

Gestures: Their Origin and Meanings

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The Thumb Up



THE THUMB UP MEANINGS:

1 O. K.	738
2 One	40
3 Sexual insult	36
4 Hitch-hike	30
5 Directional	14
6 others	24
7 not used	318

(Based on 1,200 informants at 40 locations)

DESCRIPTION

The clenched hand is extended, with the thumb vertically erect. In English it is better known by the popular name 'thumbs up', despite the fact that the action is commonly performed with only one hand.

ORIGINS

Few gestures can have a stranger history than the familiar 'thumbs up'. There is no doubt in the popular mind as to its origin. Everyone agrees that it hails from the days of gladiatorial combat in ancient Rome, when a decision had to be made concerning the fate of a beaten warrior. Peter Quennell, in his book on The Colosseum describes what has now become the generally accepted scenario:

In the sovereign's presence, the crowd advised their ruler. Waving cloths and displaying up-turned thumbs, they shouted 'Mitte!' (Let him go free); or, by turning down their thumbs, they vociferated 'Iugula!' -- recommending that the fallen man should pay the penalty. When the emperor happened to share their feelings, he confirmed the crowd's verdict ... and ... with polico verso, downturned thumb, ordered his immediate execution.

So, if the defeated gladiator had fought well, he could be spared by a thumbs up gesture. If he had fought badly, he could be slain by a thumbs down. From this specific use of the two thumb signals, it is argued, came our modern usage,

with the thumbs up meaning 'all's well -- O.K.' and the thumbs down meaning 'no good -- failure'. This has become the dominant interpretation of the two gestures throughout Europe, and much of the rest of the world.

What could be simpler? The answer is that it would indeed be a simple derivational explanation, if only it happened to be true. But it is not. The ancient Romans did not behave in the manner ascribed to them, and the whole story of the thumbs up 'approval' sign is based on misunderstanding and mistranslation. It is a complete distortion of the facts, and the true basis for our modern usage comes from a different source altogether. What has happened is that, having acquired our modern thumbs up and down meanings from elsewhere, we have then blatantly re-written Roman history to fit in.



There are, in reality, no ancient references to the thumbs going either up *or* down in the Colosseum, at the vital moment of decision. Later authors who have claimed so have simply not understood the Latin phrases. *Pollice verso* does not mean a down-turned thumb it simply means a turned thumb -- one that is moved in some unspecified way. No particular direction can be assumed. The posture of the thumbs of those wishing to spare the gladiator was *pollice compresso* -- compressed thumbs. In other words, not thumbs up, but thumbs covered up -- thumbs folded away out of sight. What the spectators did, in fact, was to extend their thumbs for a kill and hide their thumbs for an

acquittal. The reason for this is not hard to find. If they wanted the victorious man to plunge in his sword, they mimed the act with their hands, their extended thumbs stabbing the air in encouragement. If they wanted to spare the defeated fighter because he proved himself valiant in battle, they did the opposite of sticking out their thumbs -- they hid them away. This made sense in an arena as vast as the Colosseum, where the kill/no-kill signals would have to be strongly contrasting to be visible at all.

If this was the true situation, then how has it come to be distorted by later writers? It is not even the case that the truth was completely forgotten. It is recorded both in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and in Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*. Sir James Murray compiled the volume of the *O.E.D.* dealing with the letter 'T' between 1909 and 1915. Under the entry for phrases connected with the word 'thumb', he includes the following quotation:

1880. Lewis and Short. s.v. *Pollex*: To close down the thumb (*premere*) was a sign of approbation: to extend it (*vertere, convertere, pollex infestus*) a sign of disapprobation.

The word *premere* refers to the pressing of the thumb, and the words *vertere, convertere, pollex infestus* refer to the turning around of the 'hostile thumb'. Different words this time, but still the same meanings and still no mention

whatever of thumbs going up or down.

Brewer's dictionary was first published in 1870 and has been reprinted many times since then. His entry is just as clear:

In the ancient Roman combats, when a gladiator was vanquished it rested with the spectators to decide whether he should be slain or not. If they wished him to live, they shut up their thumbs in their fists (*pollice compresso favor judicabatur*); if to be slain, they turned down their thumbs ... Our popular saying, Thumbs up! expressive of pleasure or approval is probably a perversion of this custom.

Brewer does not hazard a guess as to why anyone should want to pervert so simple a truth. In a moment we shall do so, but first we want to consider some other distortions that occurred. The modern equations: thumbs up = O.K., thumbs down = not O.K., is not the only error that was made. Earlier authors usually made the opposite mistake. This is hard to believe today, but the following quotations should be convincing enough.

R. Garnett, 1887: 'They had unanimously turned their thumbs up. "Sartor", the publisher acquainted him, "excites universal disapprobation".'

J. Dixon, 1896: 'To turn the thumbs up. To decide against. The Romans in the amphitheatre turned their thumbs up when a combatant was not to be spared.'

R.Y. Tyrrell, 1907: "'Thumbs down" means "spare him ...": the signal for death was "thumbs up".'



The O.K. thumb up employed as a good luck patch for attachment to denim clothing

What seems to have happened here is that the extended thumb has automatically been thought of as going up, and the hidden thumbs as being kept down (rather than pointed down). But as the idea has been passed from author to author, the distortion has hardened. Sadly, it appears that translations from the Latin are often less than scholarly. In one case, we can actually watch the bias change as the years pass. There is a passage in Juvenal's third *Satire*, written at about the beginning of the second century A.D., which, in

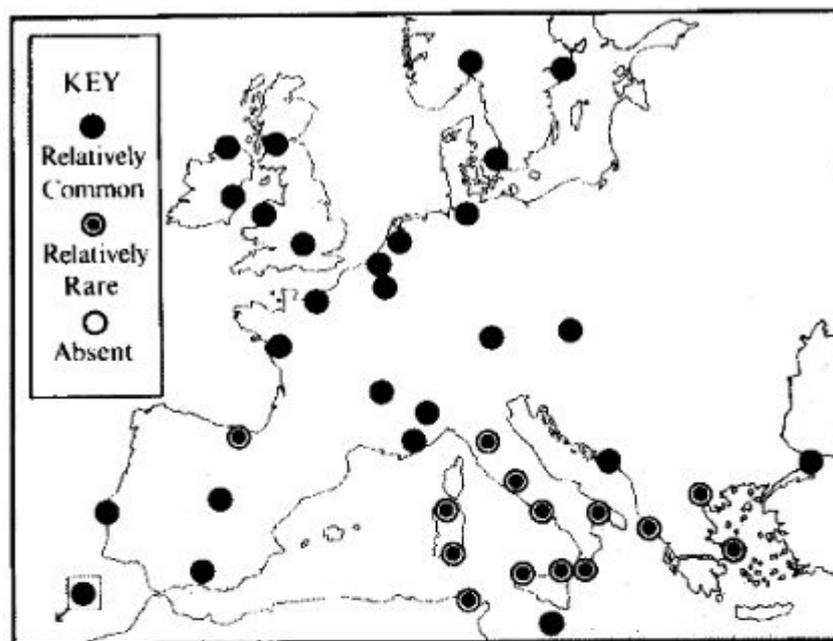
the original, refers to thumbs being either *verso* or *converso* (according to two different sources). Either way, it means that the thumbs were being turned. but makes no suggestion as to the direction Juvenal has been translated many times, but if we select just three examples, we can see how the interpretation varies with the period.

Montaigne, in his Essays of 1603 (Second Book, 26th Chapter) translates the Juvenal passage as 'When people turn their thumbs away, they popularly any slay.' This is very restrained and correct, but he makes it the basis of a comment of his own to the effect that a thumb-sign 'of disfavour or disgrace' is 'to lift them up and turn them outwards'. Read properly, he is still not badly distorting the original, but the phrase 'lift them up' can easily be taken to mean 'point them up', and this is undoubtedly the way many subsequent authors interpreted him.

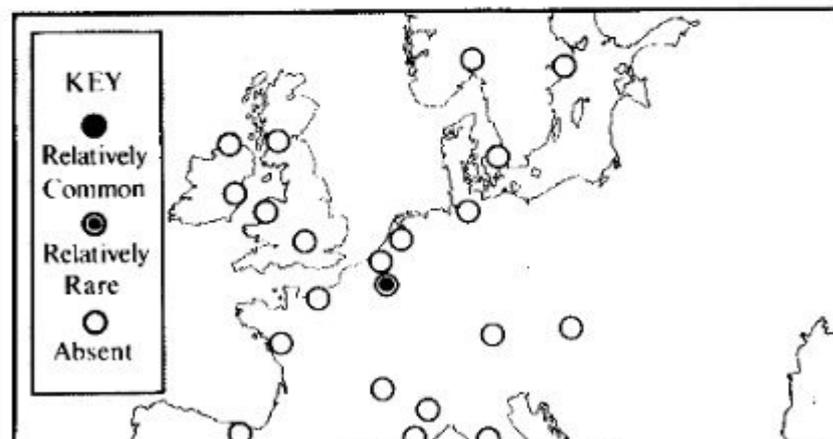
Dryden, in his translation of Juvenal in 1693, gives the same passage as: 'Where ... with thumbs bent back, they popularly kill.' Turning away has now become bending back, and again this was taken to mean an erect thumb, even though Dryden was not specific about it.

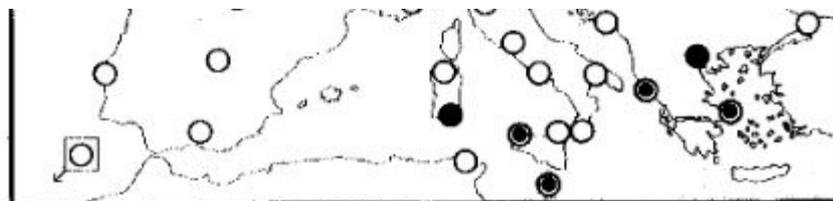
Coming up to date, in Peter Green's 1967 translation, the passage becomes: '... and at the mob's thumbs-down, will butcher a loser for popularity's sake.' Now the meaning has gone the other-way, to fit in with modern usage.

So, from an



THE THUMB UP Meaning: O.K.





THE THUMB UP Meaning: sexual insult

ambiguous beginning the distortion has taken off, first in one direction, and then in another. The question we now have to answer is what is it that controls these directions? Are they mere whims, or are there certain pressures being exerted to pull them one way or the other? First, we must consider pressures favouring the idea that thumbs up mean something unpleasant and thumbs down something pleasant. Whatever the pressure is, it has not been a, particularly strong or successful one, and has lost out to its rival in modern times. A glance at the list of meanings for the thumbs up gesture, which we obtained from our informants in our present gesture-maps field study, reveals that 738 of them gave the 'O.K.' pleasant meaning, while only 36 gave an unpleasant meaning, namely that of an phallic insult. In the latter case the erect thumb is jerked in the air as a symbolic phallus, and the message is 'sit on this', or 'up yours'. This appears to be an old usage that has lost ground in the face of the increasingly popular O.K. meaning. If it was once better known than it is today, it could easily have led to the idea that, if an unpleasant thumb gesture was used in the Colosseum, it must have been this one.

Another clue comes from the first century A.D. writings of Pliny. In his great work, *The Historie of the World*, translated into English in 1601 by Philemon Holland, there is a passage in the second chapter of the 28th book, which reads: 'to bend or bow down the thumbs when we give assent unto a thing, or do favour any person, is so usuall, that it is growne into a proverbial speech, to bid a man put down his thumb in token of approbation.' There is no doubt here about the way Pliny viewed the gesture: thumbs down meant O.K. But he was not talking about what happened in the Colosseum. He was referring to ordinary, everyday life, and it is important to make that distinction.

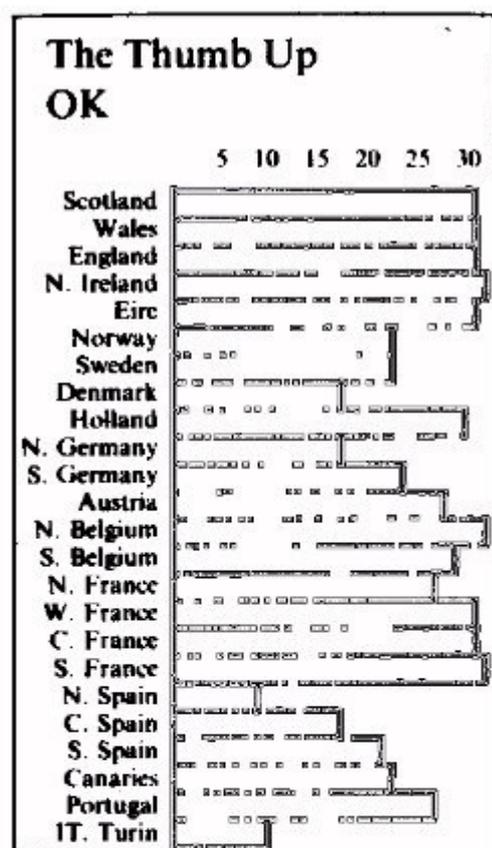
If we now put together these two observations: thumbs up meaning an unpleasant insult, and thumbs down meaning a pleasant form of approval, it is possible to see how these usages, if known about by earlier authors, could have been grafted on, as it were, to the ambiguous statements about what the spectators' thumbs were doing at the gladiatorial combats. This can explain how one kind of distortion developed, but what of the other - the one leading in the opposite direction, to the popular usage of modern times?

To understand this other distortion we have to consider the basic nature of 'up' gestures and 'down' gestures. If we are feeling 'up in the air' we are feeling good, and if we are feeling 'down in the dumps' we are feeling bad. There is something inherently optimistic, positive and dominant about upward movements, and something essentially pessimistic, negative and subordinate about downward movements. This dichotomy pervades the whole of our language and our thinking, and it is obviously going to have an impact on our gestural repertoire as well. So, whatever other, more specific, influences may be at work, there is also going to be a generalized pressure tending to favour a thumbs up gesture as meaning something pleasant and a thumbs down gesture as something unpleasant. We feel that it is this basic influence that has finally favoured the modern interpretation of the thumbs up and down gestures.

There is some evidence that this is not exclusively modern. John Bulwer in his *Chirologia* of 1644, has this to say about ordinary thumb postures: 'To hold up the thumbe, is the gesture ... of one shewing his assent or approbation. To hold up both thumbs, is an expression importing a transcendency of praise.' He quotes classical authors to support him in this view, which contradicts the statements made by Pliny. There is no way we can see to reconcile these two views and it looks as though there must have been an early conflict of thumb signals which was eventually resolved by the rise to dominance of the 'up = good' version.

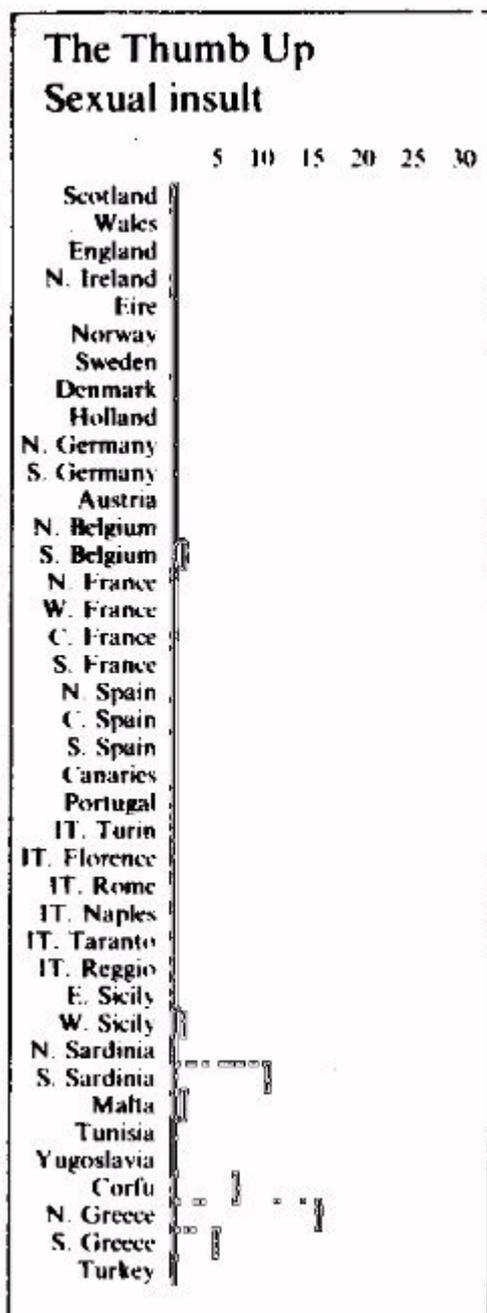
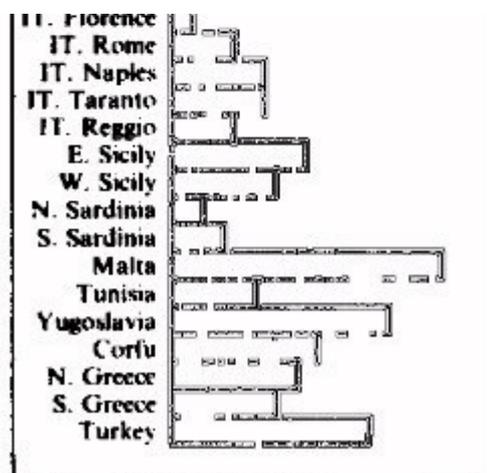
Two other derivational clues exist to help explain the 'thumbs up = good' equation. There is a old English saying 'Here's my thumb on it!' which was used to seal a bargain. The two people involved each wetted a thumb and then extended it, held upwards, until the two raised thumbs came into contact with one another. It is easy to see how this custom could lead to, or support the idea of holding out a raised thumb as a sign of friendly agreement or approval. Another supportive clue comes from Gerard Brault's study of *French Gestures*, where he says that admiration is expressed when 'the thumb of the right hand is held erect and pushed forward, as if pushing in a thumbtack'. The thumbs up gesture here signifies "first class", for the French number one with the thumb.'

Summing up, it would be an understatement to say that the origins of the thumbs up gesture are not as simple as most people seem to believe. The whole 'Roman arena' explanation that is so often given, appears to be largely irrelevant. The evidence as to exactly what was happening in ordinary, daily life in ancient times is still not clear and the information is contradictory. But the present--day situation is obvious enough. Everywhere the O.K. message of the thumbs up gesture has come to dominate the scene, as the gesture map reveals.



DISTRIBUTION

If Rome really was the ancestral home of this gesture, we would expect to find the Italian region particularly strongly represented on our gesture map. The opposite is the case, with the Italian-speaking zone, in fact, being the weakest of all, closely followed by Greece. This confirms our suspicions that the fate of gladiators played no part in the history of this gesture. It also seems to indicate that perhaps the existence of the ancient thumbs up obscenity in the Italian and Greek zones has been the main factor working against the domination of the O.K. message there. The second gesture map, dealing with the gesture as a phallic insult clearly shows that this sexual interpretation



(apart from solitary informants in Belgium and Malta) is entirely limited to the Greco-Italian world. In Italy, its strongholds are in the more remote, less cosmopolitan regions, where older customs tend to die hard.

It would seem that the O.K. gesture is likely to have enjoyed its major growth in the north of Europe and then to have rapidly invaded the south. Many Italians were surprised to learn that northerners thought of the gesture as having sprung originally from Rome. To them it was a 'new thing' imported by the American G.I.s during the war. At every location we visited on mainland Italy, at least one person identified it as 'The American O.K.', helping to drive yet another nail into the 'Roman Arena' explanation.

Finally, it is perhaps worth recording in this case the wide variety of 'O.K.' messages we were given by informants. They reveal the generic nature of the gesture, encompassing many subtly differing specific signals. Answers given included the following:

All right, A.O.K., *!arriba!* (Spain), bang on, *champion* (France), everything's fine, everything's fixed, excellent, first class, *fixe* (Portugal), good luck, great, great stuff, I agree, I made it, it's a winner, it's in the bag, *kalo* (Greece), O.K., ready to go, really good, right on, solid, *Spitze* (Austria), spot on, success, superb, tops, *va bene* (Italy), very good, victory, you are right, you've done well.

This is almost exactly the same range of meanings as we found with the O.K. ring gesture, and the two can be used almost interchangeably.

They are also of about equal popularity (700 for the O.K. ring and 738 for the O.K. thumbs up) and have the same widely scattered range. The major difference between them is that the O.K. ring is the more popular in Italy, and the O.K. thumbs up the more popular in France.

The distribution of the minor meanings of the thumbs up are of little interest. They are so scattered that few zonal concentrations show up, and we have not felt it worthwhile to map them. The 40 informants who interpreted the gesture as meaning 'one', ranged from Holland to Turkey. Only in Tunisia was this meaning at all popular (14 out of 30 informants). The 30 informants who saw it as a hitch-hiking signal (often called by the name 'autostop') were scattered right across the map, but there were never more than 4 at any one site. The 14 who interpreted it as a directional sign -- a thumb point -- were confined to southern regions, where this kind of guide-sign is slightly less surly in its ordinary use.

It is not safe to use the 'thumbing-a-lift' gesture in either Sardinia or Greece. The message transmitted to the passing drivers by the hopeful figures at the roadside is not 'please help us', but 'get stuffed', and does not encourage drivers to stop, except to pick a fight. Our figures show that, although both the insult meaning and the O.K. meaning are present in these countries, in southern Sardinia and northern Greece the obscene insult is dominant. Furthermore, with the addition of the upward jerking movement, shared by both the insult and the true hitch-hiking gestures, but absent from the O.K. version, far more people in those countries would see the action in its obscene role, and the hitch-hiking tourist would do well to imitate the local hitch-hikers, and adopt the loosely waved, flat hand gesture we observed at Sardinian and Greek roadsides.



The obscene version of the thumb up gesture, used here in southern Sardinia
