

# Exploration of the use of non-verbal communication in Japanese conversation

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While speech plays an important role in conversation in most languages, spoken words are not the only tool for expressing oneself during discourse. This paper outlines some examples of non-verbal cues regularly employed during conversations in Japanese.

## Hand gestures

Japanese people use many different hand gestures during conversation that differ from Dutch ones. These gestures are culturally influenced.

A common example of this is pointing towards oneself. When Japanese people talk about themselves, they use their index finger and point it at their nose, as opposed to the Dutch gesture of pointing to oneself with a thumb and closed fist.

Another often used gesture is waving one's hand in front of their face. To make this gesture one has to wave their hand in front of their face with their thumb facing themselves and their pinky turned away. This gesture is used when you are asked something you do not know, or when someone says something about you that is not true.

## Writing gestures

Another example of gestural communication is named *kūshō*<sup>1</sup> (空章, こうしょう), which translates to air-writing. The use of this term is specific to the cited paper. *Kūshō*, as the word would suggest, describes the use of gestures in the air, or an immediate surface like a table or another person's hand palm, to draw kanji characters during a verbal conversation.



Writing gestures are often used to describe something and people sometimes use gestures before speaking to clarify what they intend to explain. These gestures are often done similarly to the stroke orders of Japanese kanji characters. Accordingly, when a person uses

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<sup>1</sup> Cibulka, P. (2013). The writing hand: Some interactional workings of writing gestures in Japanese conversation. *Gesture*, 13(2), 167.

writing gestures in conversation, mutual understanding is created through a common understanding of the stroke orders.<sup>2</sup>

## Nodding

Nodding in Japanese speaking culture is often linked with something called “aizuchi”, which is the act of using words or utterances to show involvement in conversation.<sup>3</sup> The speaker and listener can both exhibit aizuchi during discourse. As for nodding, it is used to cohabit the aizuchi and has specific uses itself as well. For instance, when people nod in conversation, it can result in a loop of nodding, which will then result in smiling.<sup>4</sup> Hence, nodding can elicit positivity amongst people having a conversation.<sup>5</sup>

## Gestures to avoid

There are gestures in Japan that are better avoided. For example: Although it signifies paying attention in the West, in Japan, making eye contact is seen as uncomfortable and can even seem a little aggressive.

For the Japanese, standing with your arms crossed means that you are not approachable or do not want to talk. However, standing with your arms crossed and your eyes closed means that you are thinking deeply about something.

The last thing not to do, is to point, as this is rude in Japan. It comes across as aggressive and can be compared to staring into someone's eyes. Even while giving directions, one shouldn't point, but gesture with their hand in the appropriate direction.

In conclusion, speaking and having conversations in Japan have nuances that are not present or different in, for instance, western countries. The use of writing gestures and nodding are examples of this. They inhere in Japanese language and culture. Thus, in order to fully understand Japanese people in conversation, Westerners need to look out for distinctions between ways in which certain body language is understood.

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<sup>2</sup> Cibulka, P. (2013). The writing hand: Some interactional workings of writing gestures in Japanese conversation. *Gesture*, 13(2), 175.

<sup>3</sup> Kita, S., & Ide, S. (2007). Nodding, aizuchi, and final particles in Japanese conversation: How conversation reflects the ideology of communication and social relationships. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 39(7), 1243.

<sup>4</sup> Kita, S., & Ide, S. (2007). Nodding, aizuchi, and final particles in Japanese conversation: How conversation reflects the ideology of communication and social relationships. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 39(7), 1248.

<sup>5</sup> Kita, S., & Ide, S. (2007). Nodding, aizuchi, and final particles in Japanese conversation: How conversation reflects the ideology of communication and social relationships. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 39(7), 1250.



Dear Robin-san,

It is very informative and interesting paper. I here by write down some points to improve it.

~~1) Please write down also the names of group members.~~

2) Add examples of non-verbal communication which you find in Japanese movies, anime or tv series and analyze the how they are used.

3) Add your own ideas and analysis.

~~4) Is 空章 used by different researchers as well or a special term only Gibulka uses?~~

## Bronnen

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**Japanese Hand Gestures and Body Language and Guide**

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