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On Successful Nonverbal Communication Between Poles and Greeks: A Comparative Study of Selected Emblems

O skutecznej komunikacji niewerbalnej między Polakami a Grekami: Studium porównawcze wybranych emblematów

Summary
The article presents selected emblems (cultural gestures) used in everyday communication in Poland and Greece. The research material was collected in the years 2007-2011 and 2017-2023 during research on emblematic gestures conducted in both cultures. 87 Polish and Greek emblems analysed in the text were divided into three categories, based on shared characteristics: the meaning and form of the gestures. A comparative study of the material has shown, among others, the richness of the repertoire of nonverbal communication acts, as well as differences and similarities between

the cultures. Considerable attention has been drawn to the problem of confusing nonverbal signals and a risk of misunderstanding familiar-looking gestures. It has been suggested that a successful intercultural interaction may depend on being familiar with the nonverbal code of a culture. Finally, due to the variety of the examples given, the text may be considered a minidictionary of common Polish and Greek emblems.

Keywords: nonverbal communication, intercultural communication, Poles and Greeks, Polish emblems, Greek emblems

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia wybrane emblematy (gesty kulturowe) stosowane w codziennej komunikacji w Polsce i w Grecji. Materiał zebrano w latach 2007-2011 i 2017-2023 podczas badań nad gestami emblematycznymi prowadzonych w obu krajach. 87 emblematów polskich i greckich analizowanych w tekście podzielono na trzy kategorie, w oparciu o wspólne cechy: znaczenie i formę gestów. Analiza porównawcza materiału wykazała m.in. bogactwo repertuaru aktów komunikacji niewerbalnej oraz różnice i podobieństwa pomiędzy kulturami. Tekst zwraca uwagę na kwestię mylnego odbierania sygnałów niewerbalnych i ryzyka niezrozumienia znajomo wyglądających gestów oraz sygnalizuje, że pomyślna interakcja międzykulturowa może zależeć od znajomości niewerbalnego kodu danej kultury. Ponadto, ze względu na różnorodność podanych przykładów, tekst można uznać za minisłownik powszechnych emblematów polskich i greckich.

Słowa kluczowe: komunikacja niewerbalna, komunikacja międzykulturowa, Polacy i Grecy, emblematy polskie, emblematy greckie

1. Present State of Research on Gestures

Gestures are natural companions of words, which help with producing utterances, and are regularly used in everyday communication. Much research has been devoted to relations between gestures, thought, speech and interaction (Abercrombie, 1968; Antas, 1996; Argyle, 1983, 1988; Bavelas & Chovil, 2000; Beattie & Shovelton, 2002; Birdwhistell, 1970; Cavicchio & Kita, 2013; Efron, 1941/1972; Ekman et al. 1987; Ekman & Friesen, 1969; Fast, 1970; Grove, 1991; Guerrero & Farinelli, 2009; Hall, 1959, 1976; Kendon, 1981, 1983, 2004; Knapp & Hall, 1972; Leathers, 1986/1997; McNeill, 1992, 2005; Mehrabian, 1981; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962; Pease,

1990; Pease & Pease, 2004; Sapir, 1949). Over the years psychologists, anthropologists, ethologists, linguists, and other researchers have been analysing the phenomenon of body movements and facial expressions, creating various categories of gestures, including cultural or emblematic gestures (for example, Argyle, 1983; Efron, 1941/1972; Ekman & Friesen, 1969; Kendon, 1988; McNeill, 1992).

There are numerous inter- and cross-cultural gesture studies (Akiyama, 1991; Andersen, 1988; Archer, 1997; Argyle & Graham, 1975; Efron, 1941/1972; Gawne & Cooperrider, 2024; Graziano & Gullberg, 2024; Jarmołowicz-Nowikow, 2018; Kanayama, 1999; Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013; Molinsky et al., 2005; Morain, 1976; Pease, 1990; Pease & Pease, 2004; Poortinga et al., 1993; Poyatos, 1975; Schneller, 1985; So, 2010; Szczepaniak, 2016) and various multi-cultural gesture inventories, guides and dictionaries have been created (Axtell, 1991; Bäuml & Bäuml, 1975; Caradec 2005/2018; Efron 1941/1972; Grosse & Reker, 2011; Laikin, 1963; Lefevre, 2011; Morris, 1994; Morris et al. 1979; Rusko & Beňuš, 2011; Ružičková, 2001; Saitz & Cervenka, 1972; Szczepaniak, 2017; University of Birmingham, 2019; Williams, 1998). Researchers have compiled dictionaries of gestures used in a particular culture (among others in Poland or Greece – see Antoniou -Kritikou, 2008; Jarząbek, 1994, 2016; Papas, 1999). Nevertheless, there have been very few comparative studies of Polish and Greek emblematic gestures conducted so far (see Szczepaniak, 2017). The aim of this paper is to present, analyse and compare selected Polish and Greek emblematic gestures, as well as to assess the possibility of successful communication between the aforementioned cultural and linguistic communities.

2. Definition of Emblematic Gestures

Emblems (cultural or symbolic gestures) are usually defined by their properties. They are culturally specific, highly conventionalised and arbitrary signals, such as body movements, facial expressions, as well as meaningful sounds (paralingual

elements/vocalisations) made intentionally and used consciously in the discourse. Emblems always have a fixed form and a very precise meaning. They also have a verbal equivalent, usually replace words and phrases and are considered complete communication acts. Each culture has a repertoire of emblematic gestures which form a nonverbal lexicon for native speakers, typically acquired in the process of socialisation. Emblems "might vary with age, sex, ethnic background, or social class" (Johnson et al., 1975, p. 338), and some may have their own name and widely known history of use. Definitions of emblems can be found, among others, in Efron (1941/1972), Ekman and Friesen (1969), Hanna (1996), Kendon (1981), McNeill (1992), Morris et al. (1979), Ricci-Bitti and Poggi (1996).

3. Research Procedure

The data was collected by the author in the years 2007–2011 and 2017–2023 during research on cultural gestures conducted in, among other countries, Poland and Greece with the use of a modified Johnson et al. (1975) method (Szczepaniak, 2017, p. 137–147). Firstly, on the basis of participant and non-participant observation, along with recording and analysing various random communication situations in public places (see Birdwhistell, 1970 and Mehrabian, 1981), a list of typical Polish and Greek emblems was compiled. Secondly, each list was supplemented by verbal equivalents of the emblems, and verified with native speakers, who could also volunteer new items to complete the list. At the next stage, the emblems from the list were encoded (shown in front of a camcorder) by a group of volunteers, and then one example of each of the recorded gestures was shown to a group of decoders from the culture in question. According to Johnson et al. (1975, p. 338), only ten to fifteen adults are required to provide exhaustive information about the emblem repertoire of a culture, and if the message derived by at least 70% of the decoders matches the encoded message, the emblem is verified.

The focus of the current research was gestures performed by only one person. The participants were 64 middle-class adults (23 male and 41 female) belonging to 4 age groups, similar to those suggested by Remland et al. (1995),[1] and coming from different regions. 16 Poles and 17 Greeks partook in the encoding session and 15 Poles and 16 Greeks partook in the decoding session. All participants were recruited by word of mouth and volunteered without compensation. The demographic data of the partakers is presented in Figure 1.

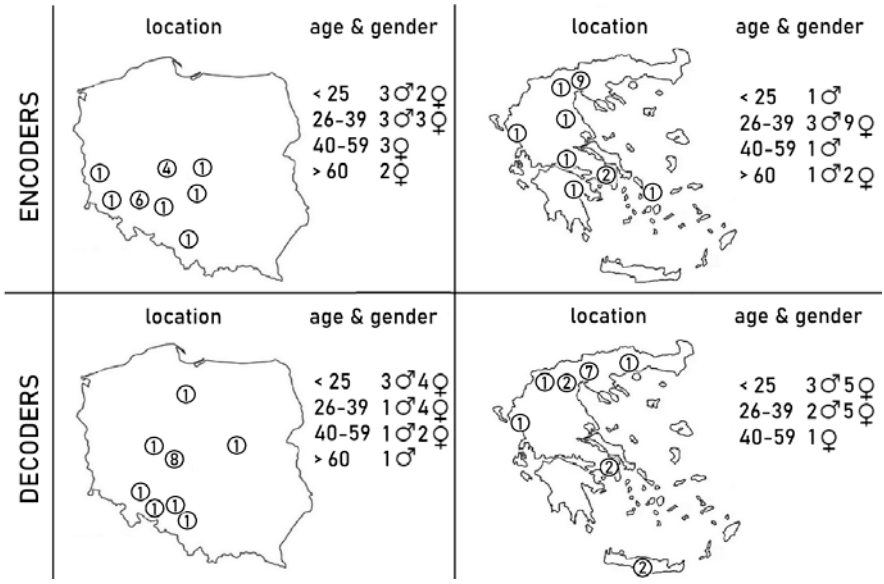


Figure 1. Information about the location, age and gender of the participants. Own elaboration

In the research outcome, the total of 231 Polish and 164 Greek emblems were recorded, described and analysed with the use of Szczepaniak and Piekot (2009) gesture analysis form (see Szczepaniak, 2017, pp. 558–559). Although the majority of the material consisted of emblems of a different meaning and form, there were some items of similar features (form and/or meaning). This

[1] In research on the effects of culture, gender and age on distance, body orientation and touch, Remland et al. (1995) divided the subjects into 4 age groups: teenagers, 20-39, 40-59 and above 60.

paper focuses on 87 Polish and Greek gestures of shared characteristics selected from the above mentioned repertoire. The items will be presented below.

4. Research Material

To show the variety of nonverbal acts of communication used in Poland and Greece, as well as to highlight a risk of misinterpreting or *blurring* some gestures (see Morris et al., 1979, p. 270), 87 emblems have been selected. The items have been divided into 3 categories:

- gestures of the same or similar meaning, but of a different form;
- gestures of the same or similar form, but of a different meaning;
- gestures of the same or similar form and meaning.

The emblems usually appear in everyday communication, in neutral to informal context, such as greetings and farewells, agreeing and disagreeing, offending or insulting and complimenting, beckoning, threatening, etc. Even though emblems replace words and phrases, they may be accompanied by some paralingual elements or utterances to a greater effect. In some cases, more than one emblem can be used in a culture to show a particular meaning.

The analysed emblems are illustrated below; each figure's caption has an abbreviation of the name of the country it is used in ('Pl' for Poland and 'Gr' for Greece).

4.1 Category 1: Gestures of the Same or Similar Meaning, but a Different Form

Emblems falling into this category are grouped under the name of the communication act or their function. A phrase or a word is added to each communication act, indicating the exact meaning of the emblems.

Greeting – 'Hi'.



Figure 2. Pl, Gr



Figure 3. Pl, Gr



Figure 4. Pl, Gr

To greet friends and social peers, usually in informal contexts,[2] Poles would perform a head toss, often combined with an eyebrow flash[3] (Figure 2). Although this gesture is also known in Greece, it was not commonly used during the research (none of the Greek encoders showed it). Acquaintances in Poland and Greece may also raise their hand (Figure 3) and/or slightly wave (Figure 4). The same gestures can be used to bid farewell.

Poles may also use the head toss to enquire about a situation or the interlocutor's wellbeing. Raising a hand can also be used by Polish road users to express gratitude or apology (see Jarząbek, 2016, pp. 122–123, 137).

Agreeing – 'I agree'.



Figure 5. Pl, Gr



Figure 6. Pl



Figure 7. Gr

[2] It should be noted that Poles, and also Greeks, use different gestures to greet someone of higher or lower social status. An important variable is the age, sex, and the physical distance. Popular Polish greetings range from a polite head nod, slight bow or curtsy, to a firm handshake, hand kiss, cheek kiss, head pat, shoulder pat or an embrace.

[3] More information about the gesture, also referred to as a 'head jerk' or 'upward nod' may be found in Axtell (1991, p. 140), Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1970/1987, p. 32), and Morris et al. (1979, pp. 161–168).

In most cases, agreeing or giving consent is reduced to a variant of the head nod (Figure 5) in both cultures (Antoniou-Kritikou, 2008, p. 114; Jarząbek, 2016, p. 41). Poles typically nod once, keep nodding for a while or close their eyelids (Figure 6), whereas Greeks rather tilt the head to one side (Figure 7) and would not tend to nod repeatedly. Closing the eyelids in agreement or confirmation is quite common in Poland, but may be unnoticed by an inattentive interlocutor. Nodding spontaneously may suggest that a person listens attentively or eagerly agrees with someone.

Disagreeing – 'No'



Figure 8. Pl, Gr



Figure 9. Gr



Figure 10. Gr

Poles usually shake their heads (Figure 8) (or make a "mh -mh", "u-uh" or "er-er" sound) to express disagreement, negation or rejection. Greeks may shake their heads as well, but this gesture is not as common as the head toss often combined with raising eyebrows and looking up (Figure 9) or closing the eyelids (Figure 10).

Another Greek signal of disagreement or negation is a denti-alveolar click, which may be accompanied by a gesture (a head toss or a head shake). Such a click, also combined with a head-shake, is also used in Poland to express disapproval.

Beckoning – 'Come over here'

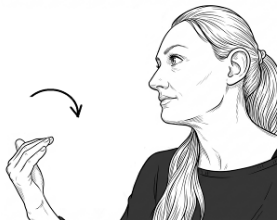


Figure 11. Pl, Gr



Figure 12. Gr

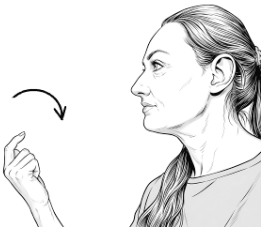


Figure 13. Pl

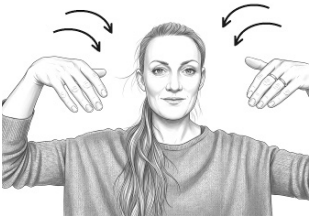


Figure 14. Gr

Polish and Greek beckoning gestures differ by the position of the hand: Poles use the palm-up wave (Figure 11), whereas Greeks also use the palm-down wave (Figure 12); Poles may also beckon someone by repeatedly flexing an index finger (Figure 13). To summon more people, Greeks use the two-hand wave ('*μαζευτείτε*', '*get together*') (Figure 14), also performed above the head; Poles would rather use the two-hand palm-up wave, although this gesture is scarce.

Complimenting – 'Super', 'Great', 'OK'

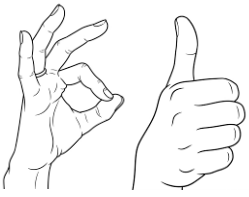


Figure 15-16. Pl, Gr



Figure 17. Pl,



Figure 18. Gr

Both cultures use 'the ring' (Figure 15) or 'the thumb-up' (Figure 16) to give a compliment or express approval (see Morris,

1994, p. 118, 215). Poles also raise a bent elbow (Figure 17) to show that something is excellent. A common Greek emblematic compliment, also popular in Turkey and the Middle East, requires forming an upward hand-purse while slightly moving the hand down (Figure 18) (see Antoniou-Kritikou, 2008, p. 106; Morris, 1994, p. 116). The emblems may be accompanied by a facial expression suggesting appreciation.

Offending – '(You are) stupid'



Figure 19. Gr



Figure 20. Pl



Figure 21. Pl

To comment on and criticise someone's foolishness, Greeks usually knock on the side of the (presumably empty) head with a fist (Figure 19). The emblem's verbal equivalent is '*τοκ τοκ',* and this gesture may be accompanied by a phrase '*είναι τοκ τοκ (αυτός ο τύπος*)' ('he is being foolish'). Poles perform the forehead tap (Figure 20), which may be replaced by a synonymic phrase ('*puknij się w głowę'*, 'knock on/tap your head'). Interestingly, Poles may also perform the forehead knock (Figure 21), similarly to Greeks. It is a strong illocutionary act, conveying an offensive message in an angry manner, as clenching a fist is a sign of fury and aggression.

Offending – '(You are) crazy'



Figure 22. Pl



Figure 23. Pl



Figure 24. Pl



Figure 25. Pl, Gr



Figure 26. Pl, Gr

To refer to someone's poor mental health or irrational behaviour, Poles perform the temple screw (Figure 22), press the thumb against the temple and swiftly flap the fingers down (Figure 23), perform the forehead circle (Figure 24) or the temple circle (Figure 25), or rotate a palm close to the temple (Figure 26). These are strong comments about the interlocutor or another person. The last two gestures are also recognised and used by Greeks.

The Polish forehead circle (Figure 24), meaning 'crazy', may be confused with the forehead tap (Figure 20), meaning 'stupid'.

Insulting – 'Fuck you'



Figure 27. Pl,



Figure 28. Pl, Gr,



Figure 29. Pl, Gr



Figure 30. Gr



Figure 31. Gr



Figure 32. Gr



Figure 33. Gr

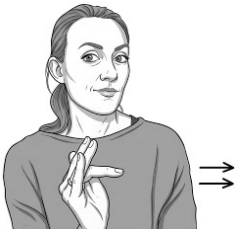


Figure 34. Gr

Poles and Greeks may convey insults in various ways. A Polish emblem, kissing a fist (Figure 27), is a nonverbal euphemism suggesting kissing the person's behind (Jarząbek, 2016, p.252). The forearm jerk (Figure 28), is also known in Greece and, as a phallic symbol, refers to a sexual threat (Morris, 1994, p. 78). 'The finger' (Figure 29), an ancient phallic gesture of Caligula (Morris, 1994, p. 162), is common in both cultures.

The most popular Greek insult ('*μούτζα*'), the palm thrust (Figure 30), originates from ancient times when the crowd would rub or throw dirt or horse manure into the face of a criminal carried to the place of execution (Morris, 1994, p. 191). Because of the emblem's similarity to a greeting gesture (see Figure 3), foreigners may confuse the two, and unintentionally greet a Greek with an outstretched palm.

There are numerous variants of the '*μούτζα'*, such as a two -hand gesture (Figure 31), the back palm thrust, known as '*πίσω φάσκελο'* (Figure 32), and the back hand slap (Figure 33). All these emblems may be accompanied by an exclamation such as '*να'* or '*πάρ'τα'* ('there', 'take it'). Another Greek affront is a variant of 'the finger' – pointing the bent middle finger at a person somebody wants to insult (Figure 34). This gesture, popular in Arabic countries (Morris, 1994, p. 161), is rather performed furtively, behind somebody's back.[4]

[4] Further information about rude and insulting gestures may be found in Axtell (1991, pp. 34–36), Lefevre (2011) and Morris et al. (1979, p. 230, 240).

Ridiculing or Mocking – 'Homosexual', 'Gay'



Figure 35. Pl



Figure 36. Gr

To mock a homosexual (in both countries homosexuality has not been widely approved, especially in the first years of the research), Poles perform the wrist flap (Figure 35), whereas Greeks would perform the palm flip, as if carrying an invisible tray (Figure 36).

Threatening – 'I'll kill you'

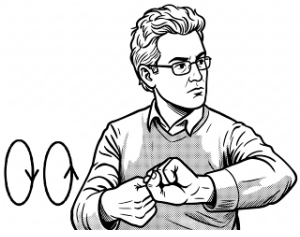


Figure 37. Pl



Figure 38. Gr



Figure 39. Pl, Gr



Figure 40. Pl, Gr

The threatening gestures signalise great anger and usually show the way of taking somebody's life (see Antoniou-Kritikou, 2008, pp. 49–51; Morris, 1994, p. 75). Poles illustrate wringing somebody's neck (Figure 37), whereas Greeks depict tearing the other person apart (Figure 38). Both cultures use a strangling gesture (Figure 39) or a throat-cutting gesture (Figure 40). The 'throat cut'

is performed with an index finger by Poles and may be performed with the thumb or the edge of a hand by Greeks. All emblematic homicide threats are understood in both cultures.

Showing Distress and Extreme Boredom or Indicating Suicide – 'I'll kill myself'



Figure 41. Pl, Gr

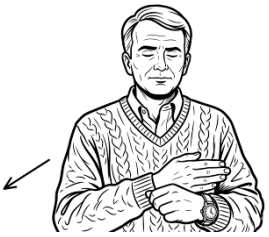


Figure 42. Gr

Gestures referring to suicide depict typical ways to do so. Poles perform 'the temple shoot' with the index and middle finger joined together (Figure 41) or point the finger-pistol at the open mouth. Greeks would rather use an index-finger variant (Antoniou-Kritikou, 2008, p. 53), however, the gesture was not shown by the Greek encoders. Greeks may also illustrate the act of opening (cutting) one's veins (Figure 42). These gestures are usually a nonverbal comment on extreme boredom or despair.

Showing Negligence, Indifference or Lack of Importance – 'Leave it', 'Never mind', 'It doesn't matter'



Figure 43. Pl



Figure 44. Gr

The Polish gesture referring to lack of importance or negligence, the hand flap (Figure 43), means '*machnąć na coś ręką*' ('to snap one's finger at something'). Greeks rather illustrate throwing

something over a shoulder (Figure 44). The gesture may also be used in response to thanking for a favour and means '*άσε το*' ('leave it', 'there's nothing to be grateful for'). A foreigner may misinterpret the Greek 'leave it' gesture as offensive '*πίσω φάσκελο*' (Figure 32).

Expressing Disbelief – 'You're lying', 'I don't believe you'



Figure 45. Pl



Figure 46. Pl



Figure 47. Gr

Expressing disbelief is in fact euphemistically indicating that somebody has been lying or playing tricks. Poles illustrate two popular phrases; the eyelid pull (Figure 45) may be accompanied by '*tu mi jedzie traktor/czołg/tramwaj*' ('yeah, sure, and there is a tractor/tank/tram going here'), and the palm point (Figure 46) means 'a cactus is sooner going to grow here than I am going to believe you' (also see Morris, 1994, p. 188). Poles may also look suspiciously at a person and/or nod ironically.

Greeks pretend to stroke a long beard (Figure 47); the '*μούσια*' ('*ψεμάτα*', 'lies') gesture is usually accompanied by a suspicious look and slightly lowered jaw (Antoniou-Kritikou, 2008, p. 187). The long strokes differentiate the gesture from two similar ones meaning wondering about something or complimenting another person's beauty.

Warding off Bad Luck – 'Touch wood'



Figure 48. Gr

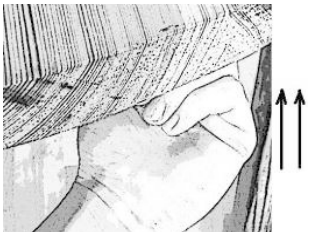


Figure 49. Pl

Some "magical" gestures used in both cultures refer to touching wood, either a Christian symbol of adoring the cross of Jesus Christ or a pagan custom of calling on good spirits living in the trees for protection (Opie & Tatem, 1989, p. 449, 450). Greeks knock on the table or any wooden furniture (Figure 48). Poles do the same, however, the wood must be bare, not polished or varnished. That is why they reach under the chair or table (Figure 49) to protect themselves from bad luck after having said something. Both cultures use the same phrase to replace the gesture: '*χτύπα ξύλο*', '*odpukać*' ('knock on wood').

Warding off Bad Luck and Protecting – 'Phtooey', 'Go away', 'Keep out'



Figure 50. Gr



Figure 51. Pl, Gr

Another "magical" gesture refers to spitting. In the ancient times saliva and spitting were considered a powerful artefact against the evil eye and demons (Elsworthy, 1895; Opie & Tatem, 1989, p. 373).

> *In the 3rd c. BC, Theophrastus wrote in Characters (16.14): 'μαινόμενον δὲ ἰδὼν ἢ ἐπίληπτον φρίξας εἰς κόλπον πτύσαι.' ('If [the superstitious man] sees a madman or an epileptic, he will shudder and spit into his bosom.') and Theocritus in Idylls (6.39): 'ὡς μὴ βασκανθῶ δέ, τρὶς εἰς ἐμὸν ἔπτυσα κόλπον' (''To avoid the evil eye, I spat thrice in my bosom.'[5]) (Lexilogia, 2009).*

The Greeks spit (or pretend to spit) thrice into their chest (Figure 50) for protection, sometimes adding '*μακριά απο εμάς*', '*φτου φτου*' or '*φύγε κακό*' ('keep out' or 'go away bad spirit'). Poles spit (or pretend to spit) once, twice or thrice over the left shoulder (Figure 51), sometimes adding '*tfu tfu*' or '*tfu tfu, na psa urok*' (which literally means 'the dog's charm'). Spitting over the shoulder is also recognised and sometimes used by Greeks. Greeks may also pretend to spit on or over somebody's head for good luck.

Both Poles and Greeks may spit once in a sign of a lapse or mistake made in a conversation, to 'spit out' the incorrect word. The gesture was not mentioned by Greeks during the first years of research, though.

Indicating a Small Amount – 'A little bit'

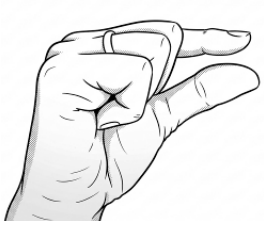


Figure 52. Pl, Gr



Figure 53. Pl

[5] Another translation of Theocritus can be found in Academic Brooklyn (2015): "Thrice for good luck I spat upon my robe".

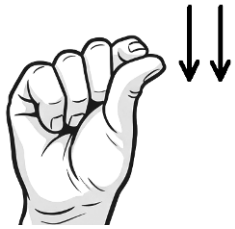


Figure 54. Gr

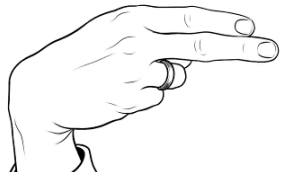


Figure 55. Gr

Showing a small size with the thumb and index finger (Figure 52) is common in both cultures. Poles touch the tip of the index or small finger with the thumb (Figure 53) meaning '*tyle, co brudu za paznokciem*' ('as little as dirt behind the fingernail'). Greeks touch the tip of an index finger with the thumb (Figure 54), which may also mean '*μισό λεπτό*' ('wait a second'). Another Greek gesture, showing joined index and middle finger placed horizontally (Figure 55), means '*ένα δαχτυλάκι*' ('the thickness of *one* finger') and indicates the small amount of alcohol a person wants.

Indicating Money – 'Money', 'Cash'



Figure 56. Pl, Gr



Figure 57. Gr

To refer to money or paying, Poles and Greeks perform the fingertips rub (Figure 56). Greeks may also place a hand purse in a palm, as if laying something on the table (Figure 57). It means '*πληρώνω μετρητά*' or '*τοις μετρήτοις*', 'paying in cash' or 'cash'.

Request to Remain Silent / Keep a Secret – 'Be quiet'/'Not a word'

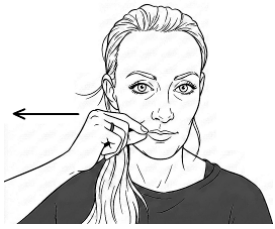


Figure 58. Pl, Gr



Figure 59. Pl



Figure 60. Pl



Figure 61. Pl, Gr

Poles and Greeks illustrate "zipping" the lips (Figure 58) (see Antoniou-Kritikou, 2008, p. 140, 143), which may be followed by pretending to turn a key in an imaginary lock at the corner of the mouth. The '*βάλε φερμουάρ*' or '*buzia na kłódkę*' phrase refers to putting on a zipper (in Greek) or a padlock (in Polish), so that no one can utter a word (or reveal a secret). Poles may also press their lips together (Figure 59) or pretend to have a mouth full of water (Figure 60) to mean 'I won't say a word'; the latter gesture illustrates taking a mouthful of water ('*nabrać wody w usta*'), which in fact makes speaking impossible.

In both cultures requesting silence (but not necessarily keeping a secret) is done by the lips touch (Figure 61) (see Morris, 1994, p. 157).

Promising – 'I promise'



Figure 62. Pl, Gr



Figure 63. Pl



Figure 64. Gr

When promising or swearing, both cultures refer the heart ('*z ręką na sercu'*, '*mówię prawdę'*; '*με το χέρι στην καρδιά*', '*το λέω αληθινά*'; 'with my hand on my heart', 'I'm telling the truth'). The heart clasp (Figure 62) emphasises sincerity, but may also signalise gratitude (see Antoniou-Kritikou, 2008, p. 76, 95) or apology (Jarząbek, 2016, p. 174). A Polish variant of the promising or swearing gesture is the chest punch (Figure 63) meaning 'for sure' ('*słowo honoru'*) (see Jarząbek, 2016, p. 206).

Another Greek gesture has a religious origin. Kissing the crossed index fingers (Figure 64) refers to kissing the cross of Jesus Christ (Antoniou-Kritikou, 2008, p. 120), and is in fact swearing to God ('*μα το Θεό*', 'I swear to God').

Taking Oath – 'I swear'



Figure 65. Pl



Figure 66. Gr

Both cultures incorporated gestures of taking oaths in official situations. Poles perform the index-and-middle-finger raise (Figure 65) (Jarząbek, 2016, pp. 178–179), whereas Greeks would raise a hand with the thumb, index and middle finger joined together (Figure 66). The Greek gesture has a religious origin and

meaning, referring to the Holy Trinity, which is metaphorically represented by the three fingers.

4.2 Category 2: Gestures of the Same or Similar Form, but a Different Meaning

Emblems falling into this category are grouped under the name referring to their morphology. Some gestures presented below have already been mentioned in Category 1, which is why their numbers have not changed.

The Head Toss



Figure 2. Pl



Figure 9. Gr

The head toss, accompanied by an eyebrow flash, may have a completely different meaning in a culture – it is a greeting or a friendly enquiry in Poland (Figure 2) and negation or a greeting in Greece (Figure 9). What is more, raising the head with the eyes wide open is a common Polish signal of surprise or confusion and is often used as a mute request to repeat what someone was saying. This gesture may be mistakenly regarded by a Greek as indicating a lack of knowledge.

Closing the Eyelids



Figure 6. Pl



Figure 10. Gr

Closing the eyes means 'yes' in Poland and 'no' in Greece. Minor differences between the gestures – Greek eyebrow flash and head toss (Figure 10), or Polish pressing the lips and slight nod (Figure 6) – may be overlooked, which may result in misinterpreting the gestures.

The Palm-Down Flap



Figure 12. Gr

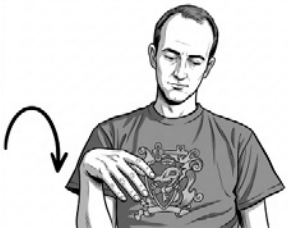


Figure 43. Pl



Figure 35. Pl

The palm-down Greek summoning gesture (Figure 12) may be mistakenly regarded by Poles as a sign of a lack of importance (Figure 43) or a homosexual (Figure 35).

The Elbow Raise



Figure 17. Pl



Figure 67. Gr

Raising a bent elbow (Figure 17) is a Polish compliment referring to something excellent. Moving a bent elbow sideways in Greece (Figure 67) means '*του πήγε να*' or '*φοβήθηκε πολύ*', 'somebody has been scared a lot'.

The Fist Slap



Figure 68. Pl

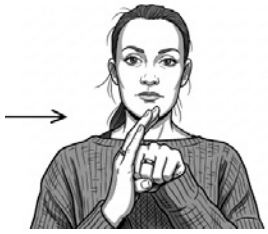


Figure 69. Gr



Figure 70. Gr, Pl

There are several fist-slap emblems used in Poland and Greece. A Polish threat ('*dostanie ci się*', 'I'll hit you'), in which the knuckles punch the palm (Figure 68), is confusingly similar to a Greek malicious satisfaction meaning '*σου την έφερα*' ('I have beaten you', 'looks like I win') in which the palm slaps the fist (Figure 69) (Antoniou-Kritikou, 2008, p. 106). The downward punch used in both cultures (Figure 70) means '*να μάθεις!*', 'that'll teach you a lesson' (Antoniou-Kritikou, 2008, p. 107).

Placing a Hand into a Palm

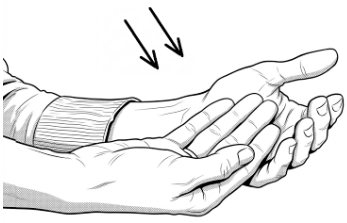


Figure 71. Pl



Figure 57. Gr

Placing one palm in another indicates a proof to a Polish interlocutor (Figure 71). This emblem may be replaced by a phrase '*solidne dowody'* ('solid proof') or '*czarno na białym'* ('in black and white'), which refers to something in writing or print, and therefore

true and confirmed. A confusingly similar Greek gesture, placing a pursed hand in a palm (Figure 57) means 'money' or 'cash payment'.

The Hand V-Sign



Figure 72. Pl, Gr



Figure 73. Gr



Figure 74. Gr

The two-finger V-sign (Figure 72), invented in 1941 by a Belgian lawyer as a symbol for a campaign against the Nazis (Morris, 1994, p. 129), is associated in Poland with the Solidarity movement. As a symbol of victory, this gesture is also recognised in Greece. Confusingly similar Greek gestures, two-finger thrusts (Figure 73, 74), are a strong insult meaning 'go to hell' (see Morris, 1994, p. 92).

4.3 Category 3: Gestures of the Same or Similar Form and the Same or Similar Meaning

Emblems presented in this category are grouped under the name of the communication act.

Indicating Someone Conceited, "Stuck-up"

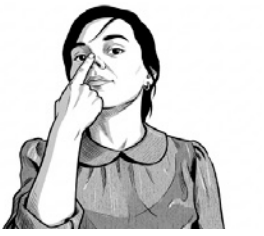


Figure 75. Pl, Gr

In both cultures the nose snub (Figure 75) illustrates a conceited, self-important person.

Indicating Being Broke



Figure 76. Pl, Gr

Pulling one's pockets inside out (Figure 76) means lack of money and illustrates Polish and Greek phrases ('*jestem spłukany*', '*mam puste kieszenie*' or '*είμαι άφραγκος*'; 'broke', 'empty pockets').

Indicating a Thief



Figure 77. Pl, Gr

To show that somebody has furtively (and presumably illegally) taken something, both Poles and Greeks rotate wrists, as if wanting to put something behind their back (Figure 77).

Casting Something or Someone out



Figure 78. Pl, Gr



Figure 79. Pl, Gr

Swift, waving motions of the hand and fingers (Figure 78) have the same meaning in both cultures: not wanting something, casting it out, or requesting to take it away (Antoniou-Kritikou 2008, p. 42, 43, 60). The gesture may be accompanied by '*άπαπα*' in Greece or '*sio!*' ('shoo!') in Poland and may be used towards people and animals. Performing the gesture with both hands (Figure 79), usually in front of a larger audience, is understood as a playful or impolite request to leave, sometimes accompanied by '*ξου ξου!*' in Greece.

Indicating Quotation



Figure 80. Pl, Gr

In both cultures flexing the index and middle fingers on each hand (Figure 80) signalises quotation (air quotes) or refers to something 'so-called' ('*tak zwane*', '*w cudzysłowie*', '*σε εισαγωγικά*'). A Greek variant is to draw imaginary angle brackets (« ») with index fingers. Air quotes often accompany speech.

Warning



Figure 81. Pl, Gr

In both cultures finger-wagging is used to warn a child (Figure 81). The gesture means that something is forbidden and that a particular activity may result in a punishment.

Indicating 'Nothing'



Figure 82. Pl, Gr

Poles use 'the hand fig' (Figure 82), a gesture of ancient origin, confusing history and a sexual symbolism[6] (see Jarząbek, 2016, p. 76; Morris et al. 1979, p. 149), to say that somebody will not get anything, or to indicate 'nothing'. In Greece the emblem is regionally distributed: only participants from Macedonia recognised this gesture, contrary to the findings of Morris et al. (1979, p. 159) – 'the fig' was supposed to be relatively rare in Attica and absent in Macedonia. What is more, the inhabitants of Central Macedonia may still use the gesture as an offence, besides meaning 'you'll get nothing' (E. Agathopoulou, personal communication, September 9, 2025).

[6] In Turkey and other Mediterranean countries, the gesture is related to female sexual organs, and is considered offensive.

Indicating Being Overworked and Overloaded



Figure 83. Pl



Figure 84. Gr, Pl

To refer to heavy workload and exhaustion, Poles and Greeks perform the 'hand cut' above the forehead (or across the chest). Poles may make a slashing movement with an index finger (Figure 83), or, like Greeks, with the whole palm (Figure 84) (see Antoniou-Kritikou, 2008, pp. 36–37, Jarząbek, 2016, p. 92). In both cultures the emblem replaces a phrase ('*mam tego potąd'*, '*μέχρι εδώ'*; 'I've had it up to here').

Indicating Walking



Figure 85. Pl, Gr

Both cultures signalise going somewhere on foot by using the 'finger-walk' gesture (Figure 85) (see Antoniou-Kritikou, 2008, p. 158).

Indicating Contempt, Disrespect or Condemnation



Figure 86. Pl, Gr



Figure 87. Pl, Gr

Both Greeks and Poles may (pretend to) spit on the ground (Figure 86) in a gesture of contempt, disrespect or condemnation of a person or a shameful act. They may also (pretend to) spit onto somebody's face (Figure 87). Poles may do so without any verbal comment, whereas Greeks would add '*φτου σου*!', '*ντροπή*!' ('phtooy!', 'shame on you!') after performing the gesture (see Antoniou -Kritikou, 2008, p. 30).

5. Other Findings

The course of research and material analysis have led to findings which may provide some contribution to gesture studies.

Johnson, Ekman and Friesen (1975, p. 338) and Morris et al. (1979) claimed that emblems might differ with age, sex (gender), ethnic background, or social class. During this research it was observed that age may influence the emblem repertoire of the culture users, as some gestures were not recognised by participants below 20 years of age, and seemed unknown to several senior participants: Polish teenage decoders did not understand some emblems and referred only to the form, not the meaning (e.g. spitting was described as getting rid of excessive saliva, not as a signal of contempt), and Polish and Greek encoders above 60 years of age could not think of some emblems (e.g. referring to something "so-called"). On the other hand, emblems were fully recognised by the majority of the participants, who were 26–39 years old (30 persons) or younger (21 persons). Clearly, being acquainted with the emblem

repertoire is a sign of high cultural (and language) competence and enables the understanding of highly conventionalised, non explicit messages. Moreover, the material analysis confirmed that neutral and informal emblems are used in everyday communication by ethnically homogenous middle-class adults, and are evenly distributed across a country, with the exception of 'the fig', whose distribution was found opposite to the results of Morris et al. (1979, p. 159).

Interestingly, unlike Morris et al. (1979, xiv), who conducted research only among men, believing that in some areas women would be reluctant to cooperate, in this study women were more willing to participate than men, and there were no taboo gestures to them. Gender did not influence the outcome of the research.

Emblems are an indispensable part of interaction. The emblem repertoire evolves and changes like words and phrases they usually replace; some gestures have been used for centuries or millenia, some are being incorporated into a culture, some cease to exist. It seems that a decade or two is a period long enough to notice some differences in the emblem inventory (e.g., Papas, 1999 and Antoniou-Kritikou, 2008; Jarząbek 1994 and 2016). Therefore, upgrading gesture dictionaries seems reasonable not only for the sake of registering the current repertoire, but also to preserve the vanishing elements of a culture.

6. Discussion

The purpose of the study was to compare selected emblems and assess the possibility of effective nonverbal communication between Poles and Greeks. The research material comprised of 65 emblems of the same or similar meaning, but of a different form, 17 emblems of the same or similar form, but of a different meaning, and 13 emblems of the same or similar form and meaning, representing 30 various communication acts.

Out of 65 gestures of the same meaning but a different form, 20 belong to the Polish and 24 to the Greek repertoire; 21 gestures are common in both cultures. Out of 17 gestures of the

same meaning but a different form, 10 are Greek, 9 are Polish. 13 gestures of the same or similar meaning are used in both cultures.

The largest and most varied Category 1 illustrates 20 communication acts. Apart from 21 shared emblems, the majority of items may be misinterpreted by a member of a different culture. Moreover, due to a deceiving resemblance of some emblems used within a culture, a foreign interlocutor may be left perplexed (e.g., confusing two kinds of Polish hand flaps or two kinds of Greek backward hand waves).

Also, emblems from Category 2 may cause befuddlement. A Polish greeting may be mistaken for a Greek refusal; a Greek refusal may be confused with a Polish agreement; a Polish compliment may be misread by a Greek as a signal of being afraid; a Greek satisfaction from achieving something may be misconstrued as a threat by a Pole. Some signals may even be mistakenly regarded as an offence and consequently lead to communication breakdown.

On the other hand, a considerable number of gestures is common and has the same meaning and form in both cultures. Category 3 contains 13 emblems representing 10 communication acts. 21 more Polish-Greek emblems were included in Category 1.

Despite some items of shared form and meaning (34 gestures from Category 1 and 3 stand for 39% of the total), the majority of the presented emblems (53 stand for 61% of the total) would remain unknown or confusing to the other culture users, even though some may look familiar. On the basis of the examples given, it may be implied that Poles would find it difficult to recognise at least 27 Greek emblems, and Greeks would struggle to understand 22 Polish emblems – respectively 37% and 30% of all the units presented. Such a percentage may influence understanding nonverbal signals used in the cultures, making communication rather challenging than successful.

It is worth noting that the majority of shared gestures are of ancient origin (e.g., ‘the ring’, ‘the finger’, ‘the fig’) or widespread, or illustrate certain activities or personal qualities. Gestures coming from medieval or ancient times are often sexually-based, and some of them may still be insulting. A few shared emblems refer

to magical (pagan) or Christian rituals. It appears that the common heritage, as well as iconic or illustrating gestures preserved and conventionalised in a culture as emblems, may be fundamental and the key to successful and effective intercultural communication. Obviously, as cultures and languages interact, gestures may travel and with time gain a new meaning in a new country. Nevertheless, some gestures remain unchanged and unique to a culture for centuries (e.g., '*moutza*'). Other emblems might seem clear or obvious (such as a threat of hitting somebody), but misunderstood in another culture, which has adapted a similar gesture for a completely different meaning (e.g., the Greek 'I have got the better of you').

The nonverbal style of communication depends on a culture, and the culture is deeply related to (or even dependent on) the language (see Hall, 1959; Leathers, 1986/1997, Chapter 16; Sapir, 1949). The research material has confirmed that numerous language phrases are reflected in emblems. Cultural differences are strongly manifested by emblematic gestures which play a crucial role in conveying meaning and cultural values and nuances (character) across diverse societies (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961; Leathers, 1986/1997, p. 391; Morris et al., 1979). Emblems illustrate typical (or stereotypical) behaviour and values of culture users, which has also been confirmed here.

A rich and varied Greek repertoire of invective gestures may reflect a tendency to be short-tempered (and creativity in nonverbal insults). Poles offend mostly by ridiculing somebody's allegedly poor mental condition, which may also inexplicitly mean that they value common sense. Interestingly, the second most numerously represented communication act in both cultures is complimenting (with the use of some ancient gestures, too), *ex aequo* with threatening, beckoning, warding off bad luck and indicating a small amount (including a small amount of alcohol – a Greek gesture unknown in Poland). It is worth mentioning that, to express negation or denial, both cultures have adapted (conventionalised) two different gestures of a baby refusing milk by taking a mouth away from the nipple (see Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1973): a head toss in Greece and a head shake in Poland.

Some scientists assert that Southern European nations gesticulate more than others (see Driessen, 1991; Graziano & Gullberg, 2024). This text presented 68 Greek emblems compared to 63 Polish ones; the marginal difference between the items may contradict this common belief, at least when it comes to emblematic gestures of shared semantic or morphological features. It might suggest that Poles, as Central Europeans, are nearly as expressive as Southern Europeans. What is more, since culture supports expression, it may be implied that a variety of emblems corresponding with the expressiveness of a society must be generated and incorporated in a culture.

7. Conclusion

The richness of the nonverbal repertoire, the differences between the Polish and Greek gestures, as well as a risk of misunderstanding seem to justify the necessity of becoming familiar with the emblematic repertoire of a culture, especially in face-to-face communication, not only in everyday situations, but also in formal and semi-formal contexts.

In order to ensure successful and effective intercultural communication, it would be highly advisable to create and update gesture dictionaries, useful to travellers, diplomats, business people or students. As the paper contains original data and refers to a relatively large number of communication acts, it may be regarded as a mini-dictionary of common Polish and Greek emblems.

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