

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

Spoken words are not the only supplements of effective communication. Gestures, body movements, facial expressions, and other displays of emotion provide extra information that goes beyond what is said. Moreover, messages can be enriched through touch, eye contact, and the use of personal space. Most of the meaning in our communication is sent nonverbally. Approximately, 7 percent of a message is passed on by words and 38 percent is through paralanguage-ways of utilizing the voice, such as tone, volume, and inflexion. Nonverbal behaviour can account for up to 55 percent of the message. What people do is clearly more important than what they say. And how something is said is much more important than the words used. This is particularly true in high-context cultures, where meaning is implied indirectly from contextual cues, rather than literally.

Keywords: Nonverbal Communication, Culture, Cross-cultural Communication, Intercultural Communication, Pragmatics, Paralinguistics.

INTRODUCTION

Communication is said to be the production of meaning, through verbal words or non-verbal gestures (Allen 1999), hence, nonverbal communication sends meaning through some means other than words, such as eye contact, body language, and space and time usage.¹ Nonverbal communication does not only serve as a crucial complementary role to verbal communication, it is also used to regularize meaning, to accentuate and reinforce information. Nonetheless, experts ascertain that 65% of communication is relayed nonverbally.² Like verbal communication, nonverbal communication varies across cultures. This means that learning how to interpret and deliver nonverbal communication is just as valuable as learning a foreign language. Flexibility in nonverbal communication can be difficult to achieve. While verbal behaviour is intentional and conscious, nonverbal communication often occurs unconsciously. This makes it difficult to regulate or modify. Interpretation can also be

¹ Altman, I., & Vinsel, A. M. (1977). Personal space: An analysis of E. T. Hall's proxemics framework. In I. Altman & J. F. Wohlwill (Eds.), *Human Behavior and the Environment: Advances in Theory and Research* (Vol. 2, pp. 181-259). New York: Plenum.

² Earley, C. P., & Ang, S. (2003). *Cultural intelligence: Individual interactions across cultures*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

a problem because nonverbal communication is often ambiguous. Even the simple handshake can vary from culture to culture. A handshake is widely accepted as the norm, however you will need to vary the firmness depending on the location. Subsequent sections of this paper are charged with the responsibility of proffering answers stemmed from theoretical background to the questions of ascertaining the most communicative when considering nonverbal and verbal communication, the influence of culture and society in the interpretation of nonverbal communication, and the reality of communicating via nonverbal means across diverse cultural settings

Materials and Methods

Troppa (2009) explained that nonverbal communication is beyond the conventional sending and receiving of messages for the sole purpose of communicating, but also affect the form of relating and interacting. It is a way to show likeness and hatred, respect or rudeness, reception or rejection. Nonverbal actions are enough to draw lines in relationship; therefore it should be interpreted correctly and meaningfully. Krauss et al. (1996) in one of the social psychological studies of nonverbal behaviour posited it as a form of nonverbal communication with the supporting instances of facial expressions like wrinkling of nose when the communicator is in disgust, and baring of teeth, narrowing of eyes and wide-eyed staring gesture when in fear. It is also stated that facial expression as an example of nonverbal behaviour has a possibility of serving a multiple functions like playing an affective experience role, and also the communication function of conveying information about the emotional state of the expresser.³ Nonverbal communications encompasses all forms of communication that is devoid of spoken and written languages, an exclusive illustration of all possible ways of interpersonal communication that are done nonverbally.

Verderber et al. (2009) stated that the most important areas of nonverbal communication are three; namely: Body language which is called the kinesic communication, characterized with using facial expressions, body movement and postures; Physical environment which is also known as Proxemic communication, aided with the usage of available space, distance or proximity to other people in the communication scenario; and Verderber et al. (2009) added that personal attributes which is known as Artefactual communication; a nonverbal communication type which is utilized by communicators to modify the appearances.⁴ Nonverbal communication

³ Rygg, K. (2012). Direct and indirect communicative styles: A study in sociopragmatics and intercultural communication based on interview discourse with Norwegian and Japanese business executives. Unpublished doctoral dissertation University of Bergen. Norway.

⁴ Mesquita, B., & Leu, J. (2007). The cultural psychology of emotions. In S. Kitayama & D. Cohen (Eds.), *Handbook of Cultural Psychology* (pp. 734-759). New York: Guildford.

involves conscious and subliminal messages, where the senders of conscious nonverbal communication are aware of the fact that message sent is accompanied with its general meaning for the receivers' comprehension, also knowing well that message received is done out of the knowledge and consent of the sender. An example of this is a receiver of a hug which symbolizes friendship.

Krauss et al. (1996) stated that involuntary nonverbal communications represent unplanned physical responses; therefore, the communication form tends to be particular in revealing and more honest than verbal communication or even the conscious nonverbal communication. Jain and Choudary (2011) also posited that nonverbal communication can be controlled by a knowledgeable person, and in result the posture to be read to get the correct state of mind and action of the sender might be outsmarted when he knows the characteristics of the communication.

Nonverbal behavior is currently a major area of research in the communications field with a consistent scope on the interpretation of the meaning of nonverbal message depending on its context, thus asserts that effective communication is undoubtedly dependent on understanding the role of nonverbal behavior as one dimension of communication competence. It has a variety of inherent advantages if assessed from its possible ways of application.

It is believed to form an integral part in the understanding and effective communication during a negotiation process, simply because it corroborates the verbal communication, hence gives a holistic comprehension of the negotiation, and sound interpretation of nonverbal communications helps in grasping the useful information from other parties that involved in the negotiation. It is noteworthy that the awareness of nonverbal communication also serves as preventive measure against harming one's negotiation position through an unknown sending of nonverbal signals that unveil confidential information.⁵

Flexibility in nonverbal communication can be difficult to achieve. While verbal behaviour is intentional and conscious, nonverbal communication often occurs unconsciously. This makes it difficult to regulate or modify. Interpretation can also be a problem because nonverbal communication is often ambiguous. Non-verbal communication is communication that occurs without words which is continuous. It is body language and environmental context involved in any communication. It is not what is said with words but how it is said and expressed. Non-verbal communication is different from person to person and especially from one culture to another. Cultural background defines their non-verbal communication as many forms of non-verbal communications like signs and signals are learned behavior.

⁵ Mesquita, B. (2003). Emotions as Dynamic Cultural Phenomena. In R. J. Davidson, K. R. Scherer, & H. H. Goldsmith (Eds.), *Handbook of Affective Sciences* (pp. 871-890). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Results and Discussions

Undoubtedly, the pitfall of nonverbal communication is inherent in its dependence on cultural interpretation, therefore makes it unfit for global communication purpose. The characterized culturally diverse interpretation of a particular nonverbal communication is a factor that makes consideration of cultural differences when sending or receiving nonverbal messages a necessity, because of a situation whereby a message that has a particular meaning in one society can have a completely different meaning in another society (Matsumoto, 2006).

This makes it difficult to regulate or modify. Interpretation can also be a problem because nonverbal communication is often ambiguous. Even the simple handshake can vary from culture to culture. A handshake is widely accepted as the norm, however you will need to vary the firmness depending on the location.

Western culture typically perceives a strong handshake as authoritative and confident, whereas many parts of the Far East, specifically, Uzbek nations perceive a strong handshake as aggressive, and usually put their hands on their chest instead. In parts of Northern Europe, a quick, firm handshake is the norm. In parts of Southern Europe, Central and South America, a handshake is longer and warmer, with the left hand usually touching the clasped hands or elbow.

Beware that in Uzbekistan, a firm handshake is considered rude and aggressive. In certain English speaking countries, a limp handshake is the standard. Men in Islamic countries never shake the hands of women outside the family.

Many facial expressions appear to be universal and recognised all over the globe. In general, there are seven different facial expressions which correspond to distinct universal facial emotions: Happiness – Raising and lowering of mouth corners, cheeks raised, and muscles around the eyes are tightened. Sadness – lowering of mouth corners and raising inner portion of brows. Surprise – Arching of eyebrows, eyelids pulled up and sclera exposed, mouth open. Fear – Brows arched and pulled together, eyes wide open, mouth slightly open. Disgust – Eyebrows lowered, upper lip raised, nose wrinkled, cheeks raised.⁶ Anger – Brows lowered, eyes bulging, lips pressed firmly. We use gestures as a way to emphasize points and illustrate what we are saying. Hand gestures can mean very different things in different cultures. A thumb up in America and European cultures is an indicator of a job well done, however in Uzbekistan we cannot use this gesture to elder people or high-status people.

Curling the index finger with the palm facing up is a common gesture that people in United States and parts of Europe use to beckon someone to come closer. However, it is considered rude in east Asia and many other parts of the world. It is also considered

⁶ Knapp M.L. Non-verbal communication. М.: PRIOR. 2000

extremely impolite to use this gesture with people. It is used only to beckon dogs in many Asian countries – and using it in the Philippines can get you arrested.

In most western countries, eye contact is a sign of confidence and attentiveness. They tend to assume that if someone looks away while we are talking to them, they are disinterested and looking for someone else to talk to. In Uzbekistan and many Middle Eastern countries, same-gender eye contact tends to be more sustained and intense than the western standard.⁷ In some of these countries, eye contact beyond a brief glance is deemed inappropriate.

In many Asian countries, however, this unbroken eye contact would be considered aggressive and confrontational. These cultures tend to be quite conscious of hierarchy, and avoiding eye contact is a sign of respect for bosses and elders. According to the cultural behaviour, children do not look at an adult who is speaking to them, and nor will employees to their bosses. Eye contact variation by culture: Used a lot in regions such as the Middle East, Mediterranean cultures, Europeans, and Latin Americans. Used often in much of Northern Europe and North America Used somewhat carefully in cultures in Africa, Middle East, Korea and Thailand Used carefully in most of the Far East.⁸

Touch. Northern Europe and the Far East as classed as non-contact cultures. There is very little physical contact beyond a handshake with people we do not know well. Even accidentally brushing someone's arm on the street warrants an apology.

An innocent hug made headlines around the world in 2009 when America's first lady, Michelle Obama, broke royal protocol on a visit to Britain by hugging the Queen. By comparison, in the high-contact cultures of the Middle East, Latin America, and southern Europe, physical touch is a big part of socialising.

In Uzbekistan, women hold hands and kiss each other in greeting, but would never do the same with a man. In Thailand and Laos, it is taboo to touch anyone's head, even children. In South Korea, elders can touch younger people with force when trying to get through a crowd, but younger people cannot do the same.

Appearance is another form of non-verbal communication. People are judged from their appearance. Racial differences as well as differences in clothing tell so much about any individual. Grooming yourself to look good is taken as an important aspect of personality in most cultures. But, what is considered to be a good appearance is different again in different cultures. Modesty is also measured from appearance. People receive information or message from body movements. It shows how people feel or

⁷ Matsumoto, D. (2006). Culture and nonverbal behavior. In V. Manusov & M. Patterson (Eds.), Handbook of nonverbal communication (pp. 219-235). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

⁸ Earley, C. P., & Ang, S. (2003). Cultural intelligence: Individual interactions across cultures. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

think about you. If a person does not face you while talking to you can mean that the person is nervous or shy. It might also mean that the person doesn't like to talk to you. Other body movements like coming to sit near or far can also show confidence, power or trying to control the environment.

Silence. Though it can feel like avoid in communication, silence can be very meaningful in different cultural contexts. Western cultures, especially North America and the UK, tend to view silence as problematic. In our interactions at work, school, or with friends, silence is uncomfortable. It is often perceived as a sign of inattentiveness or disinterest. In other cultures, however, silence is not viewed as a negative circumstance. In China, silence can be used to show agreement and receptiveness. In many aboriginal cultures, a question will be answered only after a period of contemplative silence. In Japan, silence from women can be considered an expression of femininity.⁹

Gender. In many cultures, what is acceptable for a man may not be acceptable for a woman. The most obvious example is the issue of covering your head in some Muslim countries but also, within religions such as Islam and Hinduism, shaking a woman's hand can be considered offensive. How we talk also constitutes of what we communicate. For example, vocal tones, volume, rhythm, pitch, etc. Speak more than what words express. Uzbek people control themselves from shouting as they are taught not to from childhood. They are known as vocal qualifiers. Vocal characterizations like crying, whining, yelling, etc. Change the meaning of the message. Giggling is taken as a bad gesture in some cultures. Many other emotions are shown by vocal differences while all of them are included in paralanguage.

As there are differences in meanings of non-verbal communication, miscommunication can occur when inter-cultural people communicate. People can offend others without meaning to due to their cultural differences in non-verbal communication. Facial expressions are mostly similar in most cultures as many of them like smile and cry are innate. According to researches, six expressions are universal; they are, happiness, sadness, disgust, fear, anger and surprise. But it might also be different like the extent to which people show these feelings, in some cultures people express openly and in some people do not.

Conclusion

Modern transportation and an increase in expendable income allow us to visit a huge range of cultures. We have discussed how gestures, eye contact, greetings, and physical contact can have very different meanings in different countries and cultures

⁹ Rygg, K. (2012). Direct and indirect communicative styles: A study in sociopragmatics and intercultural communication based on interview discourse with Norwegian and Japanese business executives. Unpublished doctoral dissertation University of Bergen. Norway.

so you will want to learn as much as you can about the country's etiquette, values, and styles of communication before you visit.

Being able to understand cultural differences will improve your working relationships and potentially make you more successful in an increasingly globalized, multi-cultural working world. Like verbal communication, nonverbal communication varies across cultures.¹⁰ This means that learning how to interpret and deliver nonverbal communication is just as valuable as learning a foreign language. As with other aspects of communication, norms for nonverbal communication vary from country to country and among cultures within a particular country. We have already learned that some nonverbal communication behaviors appear to be innate because they are universally recognized. Two such universal signals are the “eyebrow flash” of recognition when we see someone we know and the open hand and the palm up gesture that signals a person would like something or needs help.¹¹ Smiling is also a universal nonverbal behavior, but the triggers that lead a person to smile vary from culture to culture. The expansion of media, particularly from the United States and other Western countries around the world, is leading to more nonverbal similarities among cultures, but the biggest cultural differences in nonverbal communication occur within the categories of eye contact, touch, and personal space. Next, we will overview some interesting and instructive differences within several channels of nonverbal communication that we have discussed so far.

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