

SCRIPT

The handshake: the act of two people holding and shaking each other's hands.

An ordinary gesture we reiterate regularly, often without even paying attention to it. Throughout the centuries it has become an ingrained habit and the most common form of greeting.

How many hands have we shaken? Do we remember them? Was the grip firm? Or limp? Or damp? Or maybe we don't even recall it because we behaved mechanically.

There is, indeed, an automatic reflex in the handshake. A performative act driven by social expectations. A sequence of gestures which shapes a choreography re-enacted over and over again. The arm raised, the hands grasping each other, a brief up and down movement. The arm raised, the hands grasping each other, a brief up and down movement.

Who are the two people shaking hands? Where is the event taking place?

If, on a personal scale, the handshake might be seen as an insignificant routine gesture, when it involves politicians, it acquires symbolic values. Because of their status, politicians are representative of a specific community, so the handshake is no longer something interpersonal, but it becomes intercommunal. In this case, the event of shaking hands has to be meticulously planned and it must comply with precise codes. During this performance, politicians use body language as a vehicle to portray themselves in the public eye.

The ceremony of greetings is an essential part of the political protocol. It takes place publicly, in which case both parties may not even look at each other, but directly at the cameras. This is the most fictional version of the greeting. The handshake becomes the real subject of the event. It can be seen as a meta-theatrical performance where the fourth wall is broken, and the two performers are directly addressing the audience.

The power of the handshake is so evocative that politicians try to make the most of the moment of greeting. For many politicians, the handshake is an opportunity to assert their dominance.

But what is this supposed set of codes that rules the handshake?

A cubic structure will serve us as a guide for the handshake. According to how the person places their hands inside and around the cube, different messages are conveyed.

Most people shake hands with their right hand. The right arm is raised in the middle of the imaginary cube with the fingertips pointing ahead. The angle that the palm traces with the horizontal axis of the cube is the most important variable to determine one's intention. The palm perpendicular to the ground is the neutral form of handshake. It is professional and respectful. After grasping the other person's hand, it usually follows a brief up-and down-movement along the vertical axis.

Let's look at the frontal axis. Two possible handshakes can be identified:

1) The close handshake, when the hand is close to the bust, aligned with the face of the cube nearest to the body.

2) The far handshake, when the arm is fully extended, and the hand is aligned with the face of the cube furthest away from the body.

This distinction has to do with the laws of proxemics, which is the study of the human use of space while interacting and communicating.

The close handshake reflects the intimate space; it conveys either inclusion or possession.

The far handshake sets a boundary between the social space and the personal space. It is a more detached way to shake hands and has the purpose to limit and to stop.

The perpendicular handshake's neutrality can be shifted by rotating the wrist. If the angle between the palm and the horizontal axis is acute, then the intention is to prevail on the other person. The smaller the angle, the stronger is the will to appear dominant. So, an angle of zero and a palm fully facing downwards is the most authoritative handshake.

On the contrary, if the angle between the palm and the horizontal axis is obtuse, then the approach is deferential, and it is considered a submissive handshake.

The palm facing downwards conveys control and supremacy whereas the palm facing upwards communicates support.

Another case where the power dynamics of the handshake can be defined by a dominant-submissive relationship involves the ascending or descending ideal line which connects the elbow to the hand. If the direction is top-down, drawing a diagonal line in the lateral cube's face, the gesture manifests dominance. If the direction is bottom-up, the resulting message is subordination. This differentiation mostly depends on the height and position of the two people shaking hands.

Finally, in the ritual of the handshake, a relevant role might be played by the left hand as well. The latter can eventually double clasp the handshake, overpowering the other person's hand, or it can also be placed and pressed on the other person's upper arm or shoulder. The sequence of these three options is a progressive climax, where touching the shoulder represents the most intimate, but also most assertive way of interacting.

Hands, fingers, steps and arms. Hands that intertwine, fingers that curl to grasp hands and arms. Gestures which generate signs; moves that shapes choreographic figures. The handshake as a precise social ritual composed by discrete events. A dialectical and mutating relationship where the two players have to re-adjust their movements in real time, simultaneously intending to convey their personal intentions while attempting to navigate their "gestural interlocutor."