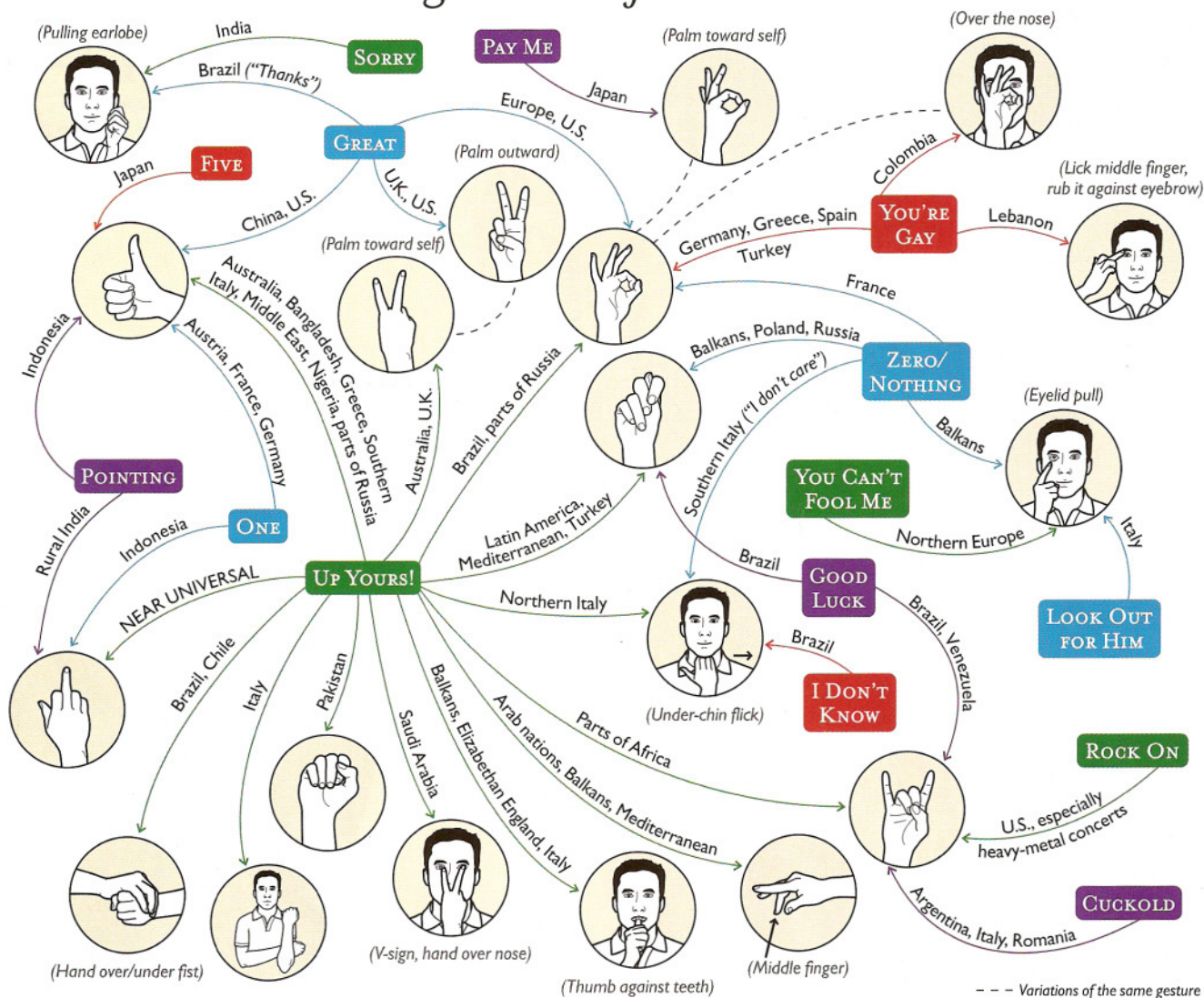


Etiquette 101: Hand Gestures

The Tangled Web of Hand Gestures



POPULAR ORIGIN MYTHS

Gestures, like words, have their own etymologies, but since they are essentially pre-verbal (and may date back to our primate days), their origins are difficult to trace. Not that that's ever stopped people from speculating. Here, the myths behind two common gestures



THE EMPEROR'S "FINISH HIM" IN THE COLOSSEUM: THUMBS-DOWN

Popular culture has it that when the Roman emperor wanted a gladiator to kill his victim, he would point his thumb down, while a thumbs-up would spare the loser's life. This is certifiably not true, and probably a misunderstanding of the Latin phrase *pollice verso*. The phrase for a "Kill" sign doesn't mean an upside-down thumb but an overturned thumb. Most scholars now believe that a thumbs-up meant "Finish him," while a thumb hidden in the fist (*pollice compresso*) meant "Spare him." This is alluded to in several sources though not absolutely verified, but since a thumbs-up was an insult in Roman times (and still is in parts of Italy), it makes far more sense than the accepted folklore. Incidentally, the middle finger was also considered vulgar in Rome. One of Caligula's storied insults was to have subjects kiss his middle finger. So where did the positive thumbs-up come from? Some ascribe it to the medieval English custom of touching upraised thumbs to seal an agreement.



THE "SCREW OFF" IN BRITAIN: PALM-TOWARD-SELF V-SIGN

This symbol, so unique to Britain and its territories, was long thought to have been invented on St. Crispin's Day, during the British underdog victory over the French at Agincourt in 1415 (memorialized in Shakespeare's *Henry V*). The story goes that the French, when capturing England's master archers, would cut off their two forefingers to prevent them from ever again shooting arrows. Legend has it that when the English won their upset victory, they held two fingers aloft in defiance—to prove that they could still shoot. Scholars have never found absolute proof of this. The most recent debunker was revisionist Anne Curry, whose *Agincourt: A New History* disproved this detail (on the basis of an utter lack of evidence and the fact that the V-sign predates the battle), as well as far bigger whoppers, like the myth that the English were outnumbered ten to one. Actually, there were just two or three times as many French—a great victory but hardly a patriotic miracle.