

THE IMPORTANCE OF BODY LANGUAGE IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS

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Abstract: This paper aims at providing information on what body language is and to state the importance of it in intercultural communications. People can have serious problems when interpreting body movements and gestures of people who belong to different cultures as they might not be aware of the fact that they have different meanings in intercultural situations. What one action means and reflects in a certain culture might be totally different or even offensive in another culture; therefore problems are likely to occur in these intercultural situations. Proxemics is also important in non-verbal communications in relation to intercultural communications as it refers to the distance between the communicators which also should be mentioned when talking about body language. Gabriel and Raam (2007) state that the distance between two people communicates the type of relationship they have and this distance reflects different meanings in different cultures. Some of the main body movements and gestures include smiling, hands, pointing, looking, listening, head movements and feet and these are the ones that play a great role in intercultural communications. Therefore, the present paper includes examples to indicate the importance of these body movements and how they might lead to serious misunderstandings in intercultural communications.

Keywords: Body language, gestures, intercultural communications, sociolinguistics, non-verbal communication

KÜLTÜRLERARASI İLETİŞİMDE BEDEN DİLİNİN ÖNEMİ

Özet: Bu çalışma vucut dilinin ne olduğunu ve kültürlerarası iletişimde olan önemini belirtmeyi amaçlar. İnsanlar kültürlerarası iletişimde değişik kültürlere ait olan insanların vucut dilini ve vucut hareketlerini yorumlarken ciddi problemler yaşayabilirler ve bunun sebebi bu vucut hareketlerinin değişik kültürlerde farklı anlamlarının olduğunu bilmemelerinden kaynaklanır. Bir kültürde belirli bir hareketin anlamı ve yansıması başka bir kültürde tamamen farklı ve hatta hoş olmayan nitelikte olabilir bu sebepten

dolayı, bu kültürlerarası iletişim durumlarında problemlerin ortaya çıkması muhtemeldir. Kültürlerarası iletişime bağlı olarak, sözsüz iletişimde konuşma uzaklığı bilgisi de çok önemlidir. Konuşma uzaklığı bilgisi, iletişim halindeki iki kişi arasındaki uzaklığa hitap eder ve vücut dilinden bahsederken bundan da bahsedilmesi gerekir. Gabriel ve Raam (2007) iki kişi arasındaki uzaklığın, bu kişilerin arasındaki ilişkiyi yansıttığını vurguluyorlar ve bu uzaklığın farklı kültürlerde farklı anlamlar taşıdığını savunuyorlar. Temel vücut hareketlerinden bazıları el, baş ve ayak hareketlerini; ayrıca gülümseme, işaret etme, bakma, dinleme gibi unsurları da içerir ve bunlar kültürlerarası iletişimde büyük rol oynarlar. Bundan dolayı mevcut olan çalışma bu vücut hareketlerinin önemini vurgulamak ve bunların kültürlerarası iletişimlerde nasıl ciddi yanlış anlaşılmalara yol açtığını göstermek için örnekler içermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Vücut dili, vücut hareketleri, kültürlerarası iletişim, toplum dilbilim, sözsüz iletişim.

1. INTRODUCTION

Body language is a means of communication which includes body movements of the head, eyes, neck, hands, arm, feet or other parts of the body to reflect expressions. These body movements send messages to the receiver and they are primarily used to reflect our emotions or to support the verbal message. It is stated that the first impression of a person is received by eye contact which takes up %60 of the message and %30 is received by the ear, the remaining %10 of the message is the verbal message itself (MEGEP, 2008). It is obvious to understand that non-verbal messages play a great role in communication by looking at the portions above.

Gullburg (2013) defines gestures and body language by stating that “gestures reflect and interact with cultural, linguistic, cognitive, and more general aspects of communication, showing systematic variation across a range of measures in each of these domains”. Gestures are performed to convey meaning and structure. In other words, they are used to clarify, disambiguate, highlight messages or regulate turn taking. Gestures are actions that help one to organize thoughts and facilitate their expressions.

It is obvious that a great number of people agree that non-verbal language takes up more space in communication than verbal language. Therefore the aim of this paper is to indicate the importance of body language in intercultural communications and the role it plays in sociolinguistic contexts. It is crucial to bear in mind that body actions have different meanings in different cultures. For this reason, the interpretations of these actions will be quite different in diverse cultures. People can run into serious blunders if they are not aware of the fact that the encoding and decoding of these actions can vary according to

culture. The paper also contains information on the importance of body language in intercultural contexts, and also provides various examples which will aid one to understand how different the same body movement might be interpreted by different cultures.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF BODY LANGUAGE (NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION) IN COMMUNICATION

Mato (2012) aims to indicate how utterances or body movements have different effects or meanings when perceived by people who belong to different cultures. The author indicates that this happens when the performer intends to express something with utterances or actions that are perceived with a totally different meaning by the receiver. This is the main reason why misunderstandings between people occur especially in intercultural communication.

Novinger (2001) refers to non-verbal behaviors as the color of verbal messages. In other words, non-verbal gestures or behaviors support the verbal messages. Novinger (2001) gave a real life example that happened between a Brazilian woman and a man from Columbia to show that the same gesture might have different meanings in different cultures. The Brazilian woman decided to visit her sister who was married to a Columbian man in Columbia. She bought gifts to everyone in the family and gave it to them when she arrived. Her brother-in-law started to laugh loudly after receiving a *figa* as a gift. The *figa* is a statuette hand gesture which represents good luck, in Brazil but it is totally slang in many cultures including Columbia. This gift was not a good idea to be given to a person who did not belong to the Brazilian culture.

Actions or body movements contribute to non-verbal communication and they are also called kinesic code. Movements and behavior of the body communicate differently (Gabriel & Raam, 2007). Using your hands and especially touching someone when communicating can be very dangerous in some cultures because you might be perceived as unwanted or breaking norms. A suggestion provided by Gabriel and Raam, (2007) is to observe the person who you communicate with first and then decide to initiate or touch.

Sharifiabad and Vali (2011) state that, there are many factors that affect communication related to body language like culture, gender, age, and psyche. The researchers conducted a study to identify the differences between Persian students and native speakers of English using body language. The study revealed that there were no significant differences between the two groups in terms of using body language but the observations showed that Persian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners used more facial expressions than gestures when communicating.

Sharifiabad and Vali (2011) claim that there are two types of communication: non-verbal communication which are the skills we use to

express our ideas and feelings without using any words and verbal communication which we use in spoken interactions. The researchers claim that body language includes greetings, how people sit or stand, what facial expressions they use, clothes, hairstyle, tone of voice, eye movements, how they listen, how close they stand, and whether they touch each other while communicating. The researchers also refer to body language as the language of emotions, space, time, and tacit knowledge. Non-verbal communication involves unspoken language produced by the person together with gestures and facial expressions and gestures are referred to as movement of a part of the body, especially the hand or the head. On the other hand they refer to facial expressions as the movements of face especially eyes which are very important in non-verbal communication. The way one sits or stands also conveys messages in intercultural communication like bowing, showing soles of feet etc. (Sharifiabad & Vali, 2011).

Ekman, (2007) indicates that there are six emotions that are innate and universal, these are; happiness, sadness, fear, anger, disgust, and surprise. Watson (as cited in Sharifiabad & Vali, 2011) refers to some cultures as “contact” cultures and some as “non-contact” cultures according to the physical touch or contact during interaction. In his study, he has found out that the contact cultures (ones who facilitate physical touch or contact during interaction) have more direct orientation, less interpersonal space, and more touching when interacting.

3. PROXIMICS

Proxemics is another important issue in intercultural communications in relation to non-verbal language. Proxemics refers to the space between the communicators. The distance when communicating differs according to culture and the amount of distance has different meanings in different cultures (Sree & Siawuk, 2012). For example, Sree and Siawuk have found out that the Gamo (an ethnic group in Ethiopia) females feel uncomfortable when strangers are too close to them when communicating.

Sree and Siawuk (2012) divide proxemics into four main categories; intimate, social, personal, and public space. The researchers support that the distance plays a great role in the communication process. They give an example of an American diplomat and his Arab host, where the Arab moved very close to the American but this closeness made the American very uncomfortable that he retreated a few feet. On the other hand this action made the Arab to feel that the American was cold and aloof. This action transferred a non-verbal message and it was misinterpreted by the two cultures because of the lack of knowledge they had about each culture. Americans preserving space can also be seen when two Americans get on an empty elevator, each one will move to opposite sides.

Proxemics is defined in MEGEP (2008) as the amount of space around or between us and others. They indicate that the space between two communicating people communicates what type of relationship exists between the two people. The meaning of space differs according to culture and people have to be aware of this especially in intercultural communications.

People reflect their relationship with proxemics and MEGEP (2008) has identified 4 types of closeness related to the relationship between people. The article uses a diagram to clarify the situation by putting the person in the middle and drawing 4 circles around it from small to larger. The first circle indicates the person in the middle and the space up to the second circle is the private area which the person uses for his/her family or very close friends. The distance between the people in this area is from 0 to 25 cm's. When strangers enter this area the person feels uncomfortable and wants to leave the area immediately. This is the reason why the faces of the people on mass transportation are always sulky. The same thing happens when people are on lifts. They move very little and wait to get off the lift as soon as possible. The second circle is called personal area and it is for the people who know each other and for friends. The person maintains the space from 25cm' to 1 meter with these people and handshakes appear between these measures. The person will feel uncomfortable when a stranger approaches closer than the measurement provided. The third circle is called social area and these are the spaces for people who know the person but do not feel any closeness. These people might be the students at the person's school or the people from the neighbor apartment and the people keep 1 to 2,5 meters when greeting with each other. The fourth and the last space is called common area and these are the areas which are used by everybody. The people feel comfortable when strangers are at least 2,5 meters away from them (MEGEP, 2008).

According to communication specialists, two-thirds to three-fourths of all communication are non-verbal. The percentage varies and this variation depends on different cultures. What is obvious is that people communicate more by non-verbal language than verbal language (Novinger, 2001).

4. FIVE CATEGORIES OF FACIAL AND BODY MOVEMENTS

Ekman (2007) has divided the entire facial and body movements into five categories;

1. Symbolic movement: Symbolic movements are said to be used as a substitute to verbal language and they have different culture characters. For example, the gesture to express OK and victory with ones hand. Another example is the body language used to refer to "suicide". Japanese people would perform an act like stabbing a

dagger in the stomach while an American would perform an act like a gun in ones hand and pretending to shoot himself from the temple. Both actions in both cultures are used to refer to the word “suicide”.

2. Illustrative movement: These movements are used together with verbal language and they intend to clarify the point which is said, like characterizing a thing’s rhythm and speed or describe a body movement.

3. Emotion revealing movement: These are normally facial expressions that reflect emotion or mood.

4. Modulation movement: These movements are used to maintain or adjust the face to face talk. For example, using the head or eye movement to let somebody know that you have finished your turn of talking and now it is the other side’s turn to speak.

5. Adaptable movement: These movements contain movements like wiping eyes, shaking hands or feet.

5. BASIC BODY MOVEMENTS IN RELATION TO INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS

Below are some basic body movements and examples that reveal how differently the same body movements or gestures might be interpreted by people who belong to different cultures.

Smiling

The Europeans perceive a smile as an affirmative or showing that you agree with the communication partner. Whereas the Asians try to reveal that he/she is not happy with the situation. For this reason the body action is same but the meaning it represents is different in each culture (as cited in Cangil, 2004).

Communication breakdowns are likely to occur when body language is interpreted incorrectly due to cross-cultural diversity. Smiles have different meanings and people smile for different reasons in different cultures. The people in the USA show gratitude through smiles and they also smile when greeting with people. On the other hand, people in Japan smile for different reasons other than the ones mentioned for Americans. Japanese people smile when they are embarrassed, ashamed and even when they feel uncomfortable. Fontes (2008) also gives an example of her own to state that smiles represent different meanings in intercultural communication. She thought that her Japanese friend was not concentrating on what she was saying about a very sad event.

Novinger (2001) also indicates that there are different smiles in France and they all have different meanings for certain situations and reasons; a smile can be flattering, convivial, possessive, cynical, courteous, or condescending. The

person who hears that smiles have different meanings in France might be confused as this does not happen in their culture.

Hands

A very serious example is when people with the same sex (mainly adults or older people) hold hands and walk about. In the Turkish or Cypriot culture this reflects that they are having a homosexual relationship. But in other cultures like China it is not like that at all, it just means that they are very close friends (Dresser, 1996).

Kumayama (1991) states that hands are important in the Japanese culture especially when giving and receiving something. For example, the Japanese people use both hands to give their business card and the receiver is expected to take the card with both hands otherwise it is interpreted as the person being rude and not paying respect. The same thing happens when giving gifts. The Japanese people stand up and give the gift with both hands and the person who is receiving the gift should also stand up and receive the gift using both hands. Receiving a gift with both hands reflects appreciation in the Japanese culture (Kumayama, 1991).

Coshkun (2010) says that using the left hand for eating, greeting, or smoking is not approved in the Middle East because of religious beliefs. The Middle East people would most probably misunderstand a person from a different culture when using his/her left hand for greeting.

OK gesture

Non-verbal communication plays a greater role than verbal communication. An American teacher had a student from Afghanistan come to see her who was interested in finding out if she had passed the test. The American teacher looked at her and performed the gesture “Okay” with her hand and fingers. The girl was very upset and ran away at once, went home and started to cry. Her brother asked her what had happened and then started to laugh as he knew what the gesture meant to Americans. Then she understood that the American teacher was actually trying to say that she had done fine on the test (Dresser, 1996).

Pointing

Pointing is another example that most of the time results in misunderstandings in cross cultural communications. Dresser (1996) provides an example of a family from Japan who got extremely angry by a girl who was working as a shopping assistant at Disney Land. The Japan family asked her where the restroom was and the girl pointed and said “it is over there”. She was not aware that pointing was very rude in the Japanese culture (Dresser, 1996).

Coshkun (2010) indicates that pointing with your index finger towards yourself is insulting for the people who come from Germany, Netherlands, or

Switzerland and this action can lead to problems with no intention to do so. This action is rude in Venezuela, Sudan, and in Sri Lanka as well.

Fingers

In many parts of the world holding your thumb up means victory or well done. This is not the case in some countries like Iran or Nigeria where it is perceived and interpreted as an insulting language (MEGEP, 2008).

Cangil (2004) provides an example in her article related to fingers. She indicates that the Turks use their index finger by putting it at the chest level and shaking it forth and back to threaten somebody. On the other hand, this action will not mean anything to the Germans because they use their index finger to threaten people by waving it to the right and to the left with their palms towards themselves.

An American will try to convey the message that a person is crazy by holding the index finger next to the right ear without touching the ear and twirling and twisting the index finger in a rotary motion. This non verbal message will probably mean nothing to somebody from a different culture (Molinsky et al., 2005).

Another interesting example about fingers is related to numbers. In Turkey people raise their index finger to represent one when counting but this index finger means four in France because they start counting with their little finger. The same finger will mean two in Japan and the reason for this is that they start counting from the thumb (Coshkun, 2010).

Looking

Another important gesture is looking at someone's eyes (Dresser, 1996). Looking at someone's eyes when speaking is a sign that shows you mean what you say to Americans and if the person in front avoids eye contact, this is interpreted negatively. An experience from an American teacher is appropriate to be mentioned here. She had a misbehaving girl in her classroom that was from Mexico. The teacher called her to the front and tried to explain that her behavior was not appropriate. The girl stood and looked down for the entire time that the teacher was talking. The teacher got angry and asked her to look at her in the eye. The little girl refused to do so and continued to look down. After school the little girl went and explained everything to her mother. The mother came to the teacher to explain that the little girl was actually trying to show her respect while looking down when the teacher was speaking. On the other hand, looking down was a sign of disrespect for the American teacher. Both sides were not aware of the cultural differences in relation to body language and gestures so the situation above lead to serious misunderstandings (Dresser, 1996).

Gabriel and Raam (2007) believe that eye contact is very powerful in non-verbal communication. It is believed that confident people are the ones who use eye contact, they are credible and do not have anything to hide.

The Japanese people will close their eyes entirely during a meeting and this is not a sign of tiredness or disrespect, it actually shows that they are listening carefully to the person who is talking (Dorn & Koch, 2005). On the other hand, in America, Turkey or Cyprus, the people would be offended towards such an action as they would think that they are boring people or the people are paying disrespect to the speaker.

Another example for eye contact is provided by Novinger (2001), where she talks about a Brazilian woman moving to the United States. The woman felt invisible when she was out in public because nobody looked at her. The woman did not understand as looking at somebody in the Brazilian culture meant admiration or interested in, where as in the United States looking at somebody especially for a long time is considered to be threatening or inappropriate (Novinger, 2001).

Staring

Staring at somebody in the eye means an invitation to violence to Americans, it reflects that you are daring them. This gesture is called “mad-dogging”. In some places (like Universal Studio’ Universal City Walk) they warn people with signs saying “no undue staring”. This expression will make people understand that just by staring at somebody you might be in trouble (Dresser, 1996).

Listening

According to Dresser (1996) Americans and many other English speaking countries, you look down when you speak and you look up when you listen. You reflect that you are listening to the person who is speaking when you look up to the person. It is not always the same in different cultures. Africans and African-Americans show that they are listening to you by looking down and they look up when they are talking to a person. This simple gesture might lead to misunderstandings between the two sides as the Americans will think that the African or African-American is not listening or showing disrespect, and obviously the African or African-American will feel the same when an American looks at them when they are speaking. This action shows that if a person is looking away or down when you are speaking from a different culture, it might not mean that they are not listening to you or ignoring you (Dresser, 1996).

Handshake

Handshakes are common all over the world but people, especially males should be careful when tending to shake a woman’s hand which especially belongs to the Islamic culture, as in many cultures it is a serious disapproved action to touch a woman, even for a handshake.

Shaking hands is not common in the Japanese culture so people should not misunderstand when they do not do it instead they use the bow to greet people (Coshkun, 2010).

Head movements

The same body movement may reveal entirely opposite meanings in cross-cultural communications. For example, in the whole world a person would nod their head up and down to say yes. On the other hand, the people in Turkey, North Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Syria, and Sicily nod their head up to express “no”. Shaking their heads back and forth means “yes” in these countries (MEGEP, 2008).

Cangil (2004) also indicates that Turkish people nod their head up and down when approving a verbal message but they also use the same gesture to represent disapproval sometimes. This gesture would definitely be very confusing for people who are not Turkish, Greek or Syrian as the people who belong to other cultures nod their head right and left to show that they disagree or disapprove something.

Blowing your nose

It is extremely rude to blow your nose in public in Japan (Coshkun, 2010). An English or American person will feel free to blow their noses anywhere. An American can get into serious trouble in such a case without even knowing or understanding why such a problem occurred as they do not have it in their own culture.

Feet or shoes

It is stated in MEGEP (2008) that a person can understand the real intention of another person by looking at their feet. If one person’s feet are turned to the door when speaking to someone else, then this communicates that they are not really happy speaking and that they want to end the conversation.

Coshkun (2010) indicates that American businessmen put their feet on the table especially when speaking on the phone but a Japanese person would perceive this action as very bad manners because it is not accepted to show the soles of your feet to anybody.

Victory or Peace sign

The victory sign or peace sign is perceived OK when the palm is facing outward in America, whereas when the palm is facing towards the performer it is accepted as very offensive to the society’s moral in England.

Finally all the examples above reveal that, in order to communicate well it is a must to understand that every culture is unique and has its own values, customs, and characteristics other than treating them as inappropriate behavior.

6. CONCLUSION

It is important to know and understand that every culture is unique and has its own values, customs, and characteristics. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations can be minimized when both sides are aware of the fact that

not every behavior is appropriate or conveys the same message in every culture. It is assumed that the examples provided throughout the paper will shed light to the importance of body language in intercultural communications and aid people in understanding these body movements rather than treating them as inappropriate behavior

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