



VINTAGE

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**BODYTALK**  
DESMOND MORRIS

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## About the Book

The first book to bring together the many different everyday gestures that are used all over the world. Desmond Morris has travelled to over 60 countries while making field studies of human body language, and made notes of hand gestures and facial expressions. The result is a fascinating reference book of over 600 different gestures from Europe, the Middle East, North & South America and the Far East. The book is arranged alphabetically under the part of the body used with Meaning, Action, Background and Locality and each gesture is illustrated with a line drawing. *The World Guide to Gestures* complements Desmond Morris's bestsellers *Manwatching* and *Bodywatching*.

## About the Author

Desmond Morris was born in 1928. Educated at Birmingham and Oxford universities, he became the Curator of Mammals at London Zoo in 1959, a post he held for eight years. In 1967 he published *The Naked Ape* which has sold over 10 million copies worldwide and has changed the way we view our own species forever. An accomplished artist, tv presenter, film maker and writer, Desmond Morris's books have been published in over thirty-six countries.



*by the same author*

The Biology of Art  
The Mammals  
Men and Snakes (co-author)  
Men and Apes (co-author)  
Men and Pandas (co-author)  
Zootime  
Primate Ethology (editor)  
The Naked Ape  
The Human Zoo  
Patterns of Reproductive Behaviour  
Intimate Behaviour  
Manwatching  
Gestures (co-author)  
Animal Days  
The Soccer Tribe  
Inrock  
The Book of Ages  
The Art of Ancient Cyprus  
Bodywatching  
The Illustrated Naked Ape  
Dogwatching  
Catwatching  
The Secret Surrealist  
Catlore  
The Animals Roadshow  
The Human Nestbuilders  
Horsewatching  
The Animal Contract  
Animalwatching  
Babywatching  
Christmas Watching  
The Naked Ape Trilogy  
The Human Animal

# The Illustrated Catwatching

# BODYTALK

*A World Guide to Gestures*

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DESMOND MORRIS



JONATHAN CAPE  
LONDON

# INTRODUCTION

Ever since human beings stood up on their hind legs and transformed their front feet into delicate hands, they have been gesticulating wildly. Their trudging, old front feet have become sensitive, new organs of communication. With considerable help from the most expressive faces in the animal kingdom, these amazing hands have developed a huge repertoire of complex body signals. It is this silent language that *Bodytalk* sets out to interpret.

As we move around the world we cannot help noticing that certain familiar gestures disappear and other strange ones take their place. What do they mean? It is all too easy to make mistakes, as every seasoned traveller will have discovered. What is polite in one region is obscene in another. What is friendly here, is hostile there. That is why a guide is needed.

Some gestures, intriguingly, do not suffer from these local variations. They appear to be universal and make us feel at least partially at home even when we are on the other side of the globe. A smile is a smile is a smile, the world over. A frown is a frown, a stare is a stare, and a shaken fist leaves no doubt about the mood of its owner. Some elements of body language, therefore, are more basic than others, but all benefit from study because even these global signals can vary in style and intensity. We all laugh, but in some places a loud laugh is considered rude. So even with our most basic signals it helps to understand the regional rules of conduct.

One of the problems that has to be faced when compiling a guide to gestures is what to leave out. Many gestures are

so well known that it seems pointless to include them. Occasionally, unusual examples of common gestures have, however, been included. For instance, types of hand-holding and forehead kissing are shown because they appear in some countries in a way that might be misunderstood. But the ordinary hand-holding and forehead kissing that occur between, say, a parent and child are omitted because they are familiar to everyone.

Also omitted are the gestures that comprise the formal sign-language systems for which specific training is necessary. All the gestures shown in *Bodytalk* are 'informal' and are used, either consciously or unconsciously, by ordinary people as they go about their daily lives.

DESMOND MORRIS  
Oxford, 1994

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

To make it easy to find your way around this guide, each gesture has been classified by its major body part. If a finger comes up to tap a nose, the gesture is called a Nose Tap and is found under N. If fingers are crossed and held aloft, the gesture is classified as Fingers Cross, and is found under F. For clarity, even a well-known gesture such as a wink is classified by its organ and is found under E for Eye Wink. So, to track down a gesture, all that is needed is to search alphabetically for the part of the body involved.

In every case there is a small sketch of the gesture. Alongside this there are four headings:

**Meaning   -   Action   -   Background   -   Locality**

The **Meaning** gives the basic message of the signal.

The **Action** describes the movements involved, as a supplement to the sketch.

The **Background** discusses anything known about the gesture, such as its origin, the context in which it is used and, where we have such information, its history.

The **Locality** tells where this gesture has been observed. In a few instances we know a great deal about the distribution of a gesture, but in many other cases we know only that it has been recorded in one particular country. So, if a gesture is classified as Locality: Holland, it does not necessarily mean that it is absent elsewhere. In future it is hoped to enlarge these records considerably, as we learn more and more about our fascinating human gestural language.

Gender Note: Anyone noticing that most of the sketches depict males might come to the conclusion that this shows an unfair gender bias. This is not the case. It is not this book that is sexist, it is the gestures themselves. For some reason, signalling by gesture is a predominantly masculine pursuit. In some countries it is so exclusively masculine that our female researcher had to withdraw before the local men would even discuss the subject.



## **ARM FLEX**

**Meaning:** I am strong.

**Action:** The arm is bent to produce maximum bulging of the muscles.

**Background:** This stylized action of body-builders is used as joking social gesture when a male wishes to comment on his own strength.

**Locality:** Western world.



## **ARM GRASP**

**Meaning:** Friendly greeting.

**Action:** While shaking hands, the gesturer's left hand grabs the arm of the companion.

**Background:** This reaching forward of the left arm is an incipient embrace, added to the formal hand-shake to give the routine greeting a stronger, more emotional impact. Occasionally, even this is not enough and the gesturer reaches around the back of the companion, offering a semi-embrace, while still shaking hands. Politicians sometimes deliberately employ these hand-shake 'intensifiers' to give the impression that they are exceptionally pleased to see someone.

**Locality:** Widespread in the Western world.

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## **ARM RAISE (1)**

**Meaning:** Request for attention.

**Action:** The arm is raised high in the air, palm showing, and held there until the gesture has been acknowledged.

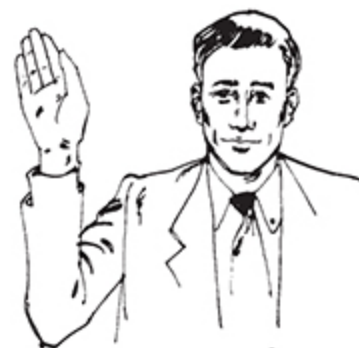
**Background:** This is essentially a schoolroom gesture that has since spread into adult social life. It is employed at



gatherings where someone wishes to speak and is also used when an informal vote is required.

**Locality:** Widespread.

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## **ARM RAISE (2)**

**Meaning:** I swear.

**Action:** The right hand is raised to shoulder level and held still with the palm facing forward.

**Locality:** Western world.

---



## **ARM RAISE (3)**

**Meaning:** Friendly greeting.

**Action:** The arm is raised with the palm showing and the fingers slightly spread.

**Background:** This is the greeting gesture used in milder situations than the full Hand Wave. Most commonly observed at fairly close quarters, as when acknowledging someone at a social gathering.

**Locality:** Widespread.

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## ARM RAISE (4)

**Meaning:** Hail!

**Action:** The arm is raised, palm showing, with the arm stiffly erect. The angle of the arm varies.

**Background:** This originated as a Roman salute and was revived by the German Nazis in the 1930s as a gesture of rigid loyalty. Still seen today in neo-Nazi political groups in Germany and elsewhere.

**Locality:** Originally Ancient Rome. Today in the Western world wherever extreme right-wing groups gather.

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## **ARM SHAKE**

**Meaning:** You are exaggerating.

**Action:** The arm, held low, brushes back and forth.

**Background:** As a signal of disbelief, the action says 'There are no flies on me!'

**Locality:** Arab cultures.

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## **ARMPIT TICKLE**

**Meaning:** Poor joke.

**Action:** The forefinger conspicuously tickles the gesturer's own armpit.

**Background:** This is a response to a joke that fails to create laughter. The message is 'I would have to tickle myself like this in order to make myself laugh at such a bad joke.'

**Locality:** Indonesia.

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## **ARMPITS HOOK**

**Meaning:** Pride.

**Action:** The thumbs are hooked into the armpits and the fingers are fanned out wide.

**Background:** This gesture is derived from the action of hooking the thumbs into the armholes of a waistcoat, or under the elastic of a pair of braces and stretching them forward. It is a smugly arrogant display of complete relaxation and says 'I am so pleased with myself that, while others must stay alert, I can afford to relax in this way, without a care in the world.' Today it is nearly always performed in jest.

**Locality:** Europe and North America.

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## **ARMS AKIMBO (1)**

**Meaning:** Keep away from me.

**Action:** The hands are placed on the hips so that the elbows protrude from the sides of the body.

**Background:** This is an unconscious action we perform when we feel anti-social in a social setting. It is observed when sportsmen have just lost a vital point, game or

contest. It is as if they are automatically adopting an 'anti-embrace' posture without recognizing what they are doing. It also occurs at social gatherings when one person wishes to exclude another from a small group. In such cases, a single arm akimbo may be enough, pointing in the direction of the particular individual who is to be kept at a distance.

**Locality:** Worldwide.

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## ARMS AKIMBO (2)

**Meaning:** Anger.

**Action:** (As above)

**Background:** In some regions, the Arms Akimbo posture is adopted as a specific signal of seething rage. This is merely an exaggeration of its ordinary use, taking the 'upset' feelings of the usual akimbo posture and extending them into full outrage or anger.

**Locality:** Malaysia and the Philippines.



## ARMS BEHIND

**Meaning:** I am at ease.

**Action:** The hands are clasped, one in the other, behind the back.

**Background:** When we feel anxious we tend to keep our hands in front of our bodies, like a defensive barrier. When we clamp them behind our backs it suggests that we are in precisely the opposite mood. In other words, we are saying 'I am so at ease that I do not need to protect myself and can display this posture, with the front of my body exposed.' In the army, the situation is slightly different, but the basic message is the same. There, it is the position soldiers must adopt when they are given the order to 'stand at ease'.

**Locality:** Widespread.



## ARMS FOLD

**Meaning:** I feel defensive.

**Action:** The arms are folded across the chest.

**Background:** This is a common, unconscious resting posture frequently adopted by people who wish to set up a mild barrier between themselves and those in front of them. The arms act like a car-fender, protecting the front of the body from unwanted intrusions. Most people are unaware that they are displaying this 'barrier signal', but sometimes it can be used deliberately as a 'You shall not pass' sign - for example, by guards outside a doorway, trying to prevent someone from entering.

**Locality:** Worldwide.

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## **ARMS RAISE (1)**

**Meaning:** I surrender.

**Action:** The arms, slightly bent at the elbows, are raised with the palms facing forward.

**Background:** This is the 'Hands Up!' action performed to emphasize that no sudden, aggressive movement is about to be made. In violent situations it is employed seriously as



a sign of capitulation, but it is also used jokingly in social contexts to say 'I give up!', when losing an argument.

**Locality:** Widespread.

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## ARMS RAISE (2)

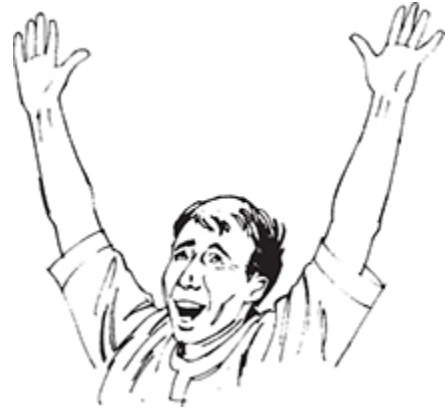
**Meaning:** Prayer.

**Action:** The arms are raised high, usually with the palms facing upwards to the sky, and with the head tilted back.

**Background:** This is the most ancient posture of prayer. From the study of early works of art, we know that it was in existence long before the now familiar Palms Contact action appeared. It is used to ask for help from the deity, or to give thanks. In origin it is simply an embracing gesture in which the arms reach up to the deity in the heavens above. In its pre-religious form it can be seen in the behaviour of a small child who reaches up towards a standing parent, inviting a hug.

**Locality:** Widespread.

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## **ARMS RAISE (3)**

**Meaning:** Triumph.

**Action:** The arms are fully raised, usually without any elbow-bend. Often they are slightly splayed, creating a V shape.

**Background:** This is the posture of the victorious sportsman or politician. In origin it is a 'body enlargement' action, making the dominant figure seem taller.

**Locality:** Widespread.

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## **ARMS REACH**

**Meaning:** I offer you my embrace.

**Action:** The arms reach out as if to make an embrace, but the action cannot be completed because of the distance between the gesturer and his companions.

**Background:** This is the favoured gesture of public figures who have just completed a performance and wish to respond to the applause of their audience by hugging them all. Unable to do so, they simply make the 'intention movement' of embracing them.

**Locality:** Worldwide.



## ARMS ROCK

**Meaning:** Baby.

**Action:** The arms mime the action of rocking a baby to sleep.

**Background:** This gesture is used in a variety of ways to refer to the presence of an infant. Most commonly it is employed to announce the presence of a baby that cannot for the moment be seen. It may also occasionally be used sarcastically to say to someone 'You are behaving like a baby.'

**Locality:** Widespread.

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## **ARMS 'SHOVEL'**

**Meaning:** You are talking nonsense.

**Action:** The arms mime the action of shovelling up manure and throwing it over the shoulder.

**Background:** This gesture is known as 'Throwing the bull' and is the gestural equivalent of the word 'bullshit'.

**Locality:** North America.

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## **BEARD GROW**

**Meaning:** How boring!

**Action:** The hand is placed under the chin and then drawn downwards as if stroking or measuring a long beard.

**Background:** This gesture is used in two contexts. If someone is making a long and boring speech, it is given to suggest 'One could grow a long beard while listening to this.' Or, if someone is telling an ancient and well-known joke, the gesture is made to say 'This joke is so old it has a beard.'

**Locality:** Holland, Germany, Austria and Italy.

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## **BEARD STROKE (1)**

**Meaning:** I am deep in thought.

**Action:** The hand is pulled pensively down through the beard a number of times, as if grooming it absent-mindedly.

**Background:** This is an unconscious action performed as a minor comfort device when wrestling with a difficult decision or a complex idea.

**Locality:** Common in Jewish communities but also observed worldwide.

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## **BEARD STROKE (2)**

**Meaning:** How boring!

**Action:** The beard (real or imaginary) is stroked with the fingers.

**Background:** This is a local version of the 'my beard is growing while you speak' gesture.

**Locality:** Austria.

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## **BEARD WAG**

**Meaning:** You are old.

**Action:** The fingers of one hand are held beneath the chin and wiggled.

**Background:** The fingers mime an old man's beard, implying great age, and possibly senility, in the other person.

**Locality:** Saudi Arabia.

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## **BELLY 'CUT'**

**Meaning:** I am hungry.

**Action:** The flat hand, with the palm down, cuts rhythmically sideways against the belly.

**Background:** The gesture implies that the pain of hunger is cutting into the belly.

**Locality:** Italy.

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## **BELLY PAT**

**Meaning:** I am full.

**Action:** The belly is patted gently with the hand.

**Background:** The gesture draws attention to the rounded shape of the full belly after a good meal.

**Locality:** Widespread.

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## **BELLY PRESS**

**Meaning:** Hunger.



**Action:** The fists are pressed hard against the belly, while the mouth is held open.

**Background:** The gesture mimes the agony of stomach pains caused by extreme hunger.

**Locality:** Latin America.

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## **BELLY RUB (1)**

**Meaning:** Hunger.

**Action:** The hand clasps the belly and makes a circular movement.

**Background:** The movement of the hand suggests the action employed to soothe the pain caused by an empty stomach.

**Locality:** Worldwide.

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## **BELLY RUB (2)**

**Meaning:** I enjoy your misfortune.

**Action:** The flat hand is rubbed up and down on the front of the belly.

**Background:** The gesture mimes the act of aching from too much belly-laughter.

**Locality:** Central Europe.

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## **BELLY 'SLICE'**

**Meaning:** None left!