

ANTHROPOLOGY-PSYCHOLOGY

# Do You Talk With Your Hands?

**You Probably Do—More Than You Realize—Though the Average American's Gestures Lack European Freedom**

By DR. FRANK THONE

**D**O YOU talk with your hands? Of course not. You're a typical average American, and Americans don't gesticulate. Only foreigners do that.

But wait a minute. If you really are a typical average American you do gesticulate. Americans talk with their hands a good deal more than they realize. Only, presumably, we have become so used to our gestures that they "don't count." They fit into the pattern of our lives as thoroughly as English speech fits in, or the habit of saying "yeah" or "uh-huh" instead of "yes." It is universal human nature not to notice the most familiar things.

Backing for the declaration that Americans are gesticulators comes from a solidly established scientific source: Prof. Franz Boas, Columbia University's veteran anthropologist.

Says Prof. Boas: "The common assumption that Americans do not gesticulate is not correct. Even aside from the well-known oratorical gestures we are fairly lively. Most of our gestures may be designated as descriptive. We supplement our speech with movements that indicate the form of what we are talking about."

Nevertheless, he admits, we are rather moderate in the use of gesticulation as compared with some other races. Our shoulders are not so eloquent as a Frenchman's, our arms as an Italian's, our hands and fingers as a Jew's.

## Environment Important

Prof. Boas turned up a number of very interesting racial trends in the use of gestures in the course of a program of research designed to discover whether races of men move differently as well as look differently. The results disclosed quite definite differences correlated with race; but they also disclosed that changed environment is followed by gesture-habit changes, just as the offspring of European parents brought up in America are usually taller and stouter than the immigrant generation, and frequently even have differently shaped heads. Thus both heredity and environment contribute a share toward your

own manner of talking with your hands.

Prof. Boas collaborated with two younger associates, Dr. David Efron, attaché of the Institute of Psychology, University of Buenos Aires, and the artist Stuyvesant van Veen. They used a method for obtaining a graphic record of gestures that was at once simple, reasonably exact, and very effective. They took motion pictures of subjects of various racial origins. These they projected on a screen, one frame at a time. From selected frames thus "frozen" they had sketches made of the movements they were interested in analyzing. The resulting diagrams are as lively as life.

## Whole Body Talks

Two racial groups he found particularly interesting were Italians and Jews—races proverbially given to the free use of the most eloquent and expressive kind of gesturing. Gesticulation with them is not merely "talking with the hands," it is talking with arms, head, neck, back—the whole body talks. And there is as much difference between the

two types of gesticulation as there is between the Italian and Yiddish languages.

"Italian gestures," says Prof. Boas, "are characterized by a wide symmetrical sweep from the shoulders. Furthermore they are symbolical. The gestures have definite meanings, many of which can be traced back to antiquity.

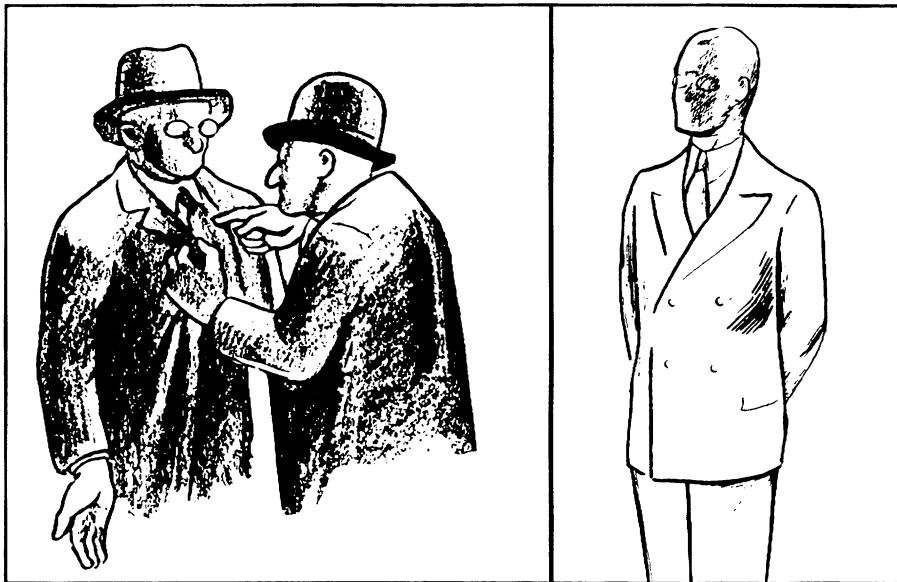
"'It is good,' 'I am hungry,' 'prison,' are represented by definite symbols. For this reason Italians are able to converse in pantomime without uttering a single word.

## Characteristic Posture

"Their posture is characterized by an easy relaxation of the shoulders and a strong forward curvature of the lumbar region. At the same time the elbows are held backward. There is also a preference for holding the wrist of one hand with the other, both being held behind the back."

As different as can be imagined from Italian gestures, with their sign-language as definite as an Indian's, is the Jewish mode of "hand-talk."

"By contrast, the Jewish gestures are jerky," continues Prof. Boas. "The wide sweep of the Italian is absent. Generally the two hands do not move symmetrically. The elbows are almost sta-



## CONTRASTS

*At the left you see "buttonholing," a characteristically Jewish gesture though by no means confined to that race. Note the slumped shoulders of the argumentative one. At the right, 100 per cent American? Surely. Yet this upstanding, gestureless gentleman is also a Jew. His family, of German origin, have lived in the South for several generations.*



tionary, close to the body, and the movements are made with forearm and fingers. They are emphasized by movements of the head. They are not graphic, but follow lines of thought. Since very few of their gestures are symbolic, pantomimic conversation without words is impossible.

"By contrast with the Italian, the Jew tries to get in touch with his friend. He will even grasp his friend's hand and gesticulate with that.

"The posture is characterized by a slump of the neck and a relaxation of the knees."

#### America Modifies

So much for types, and the contrasts between the types. Racial characteristics in gesture are found in "pure" form only among the first-generation immigrants, and among their American-born offspring if they have become segregated in large "foreign islands" like New York's lower East Side. As soon as one race makes contact with another that has different gesture-habits, modification begins: here also the melting-pot is at work.

The process carries through to a remarkable degree of completeness in some instances. Some of Prof. Boas's pictures are almost "still life" studies, so few were the gestures the speakers made, despite their Jewish origin. The secret was that these men were descendants of early immigrants who had prospered, given their descendants economic and educational advantages, and thus projected their family strains into the mainstream of American life. So their fourth or fifth generation grandsons stand in courtroom or lecture hall, speaking easily yet using so few gestures that their very absence is noticeable.

The process works the other way

around, too. If a non-gesturing person lives long enough among people who do a great deal of their talking with their hands, he presently "learns the language." Even Englishmen will do it. Prof. Boas found one Englishman who had been reared in Italy and was married to a Jewess. He gesticulated freely—but his gestures were a curious combination "dialect" combining both Italian and Jewish qualities!

Another case of a man adopting gestures quite alien to his race is related by Prof. Boas. This is a young man, son of a Danish father and an Irish mother. He was born in a small town in upstate New York, which had no Jewish population. But from his thirteenth year on, he has been closely associated with second-generation, "semi-assimilated" Jews. He walks like them, with a notable slump. He talks like them, in fluent Yiddish. And all his gestures are Jewish.

#### English Once Gesticulators

If instead of examining the strangers at our gates and the still half-stranger brethren within them, we could only set the clock back to our own English forebears of three or four hundred years ago, we might find some interesting "foreigners" there, too. Englishmen of Shakespeare's time were free gesticulators, and it is hard to imagine the Merry Monarch and his subjects going about glumly with their hands in their pockets. For one thing, they hadn't any pockets.

(Which rouses a question not discussed by Prof. Boas: do the pocketless peoples of the earth gesticulate more?)

Another thing: persons whose professions involve making or drawing things are very apt to carry the techniques of their craft into their gestures. Thus, notes Prof. Boas, many painters accom-

#### LANGUAGE

*You may not understand the Yiddish word for "No!" but you can get the idea expressed by the man at the left. "La barbe," the Frenchman calls the gesture depicted in the center. Flipping the beard is a way of saying "I don't care." The Italian gesture at the right is understood in all lands where men gather to drink.*

pany their speech by movements which imitate the motions of the brush in painting.

#### Indicating Shape

A similar habit may underlie the graphically descriptive gestures used by a professor of mathematics included in the study. Even when he did not have a piece of chalk in his hand, he was making drawings and diagrams. "You have a sphere," and his hand, with fingers curved, sweeps over the top of the imaginary sphere. "You have a point and you cut the sphere;" a jab and a slash with extended hand. "You determine the circumference," and around sweeps the hand in a circle. These are all typically American gestures—illustrating the shapes of things.

Equally graphic, though in a different way, are some of the "words" in the Italian hand-language. Many of these are international; others are strictly Italian, understood by no one else, or perhaps shared only with other Latin-speaking races.

Unmistakable (at least among males) is the tilted fist before the face, with thumb extended. That is read instantly in any language: "Let's have a drink."

Hand toward the mouth, with fingertips bunched together: fairly clear international code for "Let's eat." But the bunched finger-tips have a special meaning in Italian: spaghetti. Italians use

forks now, but their gesture is eloquent of more primitive table manners.

But would you know what it meant if somebody tilted up his chin and then flicked his hand under it, back outwards? It means, "I don't care!" Formerly, when all men were bearded, a flick of the beard signified indifference; now it is used even by clean-shaven men. The French know and use this gesture, too: they call it "la barbe."

## PSYCHOLOGY

## Mothers-In-Law May Cause "Hay Fever" of the Mind

**T**HE MIND can have "hay fever" too. It is not caused by ragweed, that obnoxious pest that brings on so many sneezes this time of year. But it can be caused by a mother-in-law.

That the mind can become supersensitive to certain irritants just as the unfortunate hay fever victim is supersensitive to certain pollens is pointed out by Dr. Wallace Marshall of Appleton, Wis., (*American Journal of Psychiatry*, July). He explains this parallel between mind and body in reacting to persistent irritations as a long-sought link or common ground for both biology and abnormal psychology.

The effect of ragweed pollen on the person sensitive to it is well known. This peculiar sort of sensitiveness to what is harmless to another person is called "allergy" by the physician. The similar sort of sensitiveness in the mind is termed by Dr. Marshall "psycho-allergy."

Bombardment by pollen will sensitize the allergic person so that thereafter the least whiff of that pollen will start a paroxysm of sneezing. In a comparable way, Dr. Marshall explains, overexposure to an irritative mother-in-law may make a person supersensitive to that particular irritation. Thereafter even a mention of the mother-in-law may be sufficient to start a paroxysm of rage or a tirade. The father-in-law, in this case, does not precipitate any violence any more than daisies cause hay fever.

The hay fever victim can be relieved of his symptoms by a process of desensitizing. He is given gradually increasing doses of the pollen in the form of injections until he is taking it in such large amounts that he is rendered immune to the ordinary irritation of pollen-laden air.

Equally cryptic, to a non-Italian, is this one: hand at coat-pocket level, horizontal, palm up; then drop it suddenly three or four inches, keeping same position. That stops any kind of financial approach. Without the addition of a spoken word, it means, "I'm broke!"

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*Science News Letter, September 5, 1936*

Likewise, Dr. Marshall encourages, the son-in-law can obtain mother-in-law "immunity" by psychoanalysis.

The "mental ragweeds," or psycho-allergens, as Dr. Marshall calls them, can be revealed by the psychiatrist's word-association test, one sometimes used with the "lie-detector" to trap those suspected of a crime.

When the person hears a key word, the "lie-detector" shows his response in the form of a change in the electric potential of his skin. That is because he has previously become sensitized mentally to that particular word. It has become for him a psycho-allergen. The record made by the "lie-detector" is an index of the emotional upset that word produced in him. In the investigation of a crime, the response may indicate the

suspect's guilt. In the patient with "mental hay fever" it identifies the irritating mental factor, as a scratch test identifies the pollen in true hay fever.

Other examples of psycho-allergy are mentioned by Dr. Marshall:

"The respiratory embarrassment which the stutterer suffers, is a psycho-allergic reaction which may have an inferiority as its basis.

"The individual who faints at the sight of blood suffers a psycho-allergic reaction which can be traced to a specific emotional upset caused by a specific psycho-allergen.

"The criminal, who kills people without the slightest sign of an emotion, may develop a refractory period and lose his nerve completely.

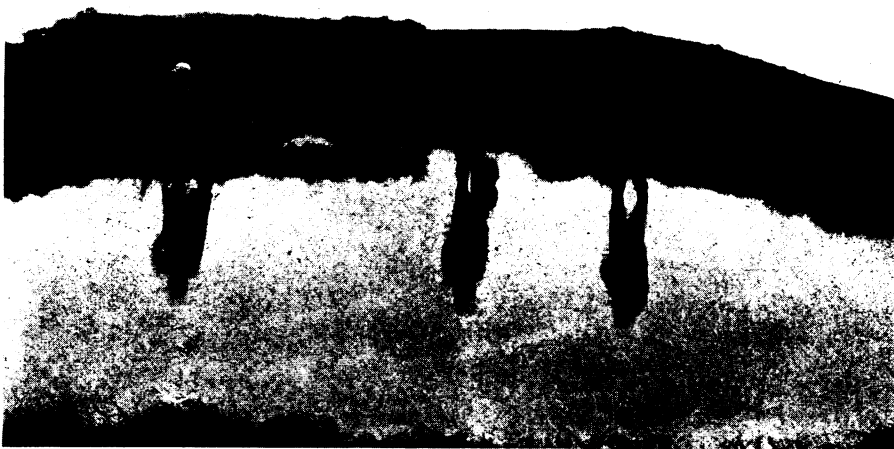
"The dipsomaniac (drunkard) seeks a flight from reality in liquor. He does not drink for the sport of drinking; he imbibes because he needs a retreat from the definite psycho-allergens to which he has developed a state of hypersensitivity."

*Science News Letter, September 5, 1936*

## CLIMATOLOGY

## Mountain in Hawaii One Of World's Wettest Spots

**D**ROUGHT-WORRIED Uncle Sam Downs at least one bit of real estate where there is no lack of rain—the top of Mt. Waialeale, in the middle of the island of Kauai, westernmost of the larger islands of the Hawaiian group. There the average annual rainfall piles up to the impressive figure of 451



**NO DROUGHT HERE**

*Near the top of one of Hawaii's mountains is this "lake." Here it is always wet.*