

# A Study on Nonverbal Communication in Cross-culture

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## ABSTRACT

*With the development of the globalization, cross-cultural communication is playing an increasingly prominent role in the international arena. In order to get an advantageous position in international business negotiation and deal with the management in foreign company, abilities of knowing the cross-cultural communication skills is of vital importance. Through the detailed analysis of some nonverbal cross-cultural factors, this paper is to help people get a thorough understanding of these factors and inspire them to deal with the culture differences in a proper way.*

**Key Words:** *cross-cultural; nonverbal communication; business negotiation*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Cross-cultural communication is a form of communication which aims to share information across different cultures and social groups. With the development of the globalization, communication among different countries has become very common particularly in the business field. There is no denying that the knowledge of different cultures plays a highly important role in the intercultural communication.

Normally our human being's communication can be defined as verbal and nonverbal kind. The former refers to the communication that is carried out either in oral or written form with the use of words. The latter means that in the communicating process, in addition to words, such forms as gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, etc. which people use to strengthen, assist, hint to what they transfer in words.

William Shakespeare has famous words about nonverbal communication: "There is language in her eye, her check, her lip. Nay, her foot speaks". American psychologist Albert Mehrabian, a pioneer researcher of body language in the 1950s, found that the total impact of a message is about 7% verbal (words only) and 38% vocal (including tone of voice, inflection and other sounds) and 55% nonverbal (Mehrabian, 2007). Therefore, the importance of nonverbal communication is clear.

Nonverbal communication is not just the body language, but also something related transmitting information. Larry A. Samovar(2004) ever defined nonverbal communication as all these nonverbal stimuli in a communication setting that are generated by both the source and his/her use of the environment and that have potential message value for the source or receiver. To put it simply, the messages that can be transmitted are intentional and unintentional behaviors, which have a wide range, such as

facial expression, eye contact, gestures, postures, space and distance. In order to get a full understanding and avoid some unnecessary misunderstandings of nonverbal meanings from the opposite side, we should bear in mind various factors, especially culture differences.

Nonverbal communication is deeply rooted in culture. Culture values and norms make an influence on nonverbal communication and determine what kind of nonverbal behavior is appropriate. On the other hand, nonverbal communication is a mirror reflecting different cultures. In this paper the author will use comparative method to discuss several nonverbal factors quite often used in daily life, which may cause misunderstanding and awkward to Westerners and Chinese in cross-cultural communication.

## **2. FACIAL EXPRESSIONS**

When feeling happy, we will smile. All over the world, while the emotions of enjoyment, sadness, fear, anger and surprise are supposed to be expressed in similar ways, the frequency and the context of using these facial expressions varies from culture to culture. Take Asian culture for example, people in this culture show smile to the others as much as possible, not only showing their happiness but also their regret and other feelings. In China, smile can cause the Westerners' aversion in certain occasion. When the latter one feels embarrassed after making a mistake, Chinese will give out a laughter. It makes the western think that the Chinese is laughing at them and they feel more humiliated. Actually, Chinese smile in such occasion means "it doesn't matter." and shows their sense of humor to avoid awkward rather than laughing at others, nor making fun at others' mistakes. Therefore, in a negotiation, people who do not get a knowledge of this information can get angry and break business cooperation.

Even though some facial expression may be similar across culture, their frequency, acceptable occasions and interpretation of emotion are specifically culture-oriented. It is important to understand the culture value and initial intention of facial expression in cross-cultural interaction.

## **3. EYE CONTACT**

In interpersonal communication, it is indispensable to keep eye contact with others. In China there are such idioms as "Adding eyes to a dragon to bring it a life", "Sending message of love to someone with one's eyes". As Shakespeare wrote in *Love's Labour's Lost*, "Me thought all his senses were lock'd in his eye, as jewels in crystal for some prince to buy". These all indicate the importance of eye communication. Eyes are the windows to the soul. Usually, looking straight at others shows being honest; avoiding eye contact shows being guilty and squint at people is a kind of contempt.

In fact, in different nations and cultures, the use of eye contact is quite different. Sometimes, they show absolutely opposite meanings. In the communication among Western countries, taking America and England for example, straight eye contact is the sign showing upright and honest. A saying in Western countries goes, "Never trust a person who can't look at your eyes." Without straight eye contact, the person will be regarded as the one who is timid, not confident and impolite. In England and France, gentle men stare at the female to show appreciation, which is a publicly recognized

culture value. A study shows in the United States, the average length of eye contact is 2.95 seconds, and the average length of time two people gaze at each other is 1.18 seconds (Argyle, 1994). The eye contact longer than that may imply the person is communicating with high interest. On the contrary, in the countries, such as China, Japan, Philippine and Indonesia, people prefer to avoid long-time straight eye contact as much as possible. They think straight eye contact is impolite and implying offense. In communication among Japanese, their eyes can focus on others' neck without looking into eyes and face. As for them, eye-to-eye contact is a disrespectful behavior. In China, both sides can avoid eye contact constantly in order to show modesty and respect. Sometimes dropped eyes are a sign of deference to a superior. "A sense of shame" makes a great influence on these people, especially in Muslim culture, it is banned that women and men have eye contact.

These differences can leading to miscommunication in the multicultural workplace. Being aware of different culture and showing respect, understanding those different implications of eye contact in different cultural context is friendly to other as well as beneficial to one's own part.

### **3. GESTURES**

Gestures are the movement of fingers to communicate with each other and express ideas. Actually, they sometimes can take the place of verbal language to start and stop communication, sometimes explain and strengthen what people express. Some researches from Levy Bruhl, Lucien (Lucien, 2010) showed that at initial time, while tribes of Indian had different verbal languages, they could communicate and understand with each other through gestures. In modern society, gesture is still an effective and irreplaceable way of communication. In cross-culture communication, people with language barrier more often use gestures to express themselves. The use of gestures is very flexible and full of various meanings, particularly in different culture.

#### **3.1 OK**

The "OK" sign is mostly considered as one of the good gestures which means everything is good. The hand gesture is used by curling the index finger over the thumb and the remaining finger extended above them. However, in Australia, Belgium and France it means "zero" or "nothing". During a business negotiation, when American negotiators show the "OK" sign to the Japanese, the latter ones can make a misunderstanding, even worse to break the business. To the American, "OK" means it is pleasing to negotiate a successful sale. But to the Japanese, "OK" is a sign similar to the shape of a coin which may imply asking for a bribe. It's rare in Arab countries where it is used as either a threat or as an obscenity.

#### **3.2 V**

The "V" sign is the first letter of word "victory". Despite being first used by the Britain's national hero, Winston Churchill, it causes severe misunderstanding in UK. If you show the "V" sign with palm outside, it imply the meaning of victory as we all know; if you show it with the palm facing you, it express the meaning of "up yours".

### **3.3 Thumbs up**

As we all know, the thump-up sign indicates things done well, showing praise and encouragement. But in some Islamic and Asian countries, it is interpreted as a rude and offensive gesture. In Australia, it means OK, but if you move it up and down, it means a grave insult. And in Thailand, this sign means a sign of mockery and condemnation.

These three kinds of gestures mentioned above are the most usual ones that we use in daily life. There are various gestures during communication. If we can not pay highly attention to the differences in cross-culture communication, we may make a offense to our cooperators unintentionally and even wore break the established and future business cooperation

## **4. POSTURES**

Postures refer to transmitting messages through body movement. When being involved in communication, people's postures could tell such messages as social status, religious belief, desire and intention and so on. The popularity of one posture over another and the emotion conveyed by a given posture seem to be largely determined by culture (Samovar et al, 2004).

During a communication, we may unconsciously put our soles to others while sticking one leg over the other. It is regarded as a disrespect in Thailand and Saudi Arabia, whereas in United States it is simply a way to show feeling relaxed. In Japan, people value the ability to sit silently which shows the mental and spiritual balance. There is an old saying in China, "stand straight like pine, sit like a clock." This makes you feel confident and full of energy.

Another posture American usually use is shrugging shoulders. It is can be interpreted that they are innocent and having no secret to conceal. But in China, it can be expressed as indifference and ignorance. It is quite unacceptable among the Chinese in communication.

During a negotiation, if the opposite side are listening with body leaning forward, it means they are interested in it and listening attentively. If they look away from time to time, it means they are not concentrated on what you say.

To some people, postures are nothing in communication. Although some postures can not exert effect negatively on them, it would be more than enough to destroy their images as businessmen.

## **5. SPACE AND DISTANCE**

In 1963, Edward T. Hall (1976) referred to the concept of "proxemics" which generalizes the researches on interpersonal distance. Through study, he divided interpersonal distance of American into four part, namely intimate distance(0~45cm), personal distance(46~122cm), social distance(122~366cm) and public distance(366~750cm). At dealing with official business, people mostly keep the social distance with each other.

Everyone has a certain interpersonal distance where it makes people feel comfortable in communication. There also exists a connection between culture and preferred interpersonal distance. During a communication, the Spanish and the Arabian can get

closer and closer; but to the English, it is too close in communicating with the Italian. Communication among the Latin American of the same sex is almost next to skin. At the end of the communication of between the Arabian and the American, they could stand at a place far away from the original place, for the former ones are prone to move forward showing friendliness while the latter ones are used to moving backward avoiding closer distance. In fact, people of different cultures are just looking for an appropriate and accustomed distance in communication.

What's more, people in Western culture pay more attention to privacy than those in Eastern culture and they show great respect to personal space. For instance, Chinese people have higher tolerance to the crowded place than the Westerns, such as in elevator and bus. No matter it is for general or business conversation, if you want people feel comfortable with you, the golden rule is “keep our distance”.

To sum up, nonverbal communication is a very common and important part in intercultural exchange, especially in business communication. It is necessary to get a knowledge of the part and make a full use of it in business in order to gain a advantageous position.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Through the above discuss, we could know a little about nonverbal cross-cultural communication, especially in business. There are great communication challenges among various cultures, such as language differences, nonverbal signs, cultural context and internal communication in multicultural company and so on. However, it does not mean that people in different cultures are standing in absolutely opposite sides. In order to get a successful communication, we could vary communication styles along with the changes of different situations and interpersonal relations while going on a communication. What we could do to meet this success? There are several suggestions for it. Firstly, getting a knowledge of some kinds of cultures is the premise undoubtedly. Then it is reasonable to understand and accept each communication style in certain culture with its meaning of existing. Meanwhile, it is necessary for us to learn some intercultural communication skills and pay attention to our won communication styles. Therefore, cultural misunderstanding caused in intercultural communication styles could be solved if using an appropriate way.

Along with the development of globalization, especially in economy field, more and more intercultural communications have taken place in society. In order to follow steps of the world, learning intercultural communication knowledge has become an urgent matter. In fact, when it comes to business, promoting cultural sensitivity will help people work more effectively when interacting with people from other countries, and will participate to make sure transactions successful. Through this paper, the author hopes it could be useful to make a correct understanding of non-verbal communication in cross-culture and treat all intercultural nonverbal factors in an respectful way.

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