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## Cultural implications through hand gesture in Japanese and Balinese communities

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### ABSTRACT

Communication involves verbal and non-verbal forms of expression, such as gestures. However, misunderstandings can arise when people from different cultures communicate. This research aims to examine the use of body movements by Japanese and Balinese people, exploring their similarities and differences. This research involves descriptive-qualitative analysis, data collection through observation, interviews, and recording. The method used for selecting these samples was purposive sampling. Findings suggest that both cultures have similar understandings of gestures due to their emphasis on social etiquette. Additionally, both cultures incorporate elements of taboo, honor, and status in their gestures. However, Balinese body language is influenced by the cultural concept of Rwa Bineda, while Japanese body language is more influenced by inyo.



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## Introduction

Communication is essential for humans to convey messages using symbols or messages with a specific goal. According to Hardjana (2016), communication involves transmitting a message through various means to another individual, who then responds to the sender. Meanwhile, Sirkula (2017) defines communication as transferring information, comprehension, and understanding from one person, place, or thing to another. In this process, each message's meaning depends on the receiver's perception and comprehension. Therefore, effective communication occurs when all parties involved share the same perception of the symbols used, leading to the achievement of the communication's purpose.

Communication requires language, a system of speech and hearing used by groups or communities to convey ideas, messages, intentions, feelings, and opinions to others. Language consists of arbitrary sound symbols and various systems that involve an order within systems. According to Walija in Lindawati et al. (2023), ge is the most effective form of communication. Verbal and non-verbal communication is often used to convey messages or exchange ideas (Holmes & Wilson, 2022; Bernad-Mechó, 2024). Verbal communication can be spoken or written, while non-verbal communication is conveyed through body language such as hand movements, facial expressions, head shakes, signs, and actions. These two forms of communication differ in structure, linguistic form, learning process, and brain processing (Burgoon et al., 2021).

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Body language is a form of non-verbal communication used during social interactions and to establish relationships. According to Birdwhistell in Mondada (2019), only 35% of a message is conveyed through verbal language, while the rest is conveyed through non-verbal cues like body language. Highlights the importance of understanding non-verbal communication, including body movements such as gestures, behaviors, and expressions (Haneef et al., 2014; Saggese, 2023).

Body language and gestures are commonly used in daily interactions in Japanese culture. Hand gestures are particularly dominant (Kiaer & Kim, 2024; Weng, 2024). Japanese people use verbal and non-verbal language to ensure clarity when conveying a message or explaining something (Kinoshita, 2023; Telaumbanua et al., 2024; Telaumbanua et al., 2024). Aizuchi culture, where individuals respond with short verbal reactions while others speak, is deeply ingrained in Japanese communication (Perdana & Nurohmah, 2022; Abdel-Raheem, 2024). Misunderstandings or discomfort may arise in personal relationships when individuals from different regions communicate, as body language and non-verbal gestures are significant in Japanese culture and may not be expressed as straightforwardly as in Western cultures (Yu & Leung, 2024; Hill & Collaborators, 2025). In pursuing harmony, Japanese individuals may remain silent and even end relationships rather than express their discomfort directly (Kishimi & Koga, 2024; Shang, 2023).

In Balinese culture, a concept called *Rwa Bhineda* refers to the coexistence of two opposing things. It is a familiar concept to the Hindu community in Bali and was created by Hyang Widhi Wasa to establish balance and harmony in the universe (Dewanti & Kameswari, 2019); Aichinger & Grohsebner, 2021; Haddad, 2024). This concept also affects language use, including the choice of words and body language. The vertical-horizontal relationship between Japanese and Balinese cultures shares exciting similarities. Both cultures highly value vertical relationships, such as respecting parents, superiors, seniors, teachers, and elders, without the need to relate horizontal relationships. In communication, both cultures combine non-verbal language with verbal statements (Cai et al., 2024; Weng, 2024; Ali, 2024). Balinese people use 'metetangan' when talking to someone from the Brahmin dynasty, while the Japanese bow deeper when communicating with elders, superiors, or respected individuals. Non-verbal language is closely associated with their societal structure and communication model.

Khotimah & Sasanti (2019) studied *aizuchi*, focusing on Japanese foreign speakers in Youtube videos discussing homestays in Japan episodes 1-3. The study identified four types of *aizuchi*: *aizuchi shi* for acquiring new information; *kurikaeshi* for expressing surprise; *iikae* for acknowledging new information; expressing surprise, and agreeing with the speaker; and *sonota* for receiving new information (ZHU et al., 2021). According to Supriatnaningsih (2015) research on using *Aizuchi* by Japanese language students, Indonesian students tend to use non-verbal *Aizuchi* more than verbal *Aizuchi* when learning Japanese. The study found that only 21% of verbal *Aizuchi* were used by Indonesian students in formal conversation situations during teacher training activities at the Japanese Language Institute, Japan Foundation, Kansai, Osaka. The remaining 79% of *Aizuchi* were in the form of non-verbal actions, such as nods made to all interlocutors, regardless of their nationality (Mitasova, 2024).

This research focuses on the hand gestures the Balinese and Japanese use. It aims to compare their respective gestures and analyze the differences. The study is limited to the body movements of the Japanese population, which are then compared with Balinese gestures (Aichinger & Grohsebner, 2021). The research used Japanese individuals in Bali and students from Bali State Polytechnic as respondents. As defined by Holmes & Wilson (2022), sociolinguistics is the study of the relationship between language use and socio-cultural life. People's language use can be influenced by social status, cultural background, and feelings. While language is a powerful tool for communication, it sometimes fails to convey true feelings, leading to the importance of non-verbal communication (Yu & Leung, 2024). However, the definition and limitations of non-verbal communication can be confusing, as noted by Randal Harrison in *The Theory of Communication* (Opoku-Agyemang, 2015).

According to Burgoon et al. (2021), nonverbal communication can be grouped into seven types of sign systems. These include body language (kinesics), sound (vocalic or paralanguage), physical appearance, touch (haptics), space (proxemics), time (chronemics), and objects (artifacts). These signs are observed in social interactions and communication. One unique form of non-verbal communication is the gesture, which involves conscious or subconscious movements, body language, and facial expressions. The gesture helps understand students' thoughts and is essential for effective teaching (Haddad, 2024). Kinesics, the study of body language, was pioneered by Ray L. Birdwhistell, who used linguistics as a model. The popular term for kinesics is body language, and Birdwhistell lists seven assumptions that form the basis of his theory of body language (Bernad-Mecho, 2024).

Overall, non-verbal communication is vital to human interaction and is necessary for conveying messages and interpreting thoughts and feelings: a) Every movement of the body can convey a message in communication.

People can interpret meaning from every activity; b) Behavior can be analyzed through organized patterns, and the actions of individuals within those patterns can be systematically studied; c) While there are biological limitations to body movements, gestures in social interactions are considered part of the more extensive social system, with different groups utilizing different gestures; d) People can be influenced by the gestures of others they observe; e) How gestures are used in communication can be studied; f) The meanings discovered through body language research are obtained through behavioral studies and research methods; g) A person's gestures are unique but still exist within a shared social system.

There are several ways in which the human body can symbolically communicate, including through the use of facial expressions, hand gestures, head movements, leg positions, and overall body language. The non-verbal code known as kinesics encompasses various forms of body language, such as hand signs, head movement, body posture, and foot position. The way someone walks can convey various emotions or attitudes (Jiang et al., 2022). Walking at a slow pace may imply a lack of energy, whereas maintaining a composed and upright posture can convey a sense of self-assurance (Hill & Collaborators, 2025). There are 32 gestures in Japanese culture, which are divided into general and slang categories. Gestures are a common part of everyday life, with a variety of broad gestures and slang gestures used to convey different meanings. There are 14 broad gestures that are commonly used, while 18 slang gestures are used to express more unusual or humorous things.

Some examples of general gestures are *Ojigi*, *Watashi*, and *Warau*, while there are also slang gestures like *Kawaii*, *Akkanbaay*, *Peace*, *Fukurettura*, *Atsui*, *Banzai*, *Hana ga takai*, *Ok*, *Yakuza*, *Goma suri*, *Hora banashi*, *Kanojo*, *Kareshi*, *Oishisou*, *Ninshin*, *Obake*, *Ippaidou*, and *Okama*. Communication encompasses various forms of expression, including verbal and non-verbal cues like gestures. Unfortunately, miscommunications can occur when individuals from diverse cultures interact (Belío-Apaolaza & Hernández Muñoz, 2024). This study seeks to investigate the utilization of body movements among individuals from Japan and Bali, delving into the similarities and distinctions between their practices.

## Method

The study utilized a descriptive-qualitative research method, which aims to understand the experiences of research subjects, including their behavior, perceptions, motivations, and actions. The researchers used this approach to systematically and accurately describe and compare the body language of Balinese and Japanese individuals who commonly use gestures. Overall, the study was a process of comparing the gestures of these two cultures. This study focused on students and lecturers at Bali State Polytechnic and a group of Japanese individuals who were also in Bali. The samples used for this study were Balinese students and lecturers from generations I and II who utilized gestures. The method used for selecting these samples was purposive sampling, a deliberate technique (Moleong, 2017).

Data was collected using various techniques, including observation, documentation, and triangulation. The complete participation observation technique was utilized for data collection, where the author, acting as a teacher, was fully involved in the data source, which was the students and lecturers. The author was positioned as a partner for Japanese participants in Bali. Additionally, documentation of gestures made by both Japanese and Balinese individuals was used. Finally, triangulation was employed, combining various data collection techniques and existing data sources. This study used different data collection techniques to obtain information from the same source, simultaneously utilizing complete participatory observation and documentation.

## Results And Discussions

### Gesture Forms Between Japanese and Balinese People

#### Appoint Own Self

In Japanese and Balinese cultures, it is common for individuals to refer to themselves using the first-person pronoun (Satyawati et al., 2021; Gonja & Musaev, 2024). In Japanese society, the gesture for "I" (*Watashi*) involves pointing the index finger in front of the nose, which someone in a higher position typically performs (Diner et al., 2022). However, if the speaker wants to show politeness to someone of a higher age or position, they will place their index finger from the chin to the chest (Yu & Leung, 2024). In Balinese culture, the gesture for "I" varies. Placing an open hand on the chest is a polite gesture when speaking to someone of a higher position while pointing the index finger to the chest is used when addressing a younger person and may indicate emotion (Nasr, 2018; Dewanti & Kameswari, 2019). Some examples of a self-pointing gesture are shown below:



**Figure 1 <A self-pointing Gesture of the Balinese people**



**Figure 2 <A Self-pointing Gesture of the Japanese People**

**To show True/ Good/ Fine**

In Japanese and Balinese cultures, people use hand gestures to convey a message of honesty and positivity in their daily conversations (Basir & Ro'Ifah, 2018; Burgoon et al., 2021). This movement allows the speaker to express a true and good statement to the listener. The standard gesture is lifting the thumb or forming an "O" shape by placing the index finger on the thumb while the other fingers are raised (Cai et al., 2024). Another gesture Japanese people use is forming a large circle above their head with both hands, which signifies something right or good (Weng, 2024; Nakano et al., 2024; Kiaer & Kim, 2024). Here are some examples of a gesture that show true/good/good:



**Figure 3 <Gestures that Show Right/ Good/ Good of the Balinese People**



**Figure 4. Gestures that Show Right/Good/Good of the Balinese People**



### To show Wrong/Not good/ Prohibition

Japanese and Balinese people use gestures in daily conversations to indicate wrong or prohibited statements (Renold et al., 2022). In Japanese society, politeness and manners are highly valued, and saying "no" directly is considered impolite (Khotimah & Sasanti, 2019). Instead, Japanese people avoid direct answers and use the gesture of crossing their hands or index fingers to form an X to communicate their disagreement. Similarly, waving hands in front of the face indicates something that is not good or not allowed. Balinese people also have various levels of politeness in their gestures, with waving five fingers to the left and right indicating a low level of politeness for "no," while waving the index finger facing up to the left and right indicates a moderate level of politeness for "no" (Mondada, 2019; (Kuhn & Sarfati, 2023). Here are some examples of a gesture that show wrong/ not good/prohibition:



Figure 5 <Gestures that show wrong/ not good/ prohibition of the Balinese people



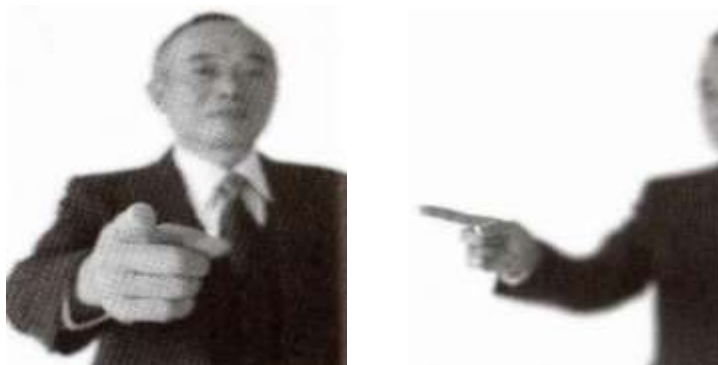
Figure 6 <Gestures that Show Wrong/ Not Good/ Prohibition of The Japanese People

### Pointing

Pointing is a familiar gesture used by Japanese and Balinese people, with different levels of politeness depending on the situation (George, 2011). The most basic form of pointing is folding all fingers except the index finger, which is extended to indicate objects, people, or places (Wasielewski, 2023). In Balinese society, this gesture is typically used by speakers of higher age or position or with intimate speech partners of the same age. For a more polite form of pointing, both Japanese and Balinese people use the gesture of opening the palm and extending all fingers close together, then pointing with all five fingers. In Balinese society, language and gestures may differ based on the caste level and the speech partner being communicated with (Rasna et al., 2024). For example, when pointing to a highly religious person such as a priest or traditional leader, the speaker may use the thumb of their right hand facing upwards, with the palm of their left hand being the base of the right hand (Hobaiter et al., 2022). Some examples of pointing gesture are shown below:



Figure 7. Gestures that Show Pointing of The Balinese People



**Figure 8 <Gestures that Show Pointing of the Japanese Peoplei**



**Figure 9 <Gestures that Show Pointing of The Balinese People in Polite Version**



**Figure 10 <Gestures that Show Pointing of The Japanese People in Polite Version**

### **Giving goods to Others**

Giving goods to others in Japanese and Balinese societies has similarities and differences. In Balinese society, two types of gestures are used when giving goods to speech partners. The first gesture involves using the right hand to hold and hand over the object to the others, who then accepts it with their right hand. This gesture is typically used when the others is a close peer, younger than the speaker, or when the speaker holds a higher social status. The second gesture involves using both hands to hold the object and offering it with straight hands, similar to the gesture used by Japanese people. Japanese people also use both hands to hold the object and offer it to the others, usually with a slight bow of the head or body. In Japanese society, it is customary to give goods at the beginning of a meeting rather than at the end, and the giver is usually careful not to offend the recipient (De Vos, 2024). Here is an example of the gesture used when giving goods:



**Figure 11.** Gestures that show Giving goods to others of the Balinese people



**Figure 12.** Gestures that Show Giving Goods to Others of The Japanese People

### **Comparison of Gesture of Japanese Society with Balinese Society**

Based on the several forms of gesture above, it can be seen that there are some similarities and differences in gestures between Japanese society and Balinese people. The following are the similarities and differences that can be seen from the use of the gestures described above, namely:

#### **Similarity**

The Similarity Japanese and Balinese: 1) People often point to a specific body part when expressing themselves. 2) To convey the meaning of right, sound, and good, Japanese and Balinese people use their thumbs facing up and index fingers to form the letter 'O' by touching their thumb. 3) A familiar hand gesture used by both Japanese and Balinese people involves shaking their hands left and right. 4) In daily life, Japanese and Balinese people tend to use the index finger for pointing and use all five fingers to show warmth and courtesy towards their conversation partner. 5) When giving items, Japanese and Balinese people demonstrate respect and courtesy by holding each side of the item before presenting it to the recipient.

#### **Different**

Different Japanese and Balinese: 1) Balinese people tend to use their chest to represent themselves, unlike Japanese people who point to their faces. Balinese people use five fingers to show politeness instead of the index finger, which is considered impolite. This gesture indicates that Balinese people value good manners when communicating with others, regardless of their position or status. 2) In Japanese society, wrapping both hands to form a capital 'O' is a familiar gesture to express agreement or accuracy when answering. Balinese people do not use this gesture. 3) Japanese people shake their right hand left and right with the palm facing left and the back of the hand facing right to say no. Balinese people shake their right hand left and right with the palm facing forward and the back of the hand backward. Japanese people also raise their hands or both index fingers to form the letter 'X,' while Balinese people only use their right index finger and shake it left and right. 4) In Balinese society, people use different gestures to point out objects and places, depending on the status of the person they are speaking to. When speaking to someone with a higher social status, such as a priest or traditional leader, the gesture is to use the thumb of the right hand facing upwards with the palm of the left hand as the base of the right hand.

Balinese people use a gesture with their right hand to hold an item and then give it to the person they are speaking to. This gesture shows politeness and respect towards others, a custom Balinese people value. They also prioritize using their right hand because it is polite and has a good meaning.

## Conclusions

Using gestures in Japanese and Balinese societies shares some similarities and differences. Both cultures gesture more homily due to their strict behavioral and communication ethics adherence. Furthermore, both cultures' gestures contain taboos, honorifics, and the status of the speaker and the interlocutor. However, Balinese body language is often influenced by the cultural concept of Rwa Bineda, representing opposites such as good and evil, light and dark, and right and left. This concept heavily influences the Balinese body language in communicating. On the other hand, Japanese body language is more influenced by the concept of Inyo, which represents two opposing energies that create everything in the universe. Men are included in the Yo group, women are included in the In group, and objects are categorized into In and Yo groups, such as the sun and the moon.

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