

Reflection of Cultural Difference of the East and the West in Nonverbal Communication

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Abstract. This essay discusses the nonverbal communication between east and west culture with the help of applying contrastive and analytic method. It aims at arousing people's awareness of nonverbal communication in intercultural communication, enhancing their intercultural communicative competence accordingly, and finally eliminating cultural misunderstanding and fraction.

Keywords: Cultural Difference; Nonverbal Communication; Nonverbal behavior; Intercultural communication.

1. Introduction

With the globalization of the world, people always interact with people from different cultures. When communicating with others, nonverbal behaviors are more often used than words; because people get nonverbal information through sense, through the subconscious, and also through intuition when communicating with others.

The cross-cultural communication study includes the verbal communication and nonverbal communication. According a survey of intercultural communication by Rey. L. Bodekesi: During the process of communicating of two persons, the information conveyed through language is only by 35% of the total, while the remaining 65% is transmitted through the movement, posture, distance from each other and other nonverbal behavior. (Smovar,1981, p.155) [11].

Barnlund highlights some of the reasons why nonverbal communication is important to the study of intercultural communication: Most of the critical meanings generated in human encounters are elicited by touch, glance, gesture, or facial expression with or without the aid of words...every harmony or disharmony of signals guides the interpretation of passing mood or enduring attribute. (Barnlund,1968, p.536-537) [2].

Apart from the above mentioned, the author also suggests that the cultural variation influences nonverbal communication. for example, the gesture formed by making a circle with one's thumb and index finger while extending the others, is emblematic of the word "OK" in USA; in Japan it signifies "money".

Learning about cultural differences in nonverbal behavior is useful in intercultural communication. First, it makes people be able to gather clues of underlying attitudes and values. Second, the study can help people get rid of isolating ethnocentrism.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Definition of Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication refers to people's actions or attributes other than words. In keeping with this perspective, J. burgoon and T. saine define nonverbal communication as follows: "Nonverbal communication is all communication refers to actions which are sent out purposely, received with consciousness and may have a response". (Burgoon & Saine,1978, p.6-7) [4].

2.2 Class Classification of Nonverbal Communication.

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2.2.1 Kinesics

It is believed that those behaviors, such as eye contact, facial expression, body movement, gestures of hands and legs are usually regarded as kinesics. In other words, kinesics is the study of body movement and activities in human communication.” (Chen and Starosta, 1998, p.88) [6] It are also called body language.

Kinesics generally fall into five categories: emblems, illustrators, regulators, affect displays and adaptors. in our communication, these gestures and movements provide and transmit a lot of information and messages.

2.2.2 Paralanguage

Paralanguage is a set of audible sound, which follows with oral language to augment its meaning. At the same time, these vocal, non-vocabulary utterances carry meanings in other words. Paralanguage may be expressed consciously or unconsciously, and it includes the pitch, volume, and, in some cases, intonation of speech. Sometimes the definition is restricted to vocally-produced sounds.

2.2.3 Object Language

Object language can also be intentional or unintentional display of material things. Usually, object language includes physical appearance, clothes, ornaments, smell and color. They serve as highly significant messages that we offer to others. We always care so much about the messages which we will give to others through our garments. It greatly affect the way where we are seen by others and the way where our messages are received.

2.2.4 Environmental Language

It is said that environmental language touches the innermost fiber of culture. It mainly includes message of space (attitudes toward crowding, proxemics, territoriality, space orientation, seating arrangement), message of time, architectural design and home decoration. Environment is a crucial factor in communication, and the control on environment can change other aspects of communication. It will affect the psychology and physiology of person when communicating. such kind language can also show the communicators’ tastes and characteristics.

2.3 Characteristics of Nonverbal Communication.

So many scholars analyses the characteristics from different perspectives. Based on other authors’ distinctions, this paper summaries the characteristics as follows: universal, conventional, contextual and ambiguous.

2.3.1 Universal

Even through the cultural differences exist, nonverbal communication is still universal. Some basic emotions of nonverbal behaviours are common sense for everybody. Such behaviours as smiling, frowning, laughing and crying may have similar meanings in any country. Burgoon, Buller and Woodall support that “many scholars believe that nonverbal signal are part of a universally recognized and understood code.”. (Burgoon, Buller and Woodall, 1996, p.5) [4].

2.3.2 Conventional

Nonverbal communication is culture-bound. However, each culture has its specific interpretation on nonverbal communication. These behaviours which is acceptable in this culture may be unacceptable in another one. our specific nonverbal behaviours we displayed are greatly affected by culture. for instance, the expression of the feeling on friendship various as culture. Embracing on men

and holding hands on women may be appropriate in some countries, whereas in other countries these may be inappropriate.

2.3.3 Contextual

Our context determined our nonverbal behaviour. For example, in China, shaking hand express not only friendly greeting, but also good-bye. The same nonverbal behaviour may get different meanings when performed in different context. Looking down at the floor may show sadness in one context and submissiveness in another one. Different nonverbal behaviour can also receive same meaning in different context. for instance, raising a forefinger to our lips or hands up and down both mean calms down, even they are in different context.

2.3.4 Ambiguous

Nonverbal messages are also ambiguous. Their meaning may be not very clear. As Wood puts, "We can never be sure that others understand the meanings we intended to express with our nonverbal behaviour."(Wood,1998, p.105) [12] One nonverbal behaviours may contain many meanings. For example, people may cry for sad, excited, happy, or no reason at all. Therefore, there is no need to be surprised when we get the real reason why a person laughed so loudly, or walked so strange.

2.4 Functions of Nonverbal Communication.

Nonverbal behaviour and speech play a vital role in our face-to-face communication. We converse with the usage of vocal organs, but our nonverbal behaviours are used to be a complementary way through all the conversation. Its functions are really need to be known for all. The following functions are widely accepted.

2.4.1 Repeating

When somebody ask you a way to one place, you will not only tell the way by your mouth, but also point in the direction to repeat it. if we don't agree with others' idea, we might shake our head while we are also uttering the word no.

2.4.2 Complementing

We always use nonverbal cues to complement more message to verbal information. we may agree on our friend with a smile. We may also say good-bye to our friend with our hand waving.

2.4.3 Substituting

Sometimes nonverbal messages can take place of verbal messages. when a naughty boy sees his father's angry glare, he will know his father is angry. You wave, beckon to a waiter in a noisy restaurant. Maybe it's better than yelling across the crowd.

2.4.4 Regulating

We often use nonverbal behavior to regulate and manage communication. We may increase our eye contact with the person to indicate we have finished our talk and he can start in conversation. Nodding head in agreement can also indicate we agree and the talk should be continue.

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2.4.6 Contradicting

Nonverbal communication can express meaning which are contrary to verbal communication. When people don't like something, they may show their appreciation verbally, but they may avoid eye contact at the same time.

3. Cultural Differences in Nonverbal Communication

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3.1 The Relationship between Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

Our life is always filled of such two forms of communication: verbal and nonverbal. they occur simultaneously and complement each other. The tone of someone's voice, clothing, general enthusiasm in speaking can provide a nonverbal confirmation of the words. as former researchers argue that VC is accompanied with NVC in human communication; the former mainly produces vocal effects, and the latter mostly produces visual, sensory, factual effects.

We use VC to convey our message, but NVC can also show the communication pattern and the relationship of two person. The distance they keep in communication can tell us the closeness of relationship of the two persons. Our verbal communication involves human intention, while the nonverbal behavior can be intentional or unintentional. The blush in our face is hard to conceal. Words have absolute start and end points, while nonverbal messages keep on going even through people don't talk. for instance, silence can still convey meaning.

3.2 The Relationship between Nonverbal Communication and Culture

Before we make clear how culture affects nonverbal communication, we should make sense of what culture is first. Even through various definitions about culture exist, it still has some basic factors such as material culture or artifacts, norms and values, communication patterns. For the purpose of this dissertation, a culture is an identifiable group whose members share beliefs, customs, values, communication patterns, and a common historical background through communication behavior. (Gibson&Hanna,1992, p. 416) [7].

It is obvious that nonverbal behaviour is directly linked to culture. In China people beckon someone with hand extending toward the person, open palm down, all fingers crooked in a beckoning motion while in America palm up, index fingers crooked instead. Culture also influences the manner on sending and receive nonverbal cues. In China, staring at strangers means curiosity and surprise, but it's impoliteness in America.

It is of great significant to learn about the alliance between nonverbal communication and culture. in our life, we always use nonverbal symbols spontaneously. For instance, American people will use eye contact automatically when talking to others. Nonverbal behaviour, like culture, is all-pervasive, multidimensional and boundless. Our any use of our nonverbal behaviour is only a small part of limitless nonverbal behaviours in our human communication. Like culture, most nonverbal communication is learned after birth. as we are not born knowing the communication dimensions involved with nonverbal information, even if many behaviours are innate such as smiling and moving.

3.3 Cultural Differences in Nonverbal Communication

As culture greatly influences our intercultural communication, especially the nonverbal communication. If we want to be a successful communicator, the well-known on the cultural differences is really necessary.

The term "kinesics" was firstly coined by Birdwhistell. Such behaviours as gestures, posture, body movements, facial expressions, eye contact and touching are usually termed kinesics. in other words, "kinesics is the study of body movements and activities in human communication". (Chen&Starosta,1998, p.88) [6] It is also called "body language" by some scholars. All these behaviours have their own meaning in a certain culture.

3.3.1 Posture

Posture refers to the general way people carry out their body. Postures are usually classified into three categories: standing, bent-knee positions (includes sitting, squatting and kneeling) and lying. Each culture has its own distinctive nonverbal cues despite of universal ones.

In China, both men and women are obliged to stand when they are introduced to others, while in America when a lady is introduced to man, she need not stand up except when the man's social status is very high. In America, the students usually assume a sitting posture when answering the teacher's question in classroom. But in China, students usually answer the teacher's questions standing. Lin Dajin confirmed that an American in his private office may lean far back in his chair or even put his legs up on desk when talking on the phone or to other people. To them, it is a sign of being relaxed and a male leader may put his legs up on the desk to show his amicability and friendliness. Nevertheless, such a posture is extremely offensive to Chinese.

From these differences, people may note the values, norms, and beliefs or subjective culture of particular group reflected in the nonverbal codes of different nations.

3.3.2 Gesture

Gestures refer to the movement of hands, or arms to reinforce a verbal message. Leger Brosnahan states that gesture is actually the core of body language. Some gestures may indicate general emotional arousal and sometimes are coordinated with speech to illustrate the talking.

Sometimes the same gesture may indicate different meanings in different cultures. but sometimes some countries have their own special gestures. In China, a fist with the little finger extended means the last one; the two index fingers beside the head indicate thinking. In America, circling the index finger beside the head to mean crazy; rubbing one index finger along the other to show being shame; shrugging shoulders means that "I don't know "or" I have no way".

3.3.3 Facial Expressions

People can get various information from facial expression, such as the type of the person or the personality traits. people also make predictions from the face about the person they meet. These can be signified by the Mexican adage that "One's face is the mirror of one's soul."

The most important function of facial expression is to express emotions and feelings. Despite the biological-based nature of facial expressions, different cultures have different rules about the circumstance under which emotions can be expressed. Americans are generally extrovert, so their facial expressions are often good indicators of their inner feelings, attitudes and reactions to others. However, for our Chinese, displaying too much emotions violates face-saving norms by disrupting harmony and causing conflict. For example, a Chinese will greet his or her guests with a smile even when his or her family bears bitter sufferings, while an American will almost never conceal their inner grief in times of unhappiness.

3.3.4 Eye Contact (Oculestics)

Eye contact is also an important aspect of kinesics, it is the study of messages sent by eyes, including eye contact, gaze, staring and pupil dilation. Eyes are the windows of people's heart. Some researchers believe that eye movement is the first and primary characteristic noticed by people. In our communication, culture also play a crucial role.

Different cultures have developed a variety of uses for the eyes in the communicative process. in America, people must direct his/her eyes to the communicator, because it is a symbol of honesty and sincerity, while in China, direct-eye-contact could be regarded as a sign of rudeness, contempt, disrespect or bad manners.

3.3.5 Touch

Touch is the earliest means we have to make contact with others. People touch for different reasons, in different ways, and in different places. Touch can also indicate many things. As we move from infancy into childhood, we learn the rules of touching. Of course, the use of touching to express feelings and emotions also is affected by culture.

In America, physical contact is generally avoided in conversation among ordinary friends or acquaintances. Even touching a child, especially a female child, is not allowed. However, touches or embraces in China is a way to show care. the act of kissing is another kind of touch. In America, kissing may be a means of greeting within the intimates. In China, only the lovers or the couples can perform such kind of action.

3.4 Chronemics

Chronemics is the study of time, or more precisely, the study of how humans use time in communication. as time is a personal phenomenon, all of us use time in a manner which show our character. here, culture also plays a substantial role in how we use time. In China, people tend to spend more time thinking. we often hear "Buzhaoji, manmanlai." (不着急,慢慢来)However, in America, people always say "Time is money". According to Samovar and Porter, a culture's conception of time can be examined from three different perspective: informal time; perceptions of past, present, and future. (Samovar and Porter,2004, p.193) [11]

3.4.1 Informal Time

Different cultures have different attitude and practice relative to the use of time. For example, people in Asian cultures such as Chinese and Agrarian like to bargain at open market. They consider it using time in an enjoyable way. But to Americans, arguing over fixing prices is an irritating and unnecessary waste of time. In America, an invitation for a dinner or a request for a date should be offered far in advance. this shows the honest desire of the host. In some Arab and Asian world, the last-minute invitations are sincere. They simply forget arrangements made in advance. The same is true in China. And Americans tend to arrive at the party 5 minutes late whereas Chinese people may appear a little even 15 minutes earlier than the predetermined schedule. All these manners show different meanings in different culture.

3.4.2 Past, Present, and Future

The concepts of past, present and future are also culturally patterned. People in the past-orientated use the past as a guide to how to live in the present because of their long history. The present-oriented culture emphasizes living in the moment and tends to have a casual, relaxed style. And the future-oriented puts great faith in the future and expects it to be grander and nicer than the present.

As Brick confirmed that Chinese culture is a culture exclusively concerned with the past. Because of its long history and resplendent cultural heritage, Chinese traditional culture pays more attention to the past than American culture dose. Filipinos and Latin Americans belong to present-orientation. For them, the future is vague and ambiguous, and what is real exists in here and now. The United State is a typical country with the future time orientation. As Cohen observed that North Americans are mostly concerned with addressing immediate issues and moving on to new challenges, and they display little interest in history.

3.4.3 Proxemics

Proxemics is the study of how we use space and how we keep distance when communicating. Dr. Edward T. hall coined the word " Proxemics" to describe the ways in which man structures and uses space in his life.

3.4.3.1 Spatial Distance

Our personal space is concerned within an invisible boundary surrounding our body. when our personal space is invaded, we react in a variety of ways. Our response is manifestation of both our personality and our cultural background. Generally speaking, American culture which stresses individualism demands more space than Chinese culture which stresses collectivism. If American strangers touch each other accidentally, they mutter an apology such as "Excuse me", or" Oh, I'm sorry".

3.4.3.2 Spatial Arrangements

Culture influences even the manner and the meaning in seating arrangements. For instance, Americans, when in groups, tend to talk with those opposite them rather than those seated or standing beside them. In China, seating arrangements take on different meanings. The Chinese often experience alienation and uneasiness when they face someone directly or sit on opposite sides. These differences result from the fact that American culture emphasizes individualism while Chinese culture emphasizes collectivism.

3.4.3.3 Territoriality

Territoriality refers to the ownership-like reaction toward a particular space or object. Human territory is defined as the continuous association of a person or group with a certain place. In different cultures, people show different manner on their territory. Americans will not tolerate a no-office situation. Their need for secure office spaces is much stronger than Chinese. Chinese like to share many things with others, the concept of territory is weak. Americans will not touch others' object without permission, while it is common for Chinese person to touch others' new clothes or something else.

3.5 Paralanguage

Paralanguage is how something is said and not the actual meaning of the spoken words. Paralanguage cues help us in drawing conclusions about an individual's emotional state, height, weight, age, intelligence, race, regional background and educational level. We generally explore three factors in the study of intercultural communication: silence, turn-talking and some nonverbal sound.

3.5.1 Silence

Silence is defined as the absence of sound during speaking or conversing, such as making soundless reaction or pause. some scholars claim that Chinese culture belong to high-context cultures. Their information is provided through gestures, the use of space, and even silence. As the saying goes: "Silence is gold". Silence is a sign of politeness and contemplation. on the contrary, American culture is the low-context culture. Silence is not highly valued in most American contexts. they dislike the Chinese listener making no feedback and keeping silence. They regard the silence in the conversation as a disrespectful behavior.

3.5.2 Nonverbal Sound

Nonverbal sound transfers communicative messages but having no fixed meaning. some scholars entitled nonverbal sound as "sound gestures" Volume, pitch, tempo, tone, rhythm, etc. are voice qualities related to our vocal organs. Several differences can be found in these aspects in different cultures. for example, Chinese people talking to each other in short distance in a much louder volume and higher pitch than the Americans do. Americans usually laugh to their heart's content; whereas the Chinese may hold back their laughter.

3.5.3 Object Language

Object language is the message about the very person who conveys information consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally through his/her general appearance, dress, smell, and personal artifacts.

3.5.3.1 General Appearance and Dress

In the process of globalization, many young men follow the international fashion in clothes, hairstyle, makeup, and personal artifacts. As we all know that physical appearance is the most important nonverbal code during initial encounters. the Chinese saying "Clothes make the man as the saddle makes the horse" indicates the importance of clothes. Culture also influence this aspect. Americans are known for their casual dressing, but they are cautious about it on formal occasions. Chinese people are attaching importance to dressing but the biggest problem with the way they dress is appropriateness.

3.5.3.2 Smell

We have discussed nonverbal cues received mainly through vision and hearing, but there is also one more conduit for meaning, which is smell. For example, Chinese may find the odour of Americans offensive, which results from the large amount of meat they eat. at the same time, Americans who visit China are often struck by the strong smell of pork throughout the country. Americans are the most blatant example of culture that is uncomfortable with natural smell. They spend billions of dollars on perfumes, toothpaste and gargle making certain that they exude the right smell. Nowadays, although many Chinese use perfumes and gargle, a lot of people are unconscious of the importance and necessity of them.

3.6 Factors Affecting Cultural Difference

It is self-evident that, nonverbal communication changes from culture to culture. so many factors influence cultural divergences in nonverbal communication. The paper will introduce from two main aspects.

3.6.1 High-Context Culture and Low-Context Culture

Sometime, we can also examine the differences through the context. Edward Hall categorizes cultures as being either high or low context, depending on the degree to which meaning comes from the settings or from the words being exchanged. In high-context cultures, many meanings are exchanged without words. But in low-context cultures most information is conveyed verbally. Because of tradition and history, some scholars regard Chinese as high-context cultures and American are in low-context cultures. For instance, "I love you", are rare among Chinese people because the message is always conveyed by the context, but American usually speak it out directly without less use of their context.

3.6.2 Collectivistic Culture and Individualistic Culture

Individualistic culture and collectivistic culture are the major dimension of cultural variability isolated by theorists across disciplines. Collectivistic cultures focus on the in-group, but individualistic cultures do not. In collectivistic cultures, we emphasized more on collectivity, harmony and cooperation in the group, but not individual function and responsibility. On the contrary, in individualistic cultures, competition rather than cooperation is encouraged. According to former studies, American culture is the culture where individualism is highly valued. They care more about their personal interests and well-being and like to be direct and assertive in interaction. while in China, an individual's well-being is thought to be cared by the other members of groups, especially the family and the work unit.

The degree of the culture on individualistic or collectivistic has an impact on the nonverbal behaviour. as Andersoen notes, "People from individualistic cultures are more remote and distance proximally." Whereas in collectivistic cultures, such as China, people tend to share property, all material possessions, food, work and love, and often live under the same roof, Research showed that violations of proximal distance in collectivistic culture evoke a withdrawal mode of reaction.

Individualism-collectivism provides a powerful explanatory framework for the cultural differences understanding on the nonverbal communication. We should realize the significant of learning on such aspect.

4. Implication

As we have introduced the significant of the learning on NVC in different culture, we may naturally know there are many important usages of it. In other words, many implications have blended in our life. On the one hand, we can develop people's competence of intercultural communication, especially those merchants who always do overseas businesses. If we control the nonverbal behavior better, we may find our communication will be smoother than before. Of course, the whole process of negotiation or foreign affairs may be easier and more effective. On the other hand, it is helpful in foreign language teaching. Because verbal messages are really not enough to make our class more

effective. We may find the class more interest if the teacher teaches with more body language, some picture information, the context or any other nonverbal behaviors. We can know better of the foreign language culture through the use of the different nonverbal behavior.

5. Summary

Edward T. Hall believes that nonverbal communication is as invisible and difficult to be perceived as the culture. However, there is no doubt that the nonverbal communication is very crucial. Nonverbal communication is the best reflection of a person's real attitude, value and emotion. In fact, people usually use their own cultural habits and rules to judge their own and others' language communication and nonverbal communicative behavior subconsciously. It will always lead to misunderstanding, doubt, even aversion and some bad emotions of the other side. Intercultural business activities require not only linguistic propriety of nonverbal behavior. It's of course, based on the understanding of different cultural backgrounds.

In conclusion, it's a very important to know the culture difference of nonverbal communication. It will not only help the businessmen make the intercultural business negotiation successfully, but also help teacher carry out an effectively class in foreign language teaching. Meanwhile, it will enhance the relationship between countries and improve the international cooperation environment.

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