

“HAVE you taken your lunch yet?”

This common greeting in Singapore throws Westerners for a loop. It is not a question that begs an answer but is simply the equivalent of “hello”

How ya going?

In a company where I did training with a multicultural group of employees, the Australians were continually irritated with this lunch question, whereas the Singaporeans felt likewise with the Australian phrase, “How ya going?”

They would say to themselves: How am I going? What do they mean? Am I walking funny? Do I look like I’m in a rush to go somewhere?

Cultural differences such as these in language find intriguing outlets in our non-verbal communication.

Symbolic gestures that signify a particular meaning are called “emblems” – gestures that replace speech and are usually culture-bound.

Pioneer anthropologist Desmond Morris took 20 gestures that existed already in Europe in the 1600s and went around the world researching to see if they could be identified as universal gestures.

He found they had differing meanings or no meaning whatsoever in many countries.

Some of these original gestures can be seen regularly in Singapore and carry the same meaning as in my home country, the United States.

For example, the ring (index finger and thumb creating a circle and the other three fingers raised) means OK. The thumbs-up gesture means “good”.

The fingertip kiss means delicious, as in Italian cuisine.

Cultural differences: Part 1 of 3

Food for thought

To overcome communication barriers, learn the common greetings and gestures of various cultural groups



In countries where eating is an important part of the culture, knowing some food-related gestures will help you adapt to the local lifestyle more easily. PHOTO: AFP

I want to *ta pao*

I have discovered that cultural themes around food provide some interesting Asian differences.

Closed fingers pointing to the mouth a few times indicate “let’s

eat”; the background of which refers to the Malay custom of eating food with your fingers, also prevalent in countries like Sri Lanka and India.

Making a shovelling motion

with your index and middle fingers toward your mouth also communicates “let’s eat”, coming from the Chinese custom of using chopsticks. The fingers take on the look of the chopsticks.

Cooking is shown by vigorous arm movements, as when you stir-fry food in a wok.

Takeaway food is taken for granted now. I remember growing up in Chicago in the 1950s when Chinese restaurants began to crop up throughout the US.

It was the first I knew about ordering food that could be carried away in little paper containers. This precluded the norm of what we know today as fast food.

Singaporeans say “*ta pao*” for takeaway and only need to make the gesture of holding the straps or strings to a container and bouncing it up and down to impart this message without speaking.

Another gesture carrying the same meaning is when one mimes the action of folding banana leaves, which are also often used to pack and take away food in the Malaysian and Indonesian tradition.

Appreciating these cultural differences will help anyone who has to regularly work abroad or in a multicultural setting ease into life there.

Next Friday: More about hand gestures

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