

Speaking With Your Hands and Eyes

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Щурить глаза: to squint, to narrow one's eyes

When I read 18th- and 19th-century American and British literature, I'm taken by how nonverbal language has changed. In old novels, people wring their hands, clasp their hands to their breasts, hold their hand to their forehead, recoil, cringe and clap their hands in joy. Those folks didn't need aerobics classes. They got a full-body workout just gossiping with the neighbors.

Of course, those descriptions of gestures might have just been markers of emotion that were no longer expressed physically. In any case, today I think most Americans are fairly staid, body language-wise. I am certainly more likely to express distress with a good, loud expletive than a hand raised delicately to my brow.

Russians use a lot of gestures, some familiar, some not. Take щурить глаза (to narrow one's eyes, to squint). Sometimes people squint to see better: Нередко близорукие

малыши☒щурят глаза (Myopic children often squint). Or to see in bright sunlight:
Он☒щурил глаза от солнца (He squinted in the sunlight).

When Americans narrow their eyes, it is usually a marker of suspicion, evil intent, dislike or determination. Sometimes Russians do the same: Он☒мстительно☒щурил глаза, обещая убить её (He viciously narrowed his eyes and threatened to kill her).

But often when Russians narrow their eyes, it means they are concentrating or lost in thought. Here you probably need to describe the gesture differently so you don't mix up the nonverbal message. Он щурил глаза, вглядывался, потом поднял глаза и глянул куда-то вдаль (He half-closed his eyes, stared and then lifted his gaze to look off into the distance).

When Russian women narrow their eyes, it can be flirtatious, although today it's rather affected: Она была очень кокетлива, поджимала губы,☒щурила глаза (She was very flirtatious. She pouted a little and looked up through half-open eyes).

Russians also do a lot of arm-waving. I asked a highly amused group of Russians to demonstrate some native gestures. Всплеснуть руками (to fling one's arms up) was a rapid flinging of their arms upward that ended with their hands by their ears, facing forward. Sometimes this was accompanied by a step back. This means: I'm startled, amazed, shocked, or taken aback. The request to show развести руками (to spread one's arms open) produced two versions. In one variant, my nonverbal informants shrugged their shoulders, raised their hands and flattened them with the palms up so they were almost parallel to the floor. Others opened their arms wide and cocked their heads. Almost all of them automatically said: Что делать? (What are you going to do?) Опускать руки (to drop one's arms) was a two-handed or, less commonly, one-handed sweep downward. This means: I give up, forget it, let it go.

Translating these gestures is tricky. If you're not careful, a couple of Russian guys drinking beer and shooting the breeze come off in translation like two upper-class twits chatting in Jane Austen's drawing room. Механик всплеснул руками isn't going to be "the mechanic flung his arms up in amazement." Instead, he recoiled, he was taken aback, he was startled.

When he tells you the problem with your car is so bad "только руками разведёшь" (literally, "you can only open your arms"), you translate his words as "there ain't nothing nobody can do about it."

Опускаю руки (I give up).

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