

# Ein, Zwei, Molson Dry? Researcher says hand gesturing to count in foreign countries can be tricky

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If you are planning to do some Oktoberfesting in Germany, you may want to pay attention to how you order your beverages. The server is not giving you a three-for-the-price-of-two beer special; you're holding up the wrong fingers when you order.

This very hand-y tip is courtesy of a study by the University of Alberta's Elena Nicoladis, an experimental psychologist, and Simone Pika, a lecturer at the University of Manchester. The article, published in the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, examines cultural differences in the use of hand [gestures](#) that could lead to miscommunications or misunderstandings.

Nicoladis drew her interest for the subject from her own lost-in-digital [translation](#) experience while riding on Berlin's transit system.

"I asked for directions on the U-Bahn to an older woman and she told me to get off in four stops, so I said, 'ja, vier' and held up my four fingers," she said. "She went off on a tirade saying 'nein, nein, vier' and held up the conventional gesture (using her thumb and three fingers)." The differentiation is because, in Germany for instance, the thumb is automatically counted as a numerical value. Thus, Nicoladis was showing five digits instead of four.

This important little piece of advice could have also saved the life of an

unlucky British spy in Quentin Tarantino's new film *Inglourious Basterds*; in which a character, an English army officer posing as a German SS captain, is exposed when he orders drinks without using his thumb in the count. He and his colleagues are shot for his faux pas.

Nicoladis and colleagues studied one and two-hand counting gestures and cultural differences between Germans and French and English Canadians. While the majority of Germans use their thumb to begin to sequentially count, the majority of Canadians, both French and English, use their index finger as the numerical kick-off point when counting with their hands.

However, Nicoladis noted that some French Canadians also displayed anomalous differences from their Canadian or even their German counterparts.

"They show a lot more variation in what they are willing to use in terms of gestures, suggesting there might be some influence from the European French manner of gesturing (whose gestures are identical to the Germans'), or possibly other cultures too," she said. "This association suggests that there are some cultural artifacts left over from these older French gestures and that they have been replaced because of the cultural contact with English Canadians."

While seasoned travellers will often research local customs and social practices to acclimatize themselves to life in their destination of choice, Nicoladis urges anyone travelling to a foreign country to brush up on their hand signs for fear of possibly embarrassing cultural situations, or even an exorbitant bar tab at the end of the night.

"When people are going into a context where they don't speak a language very well, they fall back on conventional gestures or pointing," she said. "Even those that seem very transparent to use can, in fact, be very

culturally embedded and could lead to possible miscommunications."

Source: University of Alberta ([news](#) : [web](#))

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