

# Three Major Nonverbal Components in Cross-cultural Communication

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People may find cross-cultural communication difficult even if they overcome the natural barriers of language difference. They are required to speak the language and use appropriate nonverbal behavior, cultural cues at the same time. "To understand cues cross culturally becomes even more complicated because each of us learns the cues that are appropriate in our culture, and each culture has different cues to show basic ideas" (Archer, 1991:76-7). As we move around the world we cannot help noticing that certain familiar gestures disappear and other strange ones take their place. What is polite in America is obscene in Thailand. What is friendly here is hostile there. We all laugh, but in some places a loud laugh is considered rude. A white American shows frankness and openness by direct eye contact while a black American shows respect by lack of eye contact. Because all language is based on gestures, when people talk they make more than sounds. They point, roll their eyes and make other gestures that clue the listeners into their meaning. The ability to recognize facial expressions, eye contact, body gestures and identify emotions are critical factors in successful communication and more general social interaction. Archer, in her "Living with Strangers in the U.S.A.", concludes that we can ask a person to repeat what he has said but we never ask a person, "Excuse me, what did you mean by your smile just now?" In nonverbal skills, there are also gender differences. For instance, females typically demonstrate greater nonverbal decoding than males, presumably due to different socialization experiences that lead them to place a greater emphasis on emotional factors in interpersonal interaction than men (Hall, 1984). Over the past two decades, researchers have gained considerable insight into the nature and function of nonverbal behavior and have produced substantial evidence pointing to its significance in interpersonal communication. Information provided by nonverbal channels can influence people's understanding

of the immediate social environment and the emotional status of those with whom they interact (Ekman & O'sullivan, 1991; Feldman & Rime, 1991). A nonverbal expression can be the hand gently strokes the chin, and the wideopen eyes blink rapidly. Even though there are so many gestures in nonverbal communication, this paper clarifies the significance of three major components in the cross-cultural communication : facial expression, eye contact, and hand gesture.

**Facial expression.** Paul Ekman, a psychologist in nonverbal communication, in his book "Emotion in the Human Face" concludes that facial expressions are a reliable index to particular basic emotions. He believed that there is a kind of vocabulary on the face. Working with Wallace Friesen, a fellow scientist, they analyzed student nurses' facial expressions and found that most people know how to fake a happy face and an angry or sad one, but what they don't know is how suddenly to make it appear, how long to keep it on, and how quickly to let go of it. For the emotion of surprise people wrinkle foreheads above raised brows; of wideopen eyes; and of mouth opened to varying degree. There are some expressions that are easy to confuse such as anger and disgust, or hurt and surprise. However, Paul Ekman and Ray Birdwhistell have a different belief about facial expressions. Paul Ekman's belief in crosscultural studies that men all over the world smile when they are happy and scowl when they are angry are universal. Birdwhistell believes that these similar expressions may occur in all men, but that the meaning people attach to them differs from culture to culture. There are display rules in every culture which define which expressions are appropriate in any given situation. Then each culture has its own rules and its own facial style. As people become more face conscious, they will become attuned to the feelings of others, able to interpret each other better and able to assess the impression they are making on one another more accurately. For example, Westerners may not be able to successfully signify sarcasm to Asians when their mouth corner is drawn back strongly and it forms a crease in the cheek. To Westerners this is a deliberately distorted version of the smile. As a "deformed compliment" it transmits a signal that is sardonic or sarcastic. In Greece, people raise their eyebrows and lower rapidly once. Instead of a smile, an action is accompanied by a serious or annoyed facial expression. The Greek Head Toss meaning "no!" includes an Eyebrows Flash. Sometimes, at close quarters, the negative signal is transmitted simply by

raising and lowering the eyebrows, without the usual Head Toss.

**Eye contact.** Laurie Taylor in his article "The Importance of Eye Contact" says that more than 90 per cent of the meaning in all interpersonal communication is transmitted nonverbally. From an employer's survey in The Independent more than 60 per cent of young people who apply for jobs in Britain's vibrant new economy aren't able to make satisfactory eye contact. A report on a survey of white undergraduate students in a U.S. Midwestern University done by Judith Martin and Mitch Hammer said that the students considered 39 per cent of competence in cross-cultural communication is maintaining direct eye contact. Culture shapes our eye behavior which is different from culture to culture. In some countries, for example, Arabic people stand very close together for conversation and look intently into one another's eyes as they talk. In other places like Thailand, it is thought to be rude to stare at the other person at all during conversation. In America, the rules are different. To be stared at in a public place is an invasion of privacy, and to be caught staring is an embarrassment. Most people have encountered the where-to-look problem when sharing a small, confined space, such as an elevator. When a man and a woman engaged in conversation make eye contact, the woman is most likely to glance away first. Try holding out eye contact; allowing someone else to avert his eyes before you do will give you a sense of control. During the everyday conversation, people not only focus their attention on what is being said but also provide a system of conversational traffic signals and notify another individual when it is his turn to talk by their eye movement. In polite conversation between individuals who don't know one another, natural looking is generally played down, probably because a lot of it would shift the focus of attention from the topic of conversation to the personal relationship between the two people. People can express many things by their eye behavior, for example, showing dissatisfaction with what the other is saying, he may look away a lot while listening. The amount of looking people do varies greatly. Personality, situation, and attitude influence a person's eye movements. When one person likes another, the chances are that he'll look at him more often than is usual. Affectionate friendship-oriented people and people who like each other are more likely to look into faces and eyes. On the contrary, an embarrassed or upset person usually tries to avoid meeting the eyes of others.

**Hand gesture.** Some scientists have suggested that man's earliest language may have been a gestural one. Hand gestures are marvelously used and can be executed more effectively than speech when the verbal message is unclear. They help clarify and reveal emotions. In general most people ignore the hand-dancing of others, assuming that it's just so much meaningless motion. Even if they are slightly more aware of the hand gestures of other person, in general they look mostly at faces rather than at hands. Every individual has his own gestural style which partially reflects his culture (Davis, 1973 : 72). An American girl in her cross-cultural class asked an Arab student how he would signify nonverbally that he liked her. His response was to smooth back his hair which, to her, was a common nervous gesture signifying nothing. She repeated her question three times. He smoothed his hair three times, and finally realized that she was not recognizing his gesture, ducked his head and stuck out his tongue slightly, his automatic response to embarrassment. This behavior was noticed by the girl and she interpreted it as his reply to her question. Sometimes different cultures use the same gesture but with quite different meanings. Sticking out the tongue in China signifies embarrassment but in Tibet it is a sign of polite deference and respect. Some common hand signs that may lead to confusion : The hand is displayed with the thumb and forefinger tips joined to make a vertical ring. It signifies O.K./good in North America and Europe but money in Japan and zero in Belgium, France and Tunisia. With the hand in the ring position, the tip of the thumb and forefinger are likely touched to the lips and then the hand is flicked away means delicious in France (Morris, 1994: 118-21). Adam Kendon's detailed analysis of the gesticulations of a man found that when a speaker passed from one sentence to the next, he also changed from one sort of body movement to another. Gesticulation also occurred during hesitant speech. He observed that while a person paused in mid-sentence to search for his next words, he would act them out with a hand gesture.

In conclusion, facial expression, eye contact, and hand gesture are largely unconscious. They are critically important because, as with other aspects of communication process, they are subject to cultural variation. Culture tends to determine the specific facial expression, eye contact and hand gesture that represent or symbolize specific thoughts, feelings or states of the speaker. Moreover, culture determines when it is appropriate to display or communicate various thoughts,

feelings or internal states and this is particularly evident in the display of emotions. There are great cultural differences in what emotions may be displayed by whom, and when or where they may be displayed. The three nonverbal messages can tell us how other messages are to be interpreted. They can indicate whether verbal messages are true, joking, serious, threatening, and so on. Learning the language, which most foreigners consider their only barrier to understanding, is actually only the beginning. It's nice to know the silent grammar of body-speak. As with any foreign language, one never knows when he might need it. Eye behavior isn't the only clue to meaning. People also go by facial expressions, by how close the other stands, by whether he touches them or not and by what he says. Some elements of body language are more basic than others, but all benefit from study because even these global signals can vary in style and intensity. Therefore, the awareness of the cultural differences in facial expression, eye contact, and hand gesture is indeed one sign of successful cross-cultural communication.

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