category show a particularly high percentage as in the gender category, which means that whether the gesture is used by adult or child is not so clear to informants.

*Intimacy:* 94% of the informants responded that a mimic gesture for playing “mah-jong” among friends (illust. 1) shows close intimacy. Showing the little finger to mean a female lover (illust. 6) rated 92%, putting both hands together in front of the face to beg for something (illust. 7) rated 91%. On the other hand, 96% of the informants said that a standing posture with folded hands in front of the body (illust. 8) indicates that there is no intimacy intended.

*Formality:* Standing, tensed body and hands (illust. 9) is recognized as formal by 91% of the informants. Concerning informal gesture, a mimic gesture for drinking Japanese *sake* (illust. 10) rated 77%, and resting the chin in the hands (illust. 11) rated 72%.

*Politeness:* A female sitting on a sofa with the legs together and hands placed on her lap (illust. 12) was recognized as polite by 57%. Displaying the little finger to signify a female (illust. 6) is considered to be used in a slang context and recognized as rude by 79%.

## 4. RESULTS OF DATA II

### 4.1. Differences

From the analysis of Data II, some of the Japanese body movements which may cause misunderstanding for people of different cultures will be presented at first. Here, examples are cited from “postures”. Interesting differences between Japanese and Westerners can be seen in the following “standing postures”.

*Example -1 (illust. 13):* The man, who is the father of a man awaiting a case review, bows to the female lawyer on the left and says, “we are really counting on your support.” This posture is used when asking for some support from a person in a respectful position. Seven informants among eight Americans and British answered that they do not use the posture in that situation. Many of the informants commented that bowing and placing the feet so closely together are awkward. This posture implied picking up something from the floor or wanting to tie shoelaces. In order to show respect in this situation, they would look into the lawyer’s eyes and shake hands firmly at the beginning and end of the meeting.





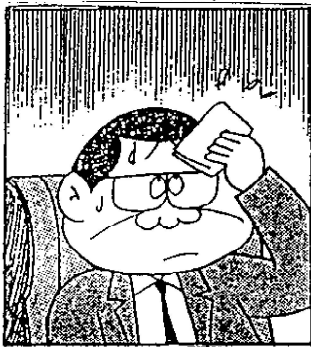
illust. 1



illust. 2



illust. 3



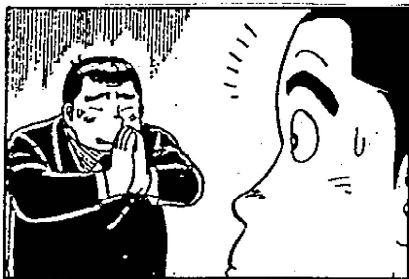
illust. 4



illust. 5



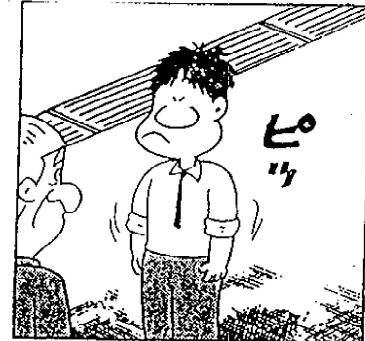
illust. 6



illust. 7



illust. 8



illust. 9



illust. 10



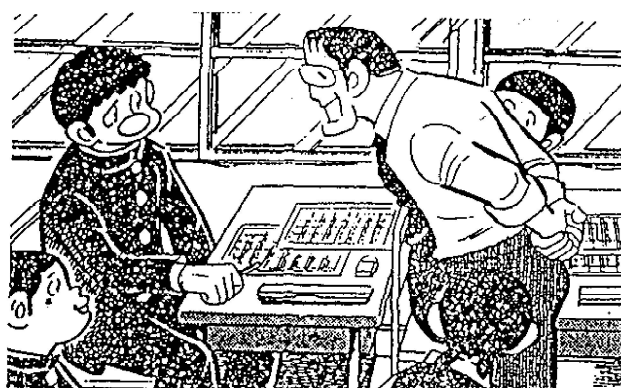
illust. 11



illust. 12



illust. 13



illust. 15



illust. 14

Illustrations are cited from *Big Comic* and *Big Comic Original* published by Shogakukan.

Percentages below show how often the posture is actually used among Japanese. Percentages are based on the results of Question 2 and Question 4 of Data I shown above. The results of Question 2 show the frequency of use by gesturers themselves and those of Question 4 denote the experiences of having seen the gesture used. Gesturers themselves may not always be aware of how often they use gestures because of unconscious behavior, therefore, the results of Question 4 tend to show more percentages.

Data I: Q2- frequency of use :	often 20%	sometimes 47%	seldom 33%
Q4- have seen used :	often 43%	sometimes 54%	seldom 3%

*Example-2 (illust. 9):* A clerk officially greets the president and holds his back straight. This posture is used to show politeness to a person in a high position. Many of the informants said a tense body and facial expression with arms extended straight down at the sides reminded them of soldiers when taking orders. One of the British informants said that this is quite a formal man's posture and used in front of members of royal families. When showing respect to an upper class person, except military and royal family, they would stand straight but assume a more relaxed posture and extend a hand for a handshake while smiling.

Data I: Q2- frequency of use :	often 2%	sometimes 62%	seldom 36%
Q4- have seen used :	often 23%	sometimes 71%	seldom 6%

The above two examples of postures are used in a rather formal situation in Japan when a person in a lower position is expected to assume those postures toward a person in a superior position. Characteristics of those postures are bowing and avoiding eye contact for e.g. 1 and tensed body and hands with rigid facial expressions for e.g. 2. On the other hand, American and British informants answered that even in those situations they always prefer to make direct eye contact and shake hands for e.g. 1 and prefer to show a more relaxed posture and smiling for e.g. 2. Expected polite behavior might be quite different from culture to culture and particularly in those situations which require respect, some behavior might be misunderstood as rude and lead to a misunderstanding in communication.

In addition to the above "standing postures", one example of a "sitting posture" is presented. Japanese sometimes sit on *tatami* and this is a big difference at first. But beyond that, a tensed body is one of the characteristics the same as in the case of a standing posture.

*Example-3 (illust. 14) :* The high school student talks with his parents about his future. The mother listens to what her son says attentively, sitting on a cushion with her knees bent and with her hand on her knees. The son implores his parents to support him financially until he graduates university. He sits on *tatami* with his knees bent and with his clenched fists on his knees. The father sits on a cushion, probably cross-legged, and with folded arms. The mother's posture means listening seriously, the father shows a higher-ranked person's posture when he listens and considers the proposal seriously. The son's posture is a man asking, begging, or imploring something of a person in a superior position.

All the informants answered that they never sit on the floor but some said that if it is an informal gathering of young friends, they do. In the above situation, they sit comfortably on a

chair, with folded hand sometimes, and direct eye contact with the other person. The father may rest one arm on the table, with one hand holding the chin, and the son would lean forward placing elbows and hands on the table, looking directly into his superior's eyes. The mother also would sit forward on the chair, legs crossed and sometimes resting the chin on the right hand.

Data I: Q2- frequency of use :	often 3 %	sometimes 51 %	seldom 46%
Q4- have seen used :	often 14%	sometimes 66%	seldom 20%

Contrasting points are tensed and relaxed, avoiding eye contact and direct eye contact. Concerning tensed and relaxed, these three postures might suggest that relaxed postures are welcomed in western society. But in Japan usually teachers are not expected to sit on a desk, members of a family are not expected to sit on a kitchen counter, and the head of the government is not expected to sit on a sofa putting the legs up on a table.

#### 4.2. Common

All the examples until now show differences, and to understand these differences properly leads to lessening a communication gap. I noticed not only differences, but I could find many common body movements as well. Here is one example: a pose of a teacher who is teaching or talking in a class (illust. 15); 7 informants among 8 answered that teachers use this pose when they talk or persuade students in a classroom or training school. Some said that teachers use hands to explain while speaking.

Data I: Q2- frequency of use :	often 1%	sometimes 35%	seldom 63%
Q4- have seen used :	often 23%	sometimes 66%	seldom 11%

To find common characteristics is important, because if we only focus on differences, we tend to forget that we are all human beings and we are capable of communicating with some body movements.

### 5. COMPILATION AND FORMAT OF A NONVERBAL DICTIONARY

Lastly, an original format for describing body movements will be discussed in comparison with two other formats for further discussion for compiling a dictionary of nonverbal behavior.

Saitz & Cervenka (1972) covers 291 gestures of Colombians and Americans. They interviewed 4 Colombians and 20 Americans and explained the meaning, the action, and related verbal expressions for each gesture with illustrations.

Morris (1994) deals with 655 body movements and covering a worldwide area. The research method is not mentioned but the items of "background" are clearly based on his findings from his profound field work experience such as Morris (1979). In addition to this, the meaning, the action, and locality are explained with an illustration for each body movement.

The forthcoming dictionary compiled by Tohyama & Ford will include 76 Japanese and 74 American gestures. Research methods for Japanese gestures were explained in section 2. As for American data, body movements were chosen from recordings of TV dramas and movies and confirmed by 30 Americans. Our dictionary will use comics and photographs in addition to illustrations. The most unique characteristic is the explanation of "usage" determined by gender, age, and levels of intimacy, formality, and politeness as well as frequency of use. Those points are valuable items and are rarely touched upon in books concerning this subject.

Table 1 Comparison of dictionary of body movements

	Saitz & Cervenka	Morris	Tohyama & Ford
Published	1972	1994	forthcoming
Area	Columbia & the U.S.	worldwide	Japan and the U.S.
Number of gestures	291	655	76(J) +73 (US)
Notation	illustrations	illustrations	illustrations comics photographs
Explanation	meaning action common/ Col./U.S. verbal expression	meaning action locality background	meaning action common/ J /U.S. usage: frequency of use gender/ age/ relationship/ formal/informal polite/ rude
Research method	interview with 4 Colombians 20 Americans	Not mentioned	100 questionnaires for J open-ended questionnaire for 5 Americans and 3 British choosing gestures of Americans from movies 30 American informants

This research is limited in that we cannot fully pledge that the explanations to be presented in this dictionary cover all the meanings and usage that Japanese and Americans may have. We tried to use as much actual data and as many informants as possible to make results more precise but there is a limitation to research of this scale. However, characteristic points of this dictionary such as illustrating each gesture in detail from various aspects, collecting and examining Japanese and American nonverbal behavior from a comparative viewpoint surely contributes to the study of all behavior and to solve an often serious communicative gap among Japanese and people from other cultures.

As for my future study, I am planning to expand my research from two-culture comparison to multi-culture comparison. I have already started to collect the open-ended questionnaire used in Data II from Asians, such as Chinese, Koreans, Taiwanese etc. I hope my research will contribute to understanding nonverbal behavior in each culture and also to finding common ways of behavior among human beings.

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