

Nonverbal Communication: The Messages of Action, Space, Time, and Silence

Do not the most moving moments of our lives find us all without words?

MARCEL MARCEAU

The power of communication to draw others near or to drive them away derives as much from how we appear as from the language we deploy.

CAROLINE KEATING

Sometimes one creates a dynamic impression by saying something, and sometimes one creates as significant an impression by remaining silent.

THE DALAI LAMA

The alarm clock on your iPhone tells you that this day you thought would never come has finally arrived. After more than four years of life as a university student, graduation day is only weeks away. It's the end of late-night cram sessions, mass lecture classes, endless meals of instant ramen, and part-time employment. Life begins today! (You hope.) Your first interview at the company went well, and today's follow-up is the final hurdle before being offered your dream job. Knowing the importance of making a good first impression and recalling what you learned about nonverbal messages in a communication class, you pay particular attention to every detail of your appearance. After showering and a quick glance in the mirror, you begin to wonder about your short beard. After a moment of reflection, including a fleeting thought about selling your soul to corporate America, off goes the beard, followed by a dash of aftershave for that clean scent. Next come the freshly ironed shirt, new tie, and the shined business shoes. As you pick up your new leather briefcase and head for the door, your roommate offers a "thumbs-up" for good luck.

At precisely 9:20 A.M., right after placing a small breath mint into your mouth, you enter the building, approach the receptionist and inform her that you are there for a 9:30 appointment. Ten minutes later, you are ushered into a large, carpeted corner office. An engraved nameplate on the elegant oak desk lets you know this is the office

of the executive vice president for human resources. The smartly dressed woman seated behind the desk smiles, rises, and walks around to meet you. Returning the smile, you step forward and firmly grasp her outstretched hand to signal your self-confidence. With a nod of her head, she invites you to sit in a comfortable chair while she takes a seat in another chair across the coffee table from you. The interview is about to begin.

This hypothetical (and perhaps exaggerated) episode was intended to demonstrate a few of the many and subtle ways nonverbal communication affects your life. In our little drama, it was assumed that the interviewer would have positive responses to your nonverbal “messages” of punctuality, grooming, apparel, expression, handshake, odor, and the like. But would these same behaviors be as successful if you were applying for a position in another country? The answer is *no*. Our negative response can perhaps be better explained with a few examples to demonstrate that misinterpreting the nonverbal actions of people of different cultures is common.

Arab men often greet by kissing on both cheeks. In Japan, men and women greet by exchanging bows. Remember that the interviewer greeted you with a simple handshake. In Thailand, to signal another person to come near, one wags one’s fingers back and forth with the palm down. You will recall that the interviewer sent you a beckoning message with her palm facing up. In Vietnam, that same motion is reserved for someone attempting to summon a dog. In Italy and various Arab countries, it is not uncommon for people to be thirty minutes tardy for an appointment. And there you were, making sure you were on time for your interview! Tongans sit down in the presence of superiors; in the West, you stand up, as you did with the interviewer. Crossing one’s legs in the United States is often a sign of being relaxed; in Korea, it is a social taboo. In Japan, gifts are usually exchanged with both hands. Muslims consider the left hand unclean and do not eat or pass objects with it. The simple thumbs-up used in the United States to say “okay” is an offensive gesture in Nigeria. The Buddha maintained that great insights arrived during moments of silence. In the United States, people talk to arrive at the truth.

All of the examples to this point were presented for three reasons. First, we wanted to pique your interest in the subject of nonverbal communication. Second, we used our examples to underscore the importance of nonverbal communication in human interaction. Or, as Descartes noted, “To know what people think, pay regard to what they do, rather than

what they say.” Finally, we sought to demonstrate that although much of nonverbal communication is universal, many nonverbal actions are shaped by culture.

To further appreciate the significance of nonverbal communication, reflect for a

REMEMBER THIS

Remember that although much of nonverbal communication is universal, many nonverbal actions are shaped by culture.

moment on the countless times, besides employment interviews, when nonverbal messages play a significant role in the transaction. For example, Silverman and Kinnersley point out that in the medical setting, nonverbal communication “is the channel most responsible for communicating attitudes, emotions and affect.”¹

Barnlund highlights some additional occasions when nonverbal messages come into play:

Many, and sometimes most, of the critical meanings generated in human encounters are elicited by touch, glance, vocal nuance, gestures, or facial expressions with or without the aid of words. From the moment of recognition until the moment of separation, people observe each other with all their senses, hearing pause and intonation, attending to dress

and carriage, observing glance and facial tension, as well as noting word choice and syntax. Every harmony or disharmony of signals guides the interpretation of passing mood or enduring attribute. Out of the evaluation of kinetic, vocal, and verbal cues, decisions are made to argue or agree, to laugh or blush, to relax or resist, or to continue or cut off conversation.²

DEFINING NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Because the objective of this chapter is to examine how and why people communicate nonverbally, we begin with a definition of nonverbal communication. A single definition, like our definitions of “culture” and “communication” in Chapter 2, is difficult to compose. Having reviewed numerous definitions, we propose that *nonverbal communication involves all those nonverbal stimuli in a communication setting that are generated by both the source and his or her use of the environment and that have potential message value for the source and/or receiver.*

It is not by chance that our definition is somewhat lengthy. We wanted to offer a definition that would not only establish the boundaries of nonverbal communication but also reflect how the process actually functions. Part of that functioning involves (1) intentional and unintentional messages and (2) the reciprocal relationship between verbal and nonverbal messages.

INTENTIONAL AND UNINTENTIONAL MESSAGES

Our definition permits us to include *intentional* as well as *unintentional* behavior. One of the features that separate humans from most other animals is that humans can usually plan certain actions before they execute them. Observing a friend approaching, you offer a broad smile as part of your greeting. This is an intentional act. Yet nonverbal messages are most often produced without a conscious awareness that they may have meaning for other people. These are unintentional messages. For example, frowning because the sun is in your eyes may make someone mistakenly believe that you are angry; looking upset after receiving a phone call could make a person approaching you think that you're unhappy to see him or her; and touching someone's hand for an extended time could cause that person to think you are flirting when that was not your intent. These are all examples of how your actions, unintentionally, can send messages to others. The sociologist Goffman describes this fusing of intentional and unintentional behavior:

The expressiveness of the individual (and therefore his capacity to give impressions) appears to involve two radically different kinds of sign activity: the expression that he gives and the impression that he gives off. The first involves verbal symbols or their substitutes, which he uses admittedly and solely to convey the information that he and the other are known to attach to these symbols. This is communication in the traditional and narrow sense. The second involves a wide range of action that others can treat as symptomatic of the actor (communicator), the expectation being that the action was performed for reasons other than the information conveyed in this way.³

CONSIDER THIS

What are some examples of intentional and unintentional behavior that you have observed? Have any of these instances involved people of cultures different from your own?

VERBAL AND NONVERBAL MESSAGES

We have already indicated that nonverbal communication is a multidimensional and complex activity. You can observe the truth of that assertion by realizing that nonverbal messages can serve as substitutes for verbal messages. In addition, verbal and nonverbal messages often work in unison. Knapp, Hall, and Horgan emphasize this idea: “We need to understand that separating verbal and nonverbal behavior into two separate and distinct categories is virtually impossible.”⁴ The interfacing of the verbal with the nonverbal is reflected in a number of ways. For example, you often use nonverbal messages to repeat a point you are trying to make verbally. You could place your index finger over your lips while whispering, “Please don’t yell,” to someone who was shouting. You can also observe the reciprocal relationship between words and actions if you tell someone you are pleased with his or her performance while patting him or her on the shoulder.

THE FUNCTIONS OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

As you can tell from the previous few pages, nonverbal communication is both omnipresent and an indispensable constituent of human interaction. This point is demonstrated by the fact that nonverbal messages serve a number of specific functions. Examining a few of those functions will illustrate why any study of intercultural communication must include information about nonverbal behavior.

CONVEYING INTERNAL STATES

As illustrated in our initial story about the college student and the employment interview, consciously and unconsciously, intentionally and unintentionally, people make important judgments about each other through nonverbal symbols. These symbols express attitudes, feelings, values, and emotions. If you see someone with a clenched fist and an inhospitable expression, you do not need words to tell you that the person may not be happy. If you hear someone’s voice quaver and witness their hands tremble, you may infer that the person is fearful or anxious, despite what might be said. If someone smiles as you approach, you feel far more at ease than if they were scowling.

Be it fear, joy, anger, or sadness, your posture, face, and eyes can convey your feelings without you ever uttering a word. For this reason, the interpretations assigned to nonverbal messages influence how one assesses the quality of a relationship. From the amount of touching that takes place, to the tone of voice being used, to the distance between you and your partner, you can gather clues to the closeness of your relationship. The first time you move from holding hands to touching your partner’s face, you are sending a message, and that message takes on added significance if your touch is returned. In short, “people use nonverbal cues to define the social and emotional nature of their relationships and interactions.”⁵

CREATING IDENTITY

Not only do you use nonverbal communication to tell others about what you are thinking and feeling, but you also utilize nonverbal symbols to “tell” yourself and



© Kathleen K. Parker

Be it fear, joy, anger, sadness, or a host of other emotions, your posture, face, and eyes can convey feelings without your uttering a single word.

others who you are. In this sense, nonverbal messages are partially responsible for establishing your identity. From personal experience you know how judgments are often made about another person based on such things as skin color, use of makeup, facial expression, manner of dress, accent, jewelry, and even the nature of the handshake offered. This use of nonverbal symbols to express a person's identity is universal, as observed in the following discussion of tattoos. In New Guinea, a swirl of tattoos on a Tofi woman's face indicates her family lineage. The dark scrawls on a Cambodian monk's chest reflect his religious beliefs. A Los Angeles gang member's sprawling tattoos depict his street affiliation and may even reveal if he has committed murder. Whether the bearer is a Maori chief in New Zealand or a Japanese mafia lord, tattoos express an indelible identity.⁶

REGULATING INTERACTION

Nonverbal actions offer clues regarding how people navigate conversation. In a classroom you might raise your hand to signal that you want to talk. As you approach someone you do not want to visit with, you may look down to indicate your lack of willingness to interact. Conversely, direct eye contact and a smile could send a message that you want to talk with the person who is approaching you. In other situations you could lean forward, point a

CONSIDER THIS

How would you explain the phrase "Nonverbal actions offer clues regarding how people navigate conversation"?

finger, or even pause as a way of altering the conversation. These and other actions can regulate everything from when the conversation can begin, when it is your time to speak, and even when it is time for the interaction to conclude.

SUBSTITUTING FOR WORDS

Another function of nonverbal messages is that they can be used as substitutes for words. For example, there are many occasions when someone who is carrying terrible news will end up signaling sorrow without uttering a sound. A teacher may place an index finger to the lips as an alternative to saying, “Please be quiet.” People often use the hands to beckon someone to come closer or use the same hands to say “good-bye.” In each of these examples, an action is replacing a verbal utterance, and that action becomes the language.

We should point out that while we treated the functions of nonverbal communication as if they were separate or independent elements, they are not. These elements usually work in tandem. Although on some occasions they operate in isolation, “more commonly there is interaction between nonverbal behavior and verbal behavior to produce meaning in the minds of others.”⁷

To help you understand the language of nonverbal communication and its role in intercultural communication, we will (1) suggest some guidelines for studying nonverbal communication, (2) link nonverbal communication to culture, (3) discuss the major classifications of nonverbal messages, and (4) offer some advice on how to better employ nonverbal communication within the intercultural context.

STUDYING NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Because the study of nonverbal communication has become part of “popular culture,” this complex and multifaceted subject is often trivialized. Many “news” programs and talk-shows, for example, frequently employ an “expert” in nonverbal communication to inform viewers of what politicians are “really saying.” This marginalizing often means that nonverbal communication is presented in a disingenuous and frivolous manner. Therefore, we need to pause before pursuing the topic any further and mention some potential problems and misconceptions associated with this area of study.

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IS A MULTICHANNEL ACTIVITY

The above heading alludes to the notion that nonverbal communication usually involves more than one message being sent at a time. For example, you might be talking with a friend while you are holding his or her hand and looking at your friend. Here, three communication activities (talking, touching, eye contact) are going on simultaneously. The problems associated with the multichannel nature of nonverbal communication often show themselves when people focus on one channel and forget the others. For example, your friend might not have direct eye contact with you while you are talking. What is this behavior signifying—if anything? In short, a great

amount of information is exchanged during an interaction, and not being aware of that fact can cause confusion.

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IS OFTEN AMBIGUOUS

We noted the problem of ambiguity earlier when we discussed the intentional and unintentional nature of nonverbal communication. Ambiguity, however, and the problems it creates are worthy of further discussion. Simply stated, nonverbal communication can be ambiguous. The potential for ambiguity increases when the variable of culture is introduced. For example, a lack of eye contact in the dominant U.S. American culture often carries a negative connotation. In China, a reluctance to make eye contact may be seen as a sign of respect. For many Muslim females, eye contact is avoided as a sign of modesty. Ambiguity can also be linked to the context. The ambiguity of setting is seen if someone brushes your leg on an elevator—was it merely an accident or an aggressive sexual act? Our point should be obvious: When you use nonverbal communication, you need to be aware of the ambiguous nature of this form of interaction.

NUMEROUS VARIABLES INFLUENCE NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

The next obstacle in studying nonverbal communication relates to the idea of individual differences and the complex nature of human communication. As noted elsewhere, people are the products not only of their culture, but also of their gender, region, occupation, political affiliation, educational background, and countless other factors that have shaped their perceptions, values, attitudes, beliefs, and nonverbal communication. We are suggesting that nonverbal communication, like much behavior, is produced by a host of variables, and culture is but one of them. Nonverbal interactions are influenced by factors such as “cultural background, socioeconomic background, education, gender, age, personal preferences and idiosyncrasies.”⁸

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE

We have already mentioned that culture is but one of the dynamics that influence the manner in which people send and receive nonverbal messages. However, while granting the assorted causes behind human behavior, we nevertheless advocate that nonverbal communication mirrors the learned behaviors embedded in a culture. As we pointed out in Chapter 2, nonverbal behavior is part of the socialization process and presents the members of each culture with “cultural rules.” These rules “are manifested in norms, values, attitudes, traditions, customs, and heritage and are communicated across generations.”⁹ Rosenblatt links these cultural rules to nonverbal communication, as he writes, “What emotions are felt, how they are expressed, and how they are understood are matters of culture.”¹⁰ Key in Rosenblatt’s sentence is that culture has taught you which nonverbal actions to display (crying or laughing),

REMEMBER THIS

Nonverbal communication is an integrated system. This means that the nonverbal messages you create are not perceived as individual units. Rather, there are usually many messages being sent at the same time.

the meaning of those actions (sadness or happiness), and the contextual backdrop (funeral or wedding). Our thesis should now be clear: *Nonverbal communication is a vital component whenever people of different cultures come together to share ideas, information, and feelings.*

As a student of intercultural communication, learning about the connection between culture and nonverbal behavior will help to improve the manner in which you engage in intercultural interactions. Hall underscores the need to learn about nonverbal behaviors in the following:

I remain convinced that much of our difficulty with people in other countries stems from the fact that so little is known about cross-cultural communication.... Formal training in the language, history, government, and customs is only a first step. Of equal importance is an introduction to the nonverbal language of the country. Most Americans are only dimly aware of this silent language, even though they use it every day.¹¹

By understanding cultural differences in nonverbal behavior you will also be able to gather clues about underlying attitudes and values being expressed by your communication partner. How far people stand from each other during normal conversation can offer clues to their views on privacy. Bowing tells you that a culture values formality, rank, and status. It is not by chance that Hindus greet each other by placing their palms together in front of their chests while tilting their heads slightly downward. This salutation reflects their belief that the deity exists in everyone.

CLASSIFICATIONS OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

MESSAGES OF THE BODY

As we begin our discussion of the classifications of nonverbal communication, you will notice that our analysis of each category starts with the behaviors found in the dominant culture of the United States. We remind you of the integrated nature of these categories. The messages you produce do not take place as individual units. Rather, there are usually many messages being sent. Keeping this notion in mind, most classifications divide nonverbal messages into two comprehensive categories: (1) those that are primarily produced by the body (appearance, movement, facial expressions, eye contact, touch, and paralanguage) and (2) those that the individual combines with the setting (space, time, and silence).

APPEARANCE

In the West, concern for how one looks takes a variety of forms. From hair sprays to hairpieces, from fat-reducing diets to twenty-four-hour fitness centers, from false eyelashes to blue contact lenses, and from cosmetic surgery to tanning salons, people show their concern for how they appear to others. The popularity of tattooing is another good example of how large numbers of people strive to make themselves

more attractive. In the United States, 23 percent of women and 19 percent of men now have tattoos.¹²

The importance of appearance can be seen daily in each of your personal interactions. Whom you approach and whom you avoid, particularly in regard to first impressions, might well determine future interaction or, indeed, if there will be any interaction. Concern with personal appearance is not confined to the West. It can be found in every culture. People from around the globe have been altering the way they appear for thousands of years. As far back as the Upper Paleolithic period (about 40,000 years ago), your ancestors were using bones for necklaces and other body ornaments. From that period to the present, historical and archaeological evidence has shown that people are fixated on their bodies. The alterations to their bodies have helped them “tell” others about who they are and where they belong. They have painted them, fastened objects to them, dressed them, undressed them, and even deformed and mutilated them in attempts to have some control over how they appear.

Judgment of Beauty

An important component of appearance is the perception of beauty. In the West, this fascination with beauty begins early. For example, many department stores and online businesses now offer a complete line of beauty aids to preteens. There are numerous studies that clearly document the advantages and disadvantages of being attractive. And many of these pros and cons surface at an early age. Knapp, Hall, and Horgan cite several studies that conclude that young students who are attractive are more popular and are perceived to be “more intelligent, more socially adept.”¹³ These positive perceptions toward being attractive become more magnified during adulthood. Whom you select to avoid and/or approach is often determined by a person’s attractiveness. Studies reveal, at least in the United States, that attractive individuals are



Tattoos are often used to express identity.

Courtesy of Ed McDaniel

perceived as more persuasive and are hired for sales positions over less attractive individuals.¹⁴

In the United States, people tend to value the appearance of males who are tall and muscular. As for women, they are considered more attractive if they are tall and slender.¹⁵ This view of attractiveness is not the rule in all cultures. For example, in large parts of Africa, plumpness is considered a sign of beauty, health, and wealth, and slimmess is evidence of unhappiness, disease, or mistreatment at the hands of one's husband.¹⁶ Buxom and stout women are also valued in much of Russia. There is even a Russian proverb that states, "One need not worry about fat, only about being hungry." It is not only the perception of the body that is part of a culture's attitude toward beauty. In Myanmar, an extended neck is considered a sign of beauty. Face painting is still common in parts of Africa and South America and among some American Indian tribes. In China, social change has brought about a transformation in how female beauty is viewed. "The tendency to conform to a modest standard of dress is strong only in small cities or rural areas.... In large cities, young people crave individual styles and world-famous brands."¹⁷

Ethnocentrism often heavily influences perceptions of attractiveness. A person usually internalizes the definitions of attractiveness related to the particular culture in which they live. Hence, what is called beauty in one culture may appear repugnant to people of another culture. A case in point is the face painting we just mentioned. Some people might be repulsed by other people painting their faces and bodies, but at the same time, many women in the United States use lipstick, makeup, and other means to change their appearance. For them, the use of makeup is often important but not the use of paint. We also see signs of ethnocentrism appear among males. In Iran, for instance, men are banned from having "decadent Western haircuts."¹⁸

Remland offers an excellent summary of cultural perceptions of beauty and ethnocentrism:

The many exotic rituals we often see in PBS documentaries or in the pages of *National Geographic*, such as neck stretching, lip enlargements, earlobe plugs, teeth filing, and so on, represent the beautifying practices common in many parts of the world. Of course, liposuction, hair implants, facelifts, laser surgery, and the like, while not the least bit extraordinary to many Westerners, may seem abhorrent to people from other parts of the world.¹⁹

Because cultures are always in flux, perceptions of attractiveness are beginning to change as cultures have greater contact with one another. Even today, doctors are reporting an increase in plastic surgeries in places like China, Russia, Korea, and Brazil. In addition, within the United States, plastic surgeons have noticed an increase in the requests for cosmetic surgeries coming from people with a variety of ethnic and international backgrounds.²⁰

Skin Color

Perhaps we should have begun our discussion of appearance with skin color, as it is the first characteristic people notice when they approach a stranger and the one that has the greatest impact on perception and interaction. For centuries and in nearly every culture, the lightest-skinned individuals were perceived to have the greatest social status and power. Even today, within the United States, "skin color is the first racial marker children recognize and can be considered the most salient of phenotypic attributes."²¹ Often, that marker is perceived negatively. Folb stresses how these

harmful perceptions of what she calls “caste markers” are manifested through issues of dominance and social control.²² Skin color “may also be the basis of the allocation of economic and psychological privileges to individuals relative to the degree those privileges are awarded to valued members of the dominant culture.”²³ The “awards” are so large that many advertisers are accused of using “digital manipulation to lighten ethnic models’ skin tone” in their ads.²⁴

The United States is not the only location where members of a culture are judged by their skin tone and seek various means to alter that tone. Because of this skin tone preference, skin bleaching is employed in many parts of the world. Avoiding sunlight to keep their skin light is a common practice among Asian women. U.S. Americans who visit Thailand are often surprised to see women sitting at the beach fully dressed. It is not uncommon to see women in China at the beach sporting face masks and sun-protective gloves.²⁵ They, along with women from Brazil, Jamaica, and India, are even using an assortment of creams and lotions to achieve a lighter tone to their skin. We should point out that women are not the only ones concerned with pale skin tones. In Japan, male-oriented parasols have become popular among younger men who seek to maintain a whiter, paler look.

Attire

As highlighted in this chapter’s opening vignette, clothing goes well beyond protection from the elements. Clothing can be used to tell others about economic status, educational level, social position, current status, occupation, interests, public and private affiliations, and the like. Perhaps most importantly, as Ross points out, “The things that people say, or are forced to say, through their clothing are thus above all statements about an individual’s identity.”²⁶ In the United States you can also observe the link between clothing and individual identity in a variety of ways. Whether it is a military uniform, the sweatshirt that carries a logo of a favorite football team, the black clothing of Goth “adherents,” the specific tilt of a baseball cap, or the attire of the hip-hop co-culture, clothing attempts to tell other people something about your identity. Among gang members, even the color of a bandana or T-shirt is a proclamation of group affiliation. So strong is this nonverbal proclamation that in 2013, a gang member from Los Angeles was sentenced to ninety years in prison for mistakenly killing a fourteen-month-old child. The shooter indicated that he was aiming at the child’s father, as he “believed the father was a member of a rival gang because of the color of his T-shirt.”²⁷ Women also know the language and power of clothing, as they, unlike men, have had to adapt and adjust their attire to the workplace for more than forty years.²⁸

Nowhere is the controversial nature of clothing more apparent than in the various types of scarves, veils, and robes associated with Muslim women. For these women, clothing is much more than apparel to cover the body. As Torrawa points out, garments often reflect important values of Arabs.²⁹ As is the case with so many aspects of culture, there is often a “below the surface” reason for cultural behaviors. This deep structure and its significance in the Arab world are explained by Torrawa: “In all its guises, clothing inscribes ideologies of truth and deception, echoing the words of scripture, and revealing—and unraveling—that honor can only be attained when every robe donned is a robe of honor and every garment a garment of piety.”³⁰

The clothing Torrawa is referring to takes an assortment of forms. The first is called the *hijab*, which basically covers only the head, while the second scarf, known

Clothing can convey a variety of aspects, such as identity, group affiliation, religious preference, and individuality.



© Susan Van Etten/PhotoEdit

as the *alamira*, is a two-piece veil that also includes a scarf. There is also the *niqab*, a more extensive veil that leaves an area open only around the eyes. However, most controversy has been generated by the *burqa*, which consists of a robe covering the entire body and veils over the entire face of the woman. Even the eyes are covered with the exception of a mesh screen that allows the woman to see what is in front of her. These coverings, particularly the ones over the entire face, have been a point of contention in some non-Muslim countries. For the last decade in many European nations, there have been government attempts to ban the veils from being worn in public places.³¹ France took the first step in this debate with the bold action of banning Muslim head scarves and other so-called religious symbols from classrooms.³² Attempts at outlawing the veils have even come to North America, where “Lawmakers in Quebec are pushing a bill that would deny public services—including health care and education—to Muslim women who wear the *niqab*.”³³ And in the United States, the issue of dress for Muslim women has even found its way to a location that in many ways is an icon of the United States—Disneyland. A young woman received an internship to work at Disneyland without having to be interviewed for the position. When she appeared for her first day of employment, she was wearing a *hijab*. She was told to remove the *hijab*. She refused and was relegated to a room at Disneyland where she had no contact with park visitors. The woman took legal action against Disneyland.

Muslim men, like the women, have attire that differs from that seen in the West. And like the attire of women, there is often a link between religion and dress. The traditional apparel for men in Arabic nations would “include a long loose robe called a *dishdasha* or *thobe* and a headpiece, a white cloth *kaffiya* banded by a black *egal* to secure it.”³⁴ The subtlety of color in garments “tells others” about an individual’s status and affiliation. An all-white *kaffiya* means that the person wearing the headpiece has not yet made the pilgrimage to Mecca.

REMEMBER THIS

Attire is often used to establish one’s cultural identity.

The link between cultural values and clothing can be seen in nearly every culture. For example, as a symbolic gesture of their faith, the Amish dress in clothing that demonstrates humility and severance from the dominant culture. Both males and females wear clothing that is simple, unadorned, and predominantly dark in color. You can also observe the relationship of values and attire in German culture, where status and authority are significant. Hall and Hall write,

Correct behavior is symbolized by appropriate and very conservative dress. The male business uniform is a freshly pressed dark suit and tie with a plain shirt and dark shoes and socks. It is important to emulate this conservative approach to both manners and dress. Personal appearance, like the exterior appearance of their homes, is very important to Germans.³⁵

You can witness that same tie between cultural values and clothing among Filipinos. Gochenour tells us, “Values relating to status and authority are the root of the Filipino’s need to dress correctly.”³⁶ Japan is another culture that merges attire and the culture’s value system: “The general proclivity for conservative dress styles and colors emphasizes the nation’s collectivism and, concomitantly, lessens the potential for social disharmony arising from nonconformist attire.”³⁷ This desire for social harmony can even be seen in the white coats that are part of a physician’s attire in Japan. A recent study revealed not only that patients preferred the white garments, but also that “wearing a white coat could favorably influence patients’ confidence in the relationship with their physician in all types of practices.”³⁸

Throughout this segment on attire, we have attempted to demonstrate how clothing represents a series of messages used by individuals and their cultures. Adamo summarizes this important set of messages in the following: “Dress is a symbolic language. It is one of the many ways in which people create and exchange meanings in communication. It helps to separate group members from non-members and to place the individual in a social organization.”³⁹

We offer a final admonition to conclude this particular section. Whether it be the women of Guatemala wearing their colorful tunics (*huipiles*) or African men in white *dashikis*, traditional garments are still common in many cultures. Whether they are Sikhs in white turbans, women in Iran wearing their *hijabs*, Japanese in kimonos, Hasidic Jews in black yarmulkes, or the dark attire of the Amish in the United States, you need to learn to be tolerant of others’ external differences and not let them impede communication.

BODY MOVEMENT

We remind you that a major thesis of this chapter is that communication involves much more than words. As Benjamin Franklin noted, “None preaches better than the ant, and she says nothing.” Imai underscores this point in a little more detail: “The world is a giddy montage of vivid gestures—traffic police, street vendors, expressway drivers, teachers, children on playgrounds, athletes with their exuberant hugging, clenched fists and ‘high fives.’ People all over the world use their hands, heads, and bodies to communicate expressively.”⁴⁰

The study of how movement communicates is called *kinesics*, which are those visible body shifts and movements that can send both intentional and unintentional messages. For example, your attitude toward the other person can be shown by

leaning forward to “communicate” that you are comfortable with him or her. Something as simple as walking can also send messages. Americans, particularly males, tend to walk in a manner that is distinct from most other cultures. Stevenson highlights this distinguishing gait thusly: “We walk big—swinging arms, letting our legs amble wide—in a manner that’s fitting for folks from a country with plenty of empty space. Citizens of densely populated Europe exhibit a far more compact posture, with elbows and knees tucked tight and arm swings restrained.”⁴¹

In attempting to understand the influence of body movement, a few points need clarification. First, in most instances, the messages the body generates operate in combination with other messages in somewhat instantaneous fashion. People may greet a friend by smiling, saying “hello,” and even hugging all at the same time.

Richmond, McCroskey, and Hickson summarize this “multidimensional” notion of kinesics in the following:

Researchers have studied these motions from many perspectives, but most nonverbal scholars today agree that it is virtually meaningless, and probably inappropriate, to study kinesic behaviors apart from their contexts. It is rare that a particular body movement symbolizes a specific message outside the restrictive environs of the context or culture where it occurs.⁴²

Second, it is often difficult to control kinesic behavior. In most instances, you have at least a fraction of a second to think about what you are going to say, but a great deal of body action is spontaneous and linked to the moment. If you are hiking with friends and without any warning, see a rattlesnake at your feet, your movements are certainly not calculated but instead are controlled by adrenalin. Finally, there are thousands of distinct physical signs that a person can make. Therefore, any attempt at cataloging them would be both frustrating and fruitless. Our basic purpose is to point out that although all people use movements to communicate, culture teaches them how to use and interpret the movements. In the upcoming sections, we look at a few cultural differences in a person’s (1) posture and (2) movements (gestures) that convey ideas and feelings.

Body movements can transmit both intentional and unintentional messages.



© Kathleen K. Parker

Posture

A person's posture can send a multiplicity of messages. Posture can be a sign of whether people are paying attention, the level of status in the encounter, if people are friends or strangers, if they like or dislike each other, and it can provide a variety of other information about the relationship. One study revealed “that body posture may be as important as the face in communicating emotions such as fear.”⁴³ Think for a moment of all the meanings associated with slouching, being stiff, slumping over, crouching, kneeling, pulling back one's shoulders, twitching one's legs, putting one's hands in pockets, bowing, and the like.

On an intercultural level, posture can offer insight into a culture's value system, as President Obama discovered a few years ago when he visited Japan and engaged in a polite bow in front of Japan's Emperor Akihito. The arguments surrounding this seemingly innocuous nonverbal action created a firestorm of media attention. *Newsweek* magazine summarized the positions on both sides of the argument in the following two sentences: “The President was pilloried last week for his deep bow to Japan's Emperor Akihito during a visit to Tokyo. Was he groveling before a foreign leader—or just being polite?”⁴⁴ For many, Obama was engaging in an act of subservience. To the Japanese, the bow (*ojigi*) is not a sign of capitulation but rather mirrors their value of status and respect.⁴⁵ Actually, the Japanese have a wide range of uses for the bow. It can be a nonverbal way of expressing “thank you,” a greeting, an apology, a congratulatory gesture, or a simple means of acknowledging another person.

To outsiders, the act of bowing appears simple. The actual Japanese ritual is rather complicated. For example, the person who occupies the lower station begins the bow, and his or her bow must be deeper than the other person's. The superior, on the other hand, determines when the bowing is to end. When the participants are of equal rank, they begin the bow in the same manner and end at the same time. In fact, there are so many nuances to the act of bowing in Japan that young children begin to learn about this nonverbal behavior at a very early age. Many large companies even hold classes in correct bowing protocol for their employees.

Thai people use a bow that is similar to the one employed by the Japanese. This movement (called the *wai*) is made by pressing both palms together in front of one's body, with the fingertips reaching to about neck level. Although the basic value behind the bow is to demonstrate respect, it is also used to communicate “thank you.” Many Buddhists will also keep the hands in the *wai* position while listening to a Dharma talk (Buddhist teaching).

Another nonverbal greeting pattern linked to religion is used in the Indian culture, where *namaste* is spoken while making a slight bow and bringing both hands together in front of the heart. This practice of greeting someone reflects the Hindu belief that God is in everything—including other people. Hence, all human beings, along with all the gods of Hinduism, are to be honored and respected. Hindus will even bow before eating as a way of bestowing thanks for yet another one of God's gifts.

As eccentric as it sounds, the way people sit is often a reflection of important cultural characteristics. In the United States, being casual and friendly is valued, and people often demonstrate this through their manner of sitting. For males, it is usually a casual sitting position that might include slouching and leaning back. American males often, consciously or unconsciously, sit with their feet up on their desk as a sign of being relaxed. In many countries, such as Germany, Sweden, and Taiwan,

where lifestyles tend to be more formal, slouching is considered a sign of rudeness and poor manners. In fact, “German children are still taught to sit and stand up straight, which is a sign of good character. Slouching is seen as a sign of a poor upbringing.”⁴⁶ Even the manner in which you position your legs while sitting has cultural overtones. For example, in Turkey, it is a sign of rudeness to sit with your legs crossed. Remland offers further instances of the crossing of legs when he notes, “An innocent act of ankle-to-knee leg crossing, typical of most American males, could be mistaken for an insult (a showing of the sole of the foot gesture) in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Singapore, or Thailand.”⁴⁷ People in Thailand also attribute distinct significance to the soles of the feet. For them, the feet are the lowest part of the body, and they should never be pointed in the direction of another person.⁴⁸

In the United States, co-cultural differences exist in how people perceive and utilize posture and movement during interaction. The walk assumed by many young African American males illustrates this characteristic. “The general form of the walk is slow and casual with the head elevated and tipped to one side, one arm swinging and the other held limply.”⁴⁹ The walk is often used to “show the dominant culture that you are strong and proud, despite your status in American society.”⁵⁰

Gestures

Consider all of the messages that can be sent by waving, placing hands on hips, folding the arms, scratching the head, biting fingernails, pointing, making a fist, shaking a finger, etc. Gestures are a nonverbal “vocabulary” that people use, both intentionally and unintentionally, to share their internal states. Reflect for a moment on “signing” as a major form of communication utilized by the deaf co-culture in the United States. Here, you can observe a rich and extensive vocabulary composed almost exclusively of gestures. Crew members on the deck of an aircraft carrier do most of their talking via hand gestures. Another example of the power of gestures can be found in the hand signals used by motorcycle and ethnic gangs. The slightest variation in performing a certain gesture can be the catalyst for a violent confrontation. An inability to “read” the meaning of a gesture, particularly in an intercultural communication setting, has the potential for confusion and awkwardness. You can witness some of the uncertainty of intercultural gestures in the following examples:

- The “thumbs-up” gesture in the United States has positive connotations because it indicates that “everything is okay” or “you are doing very well.” However, in Australia, Bangladesh, Iran, and Nigeria, it is seen as a rude gesture. And in Turkey, it actually represents a political party.
- In the United States, pointing at someone usually does not carry negative connotations. In fact, directions are often given by pointing in one direction or another with the index finger. Germans point with the little finger, while in Japan pointing is done with the entire hand with the palm held upward. In China, pointing can be taken as a sign of rudeness. In much of the Arab world, pointing is thought to be an offensive gesture. And in much of Asia, pointing the index finger at a person is considered rude.
- In the United States, “making a circle with one’s thumb and index finger while extending the others is emblematic of the word ‘okay’; in Japan (and Korea) it traditionally signified ‘money’⁵¹ (*okane*); and among Arabs this gesture is usually accompanied by a baring of teeth, signifying extreme hostility.”⁵² To a Tunisian,

the gesture means, “I’ll kill you.” In some Latino cultures, the circle with the thumb and index finger is often perceived as an obscene gesture.

- In Mexico, when asking someone to wait for “just a minute, please” (*un momento, por favor*), the speaker also makes a fist and then extends the thumb and index finger so that they form a sideways “U,” as though measuring a short span of time.
- Greeks express “yes” with a nod similar to the one used in the United States, but when communicating “no,” they jerk their heads back and raise their faces. Lifting one or both hands up to the shoulders strongly emphasizes the “no.”
- In Chile, to “say” that someone is unintelligent or dense, one holds the palm upward with the fingers spread.

We could present more examples, as there are thousands of gestures prevalent in every culture. But instead of offering a protracted catalog of gestures from all over the world, we will include just a few examples to demonstrate how gestures and culture are linked. We remind you of the mutually dependent nature of all nonverbal actions. As applied to gestures, the thin line between gestures and all the messages a person generates cannot be clearly drawn. Hence, we agree with Ekman and Friesen’s view of nonverbal communication when they speak of a “comprehensive approach.”⁵³ For them, studying nonverbal gestures in isolation provides “an incomplete picture of what is occurring.” With this qualification behind us, we propose to examine (1) idiosyncratic gestures, (2) beckoning, and (3) the frequency and intensity associated with gestures.

CONSIDER THIS

Consider that you have met someone who has recently arrived in the United States and they ask your help in deciding what certain gestures mean. What would you tell them about the meaning for the following gestures used in the United States?

- Fingers crossed
- Thumbs up
- Thumbs down
- Making a round ring (O) with the thumb and index finger
- Pointing directly at someone

Idiosyncratic Gestures. As already indicated, there are limitless idiosyncratic gestures found in each culture. These are the distinctive gestures whose meanings are usually the feature and property of a particular culture. Even gesturing with the same specific part of the body can differ from culture to culture. For example, in Nepal, pulling both earlobes is a form of apology for offending someone. Yet pulling one earlobe in China means a person is “saying” that he or she touched something that was very hot.⁵⁴ The Japanese also have a gesture whose actual movement is not unique to that culture, yet the meaning is exclusive to that culture. The gesture is made by pointing both index fingers above the head, at the top of the ears, as if they were the horns of an ogre. The gesture means the man’s wife is angry.⁵⁵ In China, if you place your right hand over your heart, it means you are making a sincere promise. In Iraq, the same gesture can mean “thank you.” For the French, pulling the skin down below the right eye can mean, “I don’t believe you.” In Argentina, one twists an imaginary mustache to signify that everything is “okay.”

Meanings for gestures with sexual connotations may also be exclusive to a specific culture. In the United States, someone might use the middle finger to send an insulting, obscene gesture. This sexual insult gesture is not universal. For the Japanese, the

thumb protruding out between the index finger and the middle finger is a sexual sign with a variety of interpretations. This same gesture is the letter “T” in American Sign Language (ASL).⁵⁶

Beckoning Gestures. The sign used for beckoning is also attached to culture. In the United States, when a person wants to signal a friend to come, he or she usually makes the gesture with one hand, palm up, fingers more or less together, and moving toward the body. In much of Latin America, this gesture takes on romantic connotations. And in the Philippines, that same gesture is often used to call one’s dog. Chinese and Koreans signal someone to come by cupping “the hand with the palm down and drawing the fingers toward the palm.”⁵⁷ Vietnamese use this same beckoning sign. When Americans see this gesture, many often think the other person is waving good-bye. In Germany and much of Scandinavia, tossing the head back constitutes a beckoning motion. For many Arabs, holding the right hand out, palm upward, and opening and closing the hand is nonverbally asking someone to “come here.”⁵⁸ And to beckon someone in Spain, you stretch your arm out, palm downward, and make a scratching motion toward your body with your fingers.

Frequency and Intensity of Gestures. There are also cultural differences that regulate the frequency and intensity of gestures. Italians, Africans, and people from the Middle East are more outwardly expressive and utilize gestures with greater frequency and intensity than do Japanese, Chinese, and Scandinavians. Writing about Brazilian culture, Novinger notes, “Brazilians say that if you tie their hands they cannot speak. They use hand gestures and broad arm gestures as they talk.”⁵⁹ The use of gestures to promote meaning is also common among Arab men. Here you can see large gestures that seem to go along with almost every word.⁶⁰ Members of many Asian cultures perceive such outward activity quite differently, often equating vigorous action with a lack of manners and personal restraint.⁶¹ Germans are also made uncomfortable by bold hand gestures. Ruch offers the following advice to American executives who work with German corporations: “Hands should be used with calculated dignity. They should never serve as lively instruments to emphasize points in conversation. The entire game plan is to appear calm under pressure.”⁶² Germans are not alone in their aversion to large and ostentatious gestures. Canadians and other people with British lineage usually do not employ extensive gesturing.

Facial Expressions

The early Greek playwrights, Beijing Opera performers, and the Noh actors of Japan were keenly aware of the shifts in mood and meaning that facial expressions convey. Each form of drama uses masks or an abundance of makeup to demonstrate differences in each actor’s character and expression. Whether it is the Mexican adage that “One’s face is the mirror of one’s soul” or the Yiddish proverb that “The face tells the secret,” people everywhere have always been captivated by the face. What is intriguing is that we are talking about three faces. First, there is your assigned face, the one you are born with. Although it is altered by age, health, and even cosmetics and surgery, this is your “basic” face. Second is the face that can be manipulated at will, often called the voluntary face. Here is where you can deliberately hide or reveal your true feeling regarding the person and/or situation you are confronting. You can signal your happiness and put on a broad smile when your best friend is approaching. Alternatively, you can hide your true feelings and smile when you dislike having to talk

with yet another person. In short, this second face is the one you control. Finally, you have the face that is changed by your surroundings and the messages you receive, such as when you involuntarily blush after receiving a compliment.

Among scholars, the importance of facial expressions is well established. Richmond, McCroskey, and Hickson summarize this importance when they write, “Experience and research have helped us to understand that the human face is a primary tool used for transmitting emotional expressions.”⁶³ The role of culture in those expressions has been a matter of debate for a great many years. The dispute is rooted in a nature–nurture controversy that goes back to the work of Charles Darwin. Although much of the debate deals with facial expressions, the arguments reach into all dimensions of nonverbal communication. Here lies the question: Is there a universal language of facial expressions? Darwin posited, and researchers such as Eibl-Eibesfeldt uphold, that “some primary facial expressions are inherently linked with moods and feelings” and have their origin in our evolutionary past and are universal.⁶⁴ Ekman, a principal proponent of this view, asserts that, “The subtle creases of a grimace tell the same story around the world, to preliterate New Guinea tribesmen, to Japanese and American college students alike.”⁶⁵ Further, Ekman and others affirm that there is “a basic set of least six facial expressions that are innate, universal, and carry the same basic meaning throughout the world.”⁶⁶ The six pan-cultural and universal emotions conveyed by facial expressions are happiness, sadness, fear, anger, disgust, and surprise. However, despite the biologically based nature of facial expressions, there seem to be clear cultural expectations and norms that often dictate when, where, how, and to whom facial expressions are displayed.⁶⁷

Different cultures create their own rules for what are appropriate facial expressions and how those expressions are to be interpreted. While granting the assorted causes behind human behavior, we advocate that nonverbal communication mirrors the learned behaviors embedded in a culture. Richmond, McCroskey, and Hickson offer a summary of how these acquired behaviors grow out of the cultural factors:

1. Cultures differ concerning circumstances that elicit emotions.
2. Cultures differ about the consequences that follow certain emotional expressions.
3. Different cultures have different display rules that govern the use of facial behavior, which their members must learn.⁶⁸

Each culture “teaches” its members what nonverbal actions to exhibit (crying or laughing), the meaning of those actions (sadness or happiness), and the contextual setting of those actions (funeral or wedding).

Because the face is often the first part of the body observed when you meet someone, usually it is given greater weight than are vocal messages.⁶⁹ Think for a moment about what is being implied about the power of the face with phrases such as “face-to-face” meeting or “losing face.” People usually send messages, consciously or unconsciously, that predict a course of action, help define power relationships, or reflect a level of interest and the degree of involvement regarding the specific encounter.

A few years ago, the world was treated to a vivid example of how facial expressions impact intercultural communication. A group of executives from the Toyota automobile company appeared before a congressional panel in the United States to explain the problems associated with the recall of over 6 million Toyota vehicles. The executives’ presentation before the panel was criticized by members of the congressional

committee and the news media. They believed that the Toyota spokespersons failed “to show adequate remorse for those who had been killed in accidents involving acceleration problems.”⁷⁰ At the core of these negative reactions was the perception that the Toyota representatives failed to outwardly display any signs of emotion. What the critics failed to realize is that many Asian cultures control and suppress facial expressions. For example, it is not uncommon for Japanese, Chinese, and Koreans to show restraint even when experiencing intense feelings (anger, irritation, sadness, and love or happiness). Although the “rule” in many Asian cultures calls for a degree of control and restraint with regard to outwardly displaying emotions, in some cultures, such as those of the Mediterranean, facial expressions are animated and exaggerated.⁷¹ It is not uncommon in this region of the world to see men crying in public.

We now move to yet another facial expression: the smile. While the smile is a universal act and everyone is born knowing how to smile, it is also influenced by culture. The stimulus that produces the smile—and even what the smile is communicating—often shifts from culture to culture. In North America, a smile usually sends a positive message and is often used as a greeting. The individual who is smiling is typically perceived as happy or amused. However, as just noted, culture can “influence smiling both by determining the interpretation of events, which affects the cause of happiness, and by shaping display rules, which determine when it is socially appropriate to smile.”⁷²

A few examples will illustrate the role culture plays in the use and interpretation of a smile. Like North Americans, Thais are another people noted for their use of the smile. In fact, Thailand has been called the “Land of Smiles,” and so common is the smile that to an outsider, it seems to be the response to just about any situation. Therefore, people from other cultures find it difficult to “read” the Thai smile, as it can be used to display sadness, joy, embarrassment, fright, anxiety, and numerous other emotions. Vietnamese also make use of the smile to represent phrases such as “Hello,” “Thank you,” and “I am sorry.” In Japan you can observe another culture where there are many meanings associated with smiling. According to Nishiyama, “the Japanese may smile when they feel embarrassed and laugh when they want to hide their anger.”⁷³ Smiling is also used to denote acceptance of a command from a person of higher status.

There are many cultures where smiling is not a common or widely accepted nonverbal action. In Korean culture too much smiling is often perceived as a sign of shallowness. Dresser notes that the “lack of smiling by Koreans has often been misinterpreted as a sign of hostility.”⁷⁴ Russians also suffer from the same misunderstanding regarding their limited use of smiling. Russians are not exhibiting rudeness or impoliteness by not smiling, but rather they are reflecting that culture’s “rules” regarding when and to whom to smile. They are also distrustful of people who smile at what they believe are inappropriate occasions. The same restrained attitude toward smiling exists in Germany, where a smile “is used with far more discretion, generally only with those persons one knows and really likes.”⁷⁵

Eye Contact and Gaze

Making eye contact is one of the earliest and most powerful modes of communication used by human beings and other primates. After touch, a newborn infant’s first “contact” with the world is through the eyes. Eyes have always been a topic of fascination. You can witness the potential communication component of eye contact when

professional poker players seek to hide behind their dark glasses or a hooded sweat-shirt during a tournament. The impact of eye contact on communication is also manifest in the countless literary and musical allusions to eyes made over hundreds of years. Emerson wrote, “An eye can threaten like a loaded and leveled gun or can insult like hissing and kicking.” Shakespeare also knew the communicative potency of the eyes when he wrote, “Thou tell’st me there is murder in mine eye.” Bob Dylan underscored the same power in his lyrics: “Your eyes said more to me that night than your lips would ever say.” Even the concept of “the evil eye” has been present in nearly every culture for centuries. The notion of an evil eye means being able to send another person a thought (transmitted through the eyes) that can cause damage in a host of ways. By some estimates there are approximately seventy cultures covering nearly every part of the world that believe in the influence of the evil eye.⁷⁶ For example, Nydell points out that “Belief in the evil eye (often just called ‘the eye’) is common, and it is feared or acknowledged to some extent by most Arabs.”⁷⁷ Convictions regarding the power of the evil eye (*mal de ojo*) are also seen in Mexico and Puerto Rico, where “Mothers may isolate their children for fear of having one become a victim of *mal de ojo*.”⁷⁸

Eye contact and gaze are essential to the study of human communication for a number of reasons. First, eyes can give clues to the nature of the relationship, indicate if the channels of communication are open or closed, assist in monitoring feedback, indicate degrees of attentiveness and interest in the interaction, regulate the flow of the conversation, reflect positive or negative emotions, and help define power and status relationships between the participants.⁷⁹

Second, eyes are significant to the communication process because of the abundance of messages they can send. We have all heard some of the following words used to describe a person’s eyes: “direct,” “sensual,” “sardonic,” “cruel,” “expressive,” “intelligent,” “penetrating,” “sad,” “cheerful,” “worldly,” “hard,” “trusting,” and “suspicious.” Finally, and most importantly for our purposes, much of eye contact is directly related to culture. On both a conscious and an unconscious level, you have “learned” the significance of eye contact and the “rules” for employing (or not employing) eye contact. These rules become quite evident when people are in an elevator with strangers. Also, reflect on the discomfort felt when someone stares at you for a long period of time.

Before offering some comparisons that demonstrate culture’s influence, we shall briefly discuss how eye contact is used by the dominant culture in the United States. As Triandis notes, looking another person directly in the eye is very common in the United States.⁸⁰ Not only is it common, but this interpersonal act is highly valued by members of the dominant culture. It is expected in most interpersonal exchanges and perceived as an indication of good manners. The implication is that if you fail to use direct eye contact, you risk being perceived as showing a lack of interest, trying to hide something, or being deceitful.

What is normal in the United States may be unacceptable in other cultures. In Japan, prolonged eye contact is often considered discourteous and disrespectful. It is not uncommon for Japanese to look down or away or even close their eyes while engaging in conversation. You can appreciate the problems that might arise if

REMEMBER THIS

Avoidance of eye contact and/or prolonged eye gazing varies from culture to culture.

Americans are not aware of the Japanese use of eye contact. U.S. Americans who are culturally uninformed often assume that Japanese eye contact (or lack of it) is an indication that their Japanese partner disagrees with what is being said or is disinterested.

Koreans also have a view of eye contact that differs from that held by most Americans. Richmond, McCroskey, and Hickson offer an excellent summary of how this culture employs eye contact:

some cultures, such as the Korean, place much more emphasis on the observance of the eyes than do others. That is, Koreans are highly aware of eye behavior because it is believed that real answers to questions they ask may be found there, even though the other's words say something else.⁸¹

Dresser offers further information about culture when she notes that “People from many Asian, Latino, and Caribbean cultures also avoid eye contact as a sign of respect.”⁸² This same orientation toward eye contact is found in many parts of Africa, where “Making eye contact when communicating with a person who is older or of higher status is considered a sign of disrespect or even aggression.”⁸³ There is even a Zulu saying: “The eye is an organ of aggression.” India and Egypt provide two additional examples of eye contact mirroring a cultural value. In India, the amount of eye contact that is employed is often related to a person's social position. This, of course, means that people of different socioeconomic classes often avoid eye contact with each other. In Egypt, where the issue is not social status but gender, “Women and men who are strangers may avoid eye contact out of modesty and respect for religious rules.”⁸⁴ We should point out, at least as it applies to gender and globalization, that the use of eye contact involving women is changing as women all over the world join the workforce.

The avoidance of eye contact is not the case among Arabs, who use very direct eye contact between same-sex communicators. This contact not only is direct, but also extends over a long period of time. For “outsiders,” this directness often appears as a form of staring. Yet for Arab males, this visual intensity is employed so that they can infer the “truthfulness” of the other person's words.⁸⁵ Notice how the words “same-sex” were used in our reference to Arab eye contact. The reason is that where gender segregation is the custom, direct eye contact between men and women is often avoided. Germans also engage in very direct eye contact. The direct gaze is also part of Russian culture. As Morrison and Conaway note, “Do not be surprised if Russians stare at you.”⁸⁶

In the United States the prolonged stare is frequently part of the nonverbal code used in the gay male co-culture. When directed toward a member of the same sex, an extended stare, like certain other nonverbal messages, is often perceived as a signal of interest and sexual suggestion.⁸⁷ A few other differences in the use of eye contact in the United States are worth noting. Eye contact (or a lack of it) can create misunderstandings between African Americans and members of the dominant culture. The reason is simple: African Americans often do not find it necessary to engage in direct eye contact at all times during a conversation. This same uncomfortable feeling toward direct and prolonged eye contact can be found among Mexican Americans,

standings between African Americans and members of the dominant culture. The reason is simple: African Americans often do not find it necessary to engage in direct eye contact at all times during a conversation. This same uncomfortable feeling toward direct and prolonged eye contact can be found among Mexican Americans,

CONSIDER THIS

Can you recall how you learned the nonverbal communication “rules” for greeting a stranger, a mate, a professor, a best friend, or your grandparents?

who “consider sustained eye contact when speaking directly to someone as rude. Direct eye contact with superiors may be interpreted as insolence. Avoiding direct eye contact with superiors is a sign of respect.”⁸⁸

Eye contact is an important consideration when communicating with members of the deaf community who are employing ASL. Among members of the deaf co-culture who are “signing,” there is a belief that eye contact is an especially important part of their communication process.⁸⁹ Turning your back to people who are “signing” is essentially the same as ignoring them. So delicate is the use of eye contact that you seldom realize the modifications you make when communicating. For example, the next time you are speaking with a disabled person, perhaps someone in a wheelchair, notice how little eye contact you have in comparison with someone who is not disabled. This practice is all too common and, unfortunately, may be interpreted as a lack of interest and concern.

Touch

Touch as a form of communication can be as effortless and rewarding as holding your partner’s hand or as powerful and frightening as being touched in a sexual manner by a stranger. The meanings you assign to being touched and your reasons for touching others offer insights into the communication encounter. This is vividly illustrated by the character Holden Caulfield in the American classic *The Catcher in the Rye*:

I held hands with her all the time. This doesn’t sound like much, but she was terrific to hold hands with. Most girls, if you hold hands with them, their goddam hand *dies* on you, or else they think they have to keep *moving* their hand all the time, as if they were afraid they’d bore you or something.⁹⁰

Touch is often considered the most fundamental and primitive of all the senses. It is our first form of “language” and point of contact with others. It is not until after birth that infants utilize all their senses as a means of defining the reality that confronts them. During this early period, they are highly involved in tactile experiences with other people. They are being held, nuzzled, cuddled, getting cleaned, patted, kissed, and in many cases breast-fed. As you move from infancy into childhood, you learn the rules of touching. You are taught whom to touch and where they may be touched. By the time you reach adolescence, your culture has taught you the “rules” of touch behavior. You have learned about shaking hands by employing various types of handshakes—firm, gentle, etc. You have even become skilled at knowing whom to hug and the intensity and location of contact associated with the person you are hugging (parent, friend, lover). Culture has also “taught you” what occasions (greeting, expression of affection, etc.) call for a hug. Because of all the contextual and relational variables involved with touching, you have also been “informed” about sexual harassment and what constitutes inappropriate touching. In spite of the complexities that are often associated with touching, it is generally believed that in the dominant U.S. culture, there are six basic types of touching:

1. Accidental touching is when someone inadvertently bumps into you.
2. Professional touching is carried out by individuals such as doctors, nurses, hairdressers, or even a swimming coach moving the arms of a pupil.

3. Social politeness touching is associated with greeting and showing appreciation. These contacts can range from a handshake to a respectful pat on the back.
4. Friendship touches demonstrate concern and caring between family members and close friends. In this type of touching, you might see actions ranging from an extended embrace to an arm placed on a shoulder.
5. Love-intimacy touches are those touches that usually occur in romantic relationships (caressing, hugging, embracing, kissing, and the like).
6. Sexual touch, the most intimate type, is used for sexual arousal.⁹¹

As is the case with all the topics in this book, each culture has “directives” aimed at its members concerning how to use touch as a means of communication. That is, each culture “instructs” its members as to who can touch whom, on what parts of the body, and under what situations. So prescriptive are these “cultural definitions” regarding touch that in the United Arab Emirates, a British couple was sentenced to one month in prison for kissing in public. You may recall the disturbance created in Great Britain when First Lady Michelle Obama was introduced to Queen Elizabeth and touched the queen as part of her greeting. Shaking hands and even hugging dignitaries is common in the United States; it is taboo in Great Britain.

One of the best settings to observe cultural variations in touch behavior is in international departure situations. Drawing from a study involving these at an international airport, Andersen offers the following observations:

A family leaving for Tonga formed a circle, wove their arms around each other's back, and prayed and chanted together. A tearful man returning to Bosnia repeatedly tried to leave his sobbing wife; each time he turned back to her, they would grip each other by the fingertips and exchange a passionate, tearful kiss and a powerful embrace. Two Korean couples departed without any touch, despite the prolonged separation that lay ahead of them.⁹²

Let us supplement Andersen's list and examine a few other cultural examples. We begin with Arabs, a group of people who frequently employ touching behavior as part of their communication style. In fact, it is not uncommon to see men in such places as Saudi Arabia holding hands while walking. Men will often kiss each other on the cheek in many Arab countries. This type of contact as a greeting has led Feghali to note that “Touching in Arab societies ‘replaces’ the bowing and handshaking rituals of other societies.”⁹³ Because of religious and social traditions, Arab Muslims eat and engage in other activities with the right hand but do not greet (touch) with the left hand because this is a social insult. The left hand is used to perform basic biological functions. Muslim women seldom touch or are touched by individuals outside of their family. Men also have “rules” about being touched by women. An athlete from Iran refused to shake hands with Duchess Kate Middleton after winning a medal in the 2012 Paralympic Games. It seems that Iranian culture bans men from shaking hands with unrelated women.

In South America and Mexico, touch is routine. Brazilians may even continue to “touch you intermittently on the arm, hand, or shoulder during much of the conversation.”⁹⁴ In Mexico a physical embrace, called an *abrazo*, is common among both males and females. “Hugs, pats on backs, and other physical contact are an important part of communication in Mexico.”⁹⁵ A high frequency of touching is also prevalent among the people of Eastern Europe, Spain, Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Israel.⁹⁶

Touch is less frequent among Germans and Finns.⁹⁷ Intentional touching is also not a prevalent form of communication in Asia.⁹⁸ For example, in Japanese business practices, “Touching fellow workers and associates is not common.”⁹⁹ Even the simple act of kissing has cultural overtones. Although mouth-to-mouth kissing is sexual in Western cultures, it is not widespread in many parts of Asia. In fact, the Japanese have for centuries rhapsodized about the appeal of the nape of the neck as an erotic zone. Having no word for “kiss” in their language, the Japanese borrowed the English word, and *kissu* is now used. In some cultures, touch can have a religious meaning. For instance, “Many Southeast Asians believe that touching their heads places them in jeopardy because that is where their spirits reside.”¹⁰⁰

Gender differences also occur in the use of touch as a form of communication. Women, for example, tend to welcome touch more than do men, especially when it is from the same sex. They initiate touch behavior more than men.¹⁰¹ As noted earlier, gender differences as they apply to touch, particularly in the workplace, have become the source of many sexual harassment cases. A male colleague who strokes a female coworker on the arm or even pats her on the back might be perceived as engaging in sexual or condescending behavior. Hence, you need to remember that touching is contextual and often carries multiple meanings. While being greeted with a hug at a party with friends might seem appropriate, that same contact may be highly inappropriate in the workplace, especially between supervisors and subordinates.

Co-cultures within the United States often employ touch in ways unique to their members. African Americans “give skin” and “get skin” when greeting each other, but they do not normally use “skinning” (touching) when greeting white people unless they are close friends.

As we have noted throughout this book, cultural norms and “rules” are subject to change. One of those changes applies to touch behavior among young people throughout the world. This is especially true in the United States. Growing weary of the handshake, the high-five, and fist bump, some are greeting each other with hugs. Kershaw writes, “Girls embracing girls, girls embracing boys, boys embracing each other—the hug has become the favorite social greeting when teenagers meet or part these days.”¹⁰²

Scents

The Russian writer/historian Solzhenitsyn was reminding us of the role of scent in human interaction when he wrote, “We are all human, and our senses are quicker to prompt us than our reason. Every man gives off a scent and the scent tells you how to act before your head does.” Although you receive most of your messages from the outside world through vision and hearing, the sense of smell can also be a conduit for meaning. From the burning of incense in India, to the aroma of flowers and herbs used in China for medicinal purposes, to people using aromatherapy to cure certain illnesses, cultures have been using odor in a variety of ways. In fact, the following paragraph by Low underlines some of the ways:

Whether we like it or not, we remain as odouriferous beings despite all of our cleaning regimes, and these odours play important roles in virtually every realm of our everyday life social experiences, running the gamut from gustatory consumption, personal hygiene, the home, the city, to class, gender and racial dimension of social life.¹⁰³

Speaking more directly about the role of smell in human communication, Richmond, McCroskey, and Hickson tell us, “The air around us is filled with scents that express a variety of messages to us. Scents can communicate memories, fear, love, dominance, and excitement—and may even arouse powerful feelings about another person.”¹⁰⁴ The importance of scent, at least in the United States, can be seen in the fact that “Each year American men and women spend millions of dollars on deodorants, soaps, mouthwashes, breath mints, perfumes, aftershave lotions, and other products to add to or cover up natural body scents.”¹⁰⁵ What makes scent part of the communication experience is that people attach meaning to how we smell. According to Howes, we even “Establish group identity through some odor, whether natural, manufactured, symbolic, or some combination of these.”¹⁰⁶ A number of elements affect the meaning we give to a smell: (1) *the strength of the smell in relation to competing fragrances and odors* (French perfume vs. an inexpensive aftershave lotion), (2) *smell’s distance from the other person*, (3) *the perceived relationship between the parties involved*, and (4) *the context of the encounter*.

Although everyone experiences the world of smell through the same sense organ, culture also plays a part in how that scent is perceived and responded to.¹⁰⁷ A few examples will help illustrate the point. The traditional Eskimo kiss, what is commonly depicted as rubbing noses, also includes “mutual sniffing.”¹⁰⁸ In Bali, when lovers greet one another, they often breathe deeply in a kind of friendly sniffing. The Maori of New Zealand use much the same greeting when they meet close friends. Smell also plays a large role among Filipinos. It is not unusual for young Filipino lovers to trade small pieces of clothing on parting so that the smell of the other person will evoke their affection for each other.¹⁰⁹ In Japan, where smell is an important part of the culture, young girls often play a game involving the placing of five fragrances in tiny boxes. The girl who identifies the most aromas wins the game. And it is not uncommon in Japan to have various fragrances emitted in the workplace. Aromatherapy is an accepted healthcare practice in many cultures.

As mentioned, Americans represent an example of a culture that tends to be uncomfortable with natural body smells and, therefore, attempts to cover up innate smells with perfumes and lotions. Many other cultures regard natural odors as normal. For example, most Italians do not mask their scents with other aromas.¹¹⁰

There is a belief among Muslim women that “wearing perfume on clothes either outdoors or when meeting strangers indoors should be avoided.”¹¹¹ The reason is that Arabs perceive a person’s smell as an extension of the person. Hall describes this cultural value:

Olfaction occupies a prominent place in Arab life. Not only is it one of the distance setting mechanisms, but it is a vital part of the complex system of behavior. Arabs consistently breathe on people when they talk. However, this habit is more than a matter of different

manners. To the Arab good smells are pleasing and a way of being involved with each other. To smell one’s friends is not only desirable, for to deny him your breath is to act ashamed. Americans, on the other hand, trained as they are not to breathe in people’s faces, automatically communicate shame in trying to be polite.¹¹²

REMEMBER THIS

Paralanguage is concerned with the communicative characteristic of the voice and with how people use their voices. Paralanguage includes such things as giggles, laughter, accents, groans, sighs, pitch, tempo, volume, and resonance.

Paralanguage

This next form of nonverbal communication is predicated on the belief that the sounds we generate, apart from the meaning contained in the words, often communicate more than the words themselves. Most of you have seen a foreign film with English subtitles moving across the screen. During those intervals when the subtitles were not on the screen, you heard the actors uttering an unfamiliar language but could essentially understand what was happening on the screen just from the sound of the voices. Perhaps you inferred that the performers were expressing anger, sorrow, joy, or any number of other emotions. From the sound of the voices, you could even tell who the hero was and who was cast in the role of the villain. The rise and fall of voices also may have told you when one person was asking a question and another was making a statement or issuing a command. Whatever the case, certain vocal cues provided you with information with which to make judgments about the characters' personalities, emotional states, ethnic background, and rhetorical activity. To be sure, you could only guess at the exact meaning of the words being spoken, but sound variations still told you a great deal about what was happening. Shakespeare suggested this with great style when he wrote, "I understand the fury in your words, but not the words." What we have just been considering is often referred to as *paralanguage*, which "includes all oral cues in the stream of spoken utterances except the words themselves."¹¹³ Research reveals that those utterances can influence perceptions related to the individual's emotional state, social class and status, personality traits, ethnicity, educational level, credibility, comprehension, and personality.¹¹⁴ Most classifications divide paralanguage into three categories: (1) *vocal qualities*, (2) *vocal characterizers*, and (3) *vocal segregates*.

Vocal Qualities. As just indicated, a great many inferences about content and character can be made from the paralinguistic sounds that people produce. Let us now look at some paralanguage behaviors that have message value in particular cultures. Although vocal qualities have numerous components, cultural differences are most apparent in the use of volume. Arabs speak with high levels of volume. It might even appear to be theatrical to "outsiders." For Arabs, loudness connotes strength and sincerity. A softer voice suggests weakness and even deceitfulness. Nydell explains the Arab use of volume in more detail: "Loudness of speech is mainly for dramatic effect and in most cases should not be taken as an indication of aggression or insistence on the part of the speaker."¹¹⁵ Germans conduct their business with a "commanding tone that projects authority and self-confidence."¹¹⁶ At the other end of the continuum, there are cultures that have a very different view toward loud voices. For example, people from the Philippines speak softly, as they maintain that this is a sign of good upbringing and education. Speaking in soft tones is also valued in Thailand. A visitor from Thailand once asked one of the authors if the loud voices she was hearing in the United States meant that U.S. Americans were upset or mad at a specific person or event. Her question made a great deal of cultural sense. In Thailand, people speak in quiet voices and believe it is an indication of anger when a person elevates his or her volume. These strident tones contradict what Buddhist teaching calls "disciplined in quietness." In Japan, raising one's voice often implies a lack of self-control. For the Japanese, a gentle and soft voice reflects good manners and helps maintain social harmony—two important values in Japanese culture.

Co-cultures also use vocal qualifiers in subtle and unique ways. For example, many African Americans use more inflection and employ a greater vocal range than most white Americans.¹¹⁷ Differences in paralanguage also mark the communication patterns of males and females. Research indicates that men’s voices tend to have louder volume, lower pitch, and less inflection. Notice that these features are likely to conform to cultural perceptions of men as assertive and emotionally controlled. Women’s voices typically have higher pitch, softer volume, and more inflection. Again, these are characteristics associated with cultural views of women as emotional and polite.¹¹⁸

Vocal Characteristics. Vocal characteristics are vocalizations that convey a meaning for members of a specific culture. In both France and Argentina, it is considered rude to yawn in public. And in much of Europe, whistling during a public performance is a message of disapproval and ridicule. For many Muslims, the simple act of sneezing is interpreted as “a blessing from God.”¹¹⁹ In fact, after a sneeze, a Muslim would say, *Al-hamduillah* (“praise and thanks to God”). Laughing also sends different messages, depending on the culture. Lynch and Hanson note this difference:

Laughing and giggling are interpreted as expressions of enjoyment among most Americans—signals that people are relaxed and having a good time.... Among other cultural groups, such as Southeast Asians, the same behavior may be a sign of extreme embarrassment, discomfort, or what Americans might call “nervous laughter” taken to the extreme.¹²⁰

Vocal Segregates. Vocal segregates are sounds that are audible but are not actual words. These sounds are used as substitutes for words. A case in point is the “shh” sound produced by Americans when they are asking someone to be silent. In many cultures certain sounds also take on special meanings. For instance, the Maasai in Africa use a number of sounds that have significance. The most common one is the “eh” sound, which the Maasai draw out and which can mean “yes,” “I understand,” or “continue.”¹²¹ In Kenya, the “iya” sound tells the other person that everything is okay. In Jamaica, the “kissing” or “sucking” sound expresses anger, exasperation, or frustration. The Japanese make use of vocal segregates in their conversations. To demonstrate reluctance or concern, a Japanese worker might “suck in his breath, look doubtful and say ‘Saa....’”¹²² Japanese will also make small utterances to demonstrate their attentiveness, such as *hai* (“yes,” “certainly,” “all right,” or “very well”), *so* which has the same sound as the English “so” (“I hear that” or an indication of agreement), or *eto* (“well...” or “let me see...”).¹²³ Many members of the African-American co-culture are familiar with the “whoop” used by many preachers, a sound to arouse members of the church. This sound has been employed in African American churches since the time of slavery.

Having previously examined how body movement communicates, we now move to a review of how space, time, and silence communicate. Although these variables are external to the communicator, they are used and manipulated in ways that send messages. For example, imagine your reaction to someone who stands too close to you, arrives late for an important

CONSIDER THIS

Have you ever felt uncomfortable when someone you had just met stood very close to you? How did it make you feel?

appointment, or remains silent after you reveal some personal information. In each of these instances you would find yourself reading meaning into your communication partner's use of (1) *space and distance*, (2) *time*, and (3) *silence*.

SPACE AND DISTANCE

The variation in distance between you and other people is as much a part of the communication experience as the words being exchanged. The study of this message system is called *proxemics*. Hall defines proxemics as “the interrelated observations and theories of man’s use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture.”¹²⁴ While Hall’s definition was advanced over forty years ago, it remains the anchor for most discussions of space and distance in a cultural context. Expanding on Hall’s analysis, today proxemics is concerned with such things as (1) *personal space*, (2) *seating*, and (3) *furniture arrangement*.

Personal Space

Personal space is often thought of as a kind of “bubble” that encircles each individual. This “bubble” increases and decreases depending on the person’s reaction to the setting and the person “invading” his or her space. Employing the example of the “bubble,” Hall and Hall discuss the significance of personal space to communication:

Each person has around him an invisible bubble of space which expands and contracts depending on his relationship to those around him, his emotional state, his cultural background, and the activity he is performing. Few people are allowed to penetrate this bit of mobile territory, and then only for short periods of time.¹²⁵

As indicated, your personal space is that area you occupy and call your own. As the owner of this area, you usually decide who may enter and who may not. When your space is invaded, you react in a variety of ways. You may retreat, stand your ground, or sometimes react violently. Use of personal space is learned on both the conscious and unconscious levels. Personal space used in the United States is divided into four categories.

1. Intimate distance (actual contact to 18 inches) is normally reserved for very personal relationships. You can reach out and touch the person at this distance. Because of the closeness of the participants, voices are usually at the level of a whisper.
2. In personal distance (18 inches to 4 feet) there is little chance of physical contact, and you can speak in a normal voice. This is distance reserved for family and close friends.
3. Social distance (4 to 12 feet) is the distance at which most members of the dominant U.S. culture conduct business and take part in social gatherings.
4. Public distance is usually used in public presentations and can vary from relatively close to very far.¹²⁶

As with most forms of communication, space is associated with cultural values. A good example of the link between the use of space and culture can be seen in the values of individualism and collectivism. Cultures that stress individualism and

People's use of space, like most aspects of nonverbal communication, can be influenced by the setting and context.



Courtesy of Larry Samovar

CONSIDER THIS

The next time you are at an airport, train station, or shopping mall where there might be people from a variety of cultures, try to observe the interactions using the guide provided below:

- Were there cultural differences in the use of space?
- What differences did you observe as applied to touching behavior?
- Did people greet each other by hugging, kissing, shaking hands, etc.?
- What differences did you notice in facial expressions? Were they animated, reserved, etc.?
- Did you notice any differences in gestures?

privacy (England, the United States, Sweden, Germany, and Australia) generally demand more space than do collective cultures. According to Triandis, Arabs, Latin Americans, and U.S. Hispanics fall into this collective category.¹²⁷ These are cultures in which people are interdependent and often work, play, live, and even sleep in close proximity to one another. “Brazil is a wonderful example of a culture that communicates in close proximity.”¹²⁸ With regard to Arabs, Ruch writes, “Typical Arab conversations are at close range. Closeness cannot be avoided.”¹²⁹

Differences in personal space can even be seen in how cultures perceive and respond to standing in lines. For most

U.S. Americans “regulations” for standing in line are simple. The line should be straight and people are expected to wait their turn. As Dresser noted, “Many new immigrants don’t understand the American rules for standing in lines.”¹³⁰ When waiting for a bus or an elevator most Arabs will not stand in neat straight lines. There is often a degree of pushing as they work their way toward the front of the crowd. For them, this is not considered rude, but simply a reflection of their perception of personal space.

Some co-cultures have their own special use of space. In prisons, where space is limited and controlled, space and territory are crucial forms of communication.

New inmates quickly learn the culture of prison by finding the correct ways to use space. They soon discover how and when to enter another cell, what part of the exercise yard they can visit, how reduction of a person's space is a form of punishment, and that they must form lines for nearly all activities.

Women and men also use space differently. For example, women normally “establish closer proximity to others” than do men.¹³¹ Years of research have also revealed other gender differences in the use of space: (1) men claim more personal space than women, (2) women manifest less discomfort than men when confronted with a small amount of space, (3) men seem to approach females more closely than females who move toward men, (4) women, when given the opportunity, seek to interact at a closer distance than do men, and (5) men more frequently walk in front of their female partner than vice versa.¹³² Spatial distance is also a variable when interacting with members of the deaf culture. When using ASL, it is necessary for the person signing to sit far enough away from the other person so that they can be seen. It would not be uncommon for two signers to sit across from one another at a distance that hearing people might perceive as impersonal.¹³³

Seating

As is the case with many features of nonverbal communication, seating arrangements send both inconspicuous and obvious messages. The producing of a very subtle message could be witnessed at an important diplomatic meeting between the Turkish ambassador and his counterpart from Israel. The Turkish representative was extremely distressed that he was asked to sit on a sofa that was lower than the one occupied by the Israeli officials. His anger was so intense that he refused to allow the media to take a picture of the meeting since he felt it humiliated him and his country. This real-life example vividly demonstrates that seating arrangements can be a powerful



The way people use space, including how they arrange themselves in a group, is often rooted in their culture.

Curt Carnemark/World Bank Group

form of nonverbal communication. Not only do seating arrangements signal power relations, as was the case with the Israeli and Turkish examples, but research points out that perceptions related to leadership, dominance, sex roles, and introversion and extraversion are influenced by seating arrangements.¹³⁴

Notice that when you are a member of a group in the United States, people tend to talk with those opposite them rather than those seated beside them. And in most instances, the person sitting at the head of the table is the leader. These seating “rules” are not the same arrangements used in other cultures. For example, in some Asian cultures students do not sit close to their teachers or stand near their superiors; the extended distance demonstrates deference and esteem. This regard for admiration and ritual can also be seen in China. Because of their Confucian background, the Chinese respect proper etiquette and ceremony. Therefore, seating arrangements are frequently dictated by cultural and historical norms, particularly at formal events such as banquets, and diplomatic and business meetings. At banquets, which are very common in China, seating arrangements place the honored person (often decided by seniority and age) facing east or facing the entrance to the hall. The higher a person’s status, the closer they sit to the person of honor.¹³⁵ At business meetings the Chinese experience alienation and uneasiness when they face someone directly or sit opposite them at a desk or table.¹³⁶ If you view a news story about American diplomats meeting with government officials from China, you might observe that the meeting is taking place with people sitting side by side—frequently on couches. In Korea seating arrangements reflect status and role distinctions. In a car, office, or home, the seat on the right is considered to be the place of honor.

For the Japanese, much like the Chinese, seating at any formal event is determined based on hierarchy. When conducting business or diplomatic negotiations, the Japanese will arrange themselves with the most senior person sitting in the middle and those next highest in rank sitting to the left and right of this senior position. Low-ranking members will sit away from the table, behind the other representatives.¹³⁷ Ways of reflecting “lower-ranking” members take a somewhat different seating arrangement among Samoans and Fijians. For them, respect and status “means being physically lower than a superior.”¹³⁸

Furniture Arrangement

The way people arrange furniture (cubicles, chairs, tables, desks, sofas, etc.) can, as Shah and Kesan note, “play a communicative role by expressing cultural or symbolic meaning.”¹³⁹ The importance of seating arrangement as a form of communication, and the role it occupies within a specific culture can be observed in the Chinese traditional philosophy of *feng shui* that dates back over 3,000 years. This approach to the arrangement of furniture and space is based on the Taoist tradition that stresses the need for people and nature to live in harmony. The heart of this perspective is that people must live with, rather than against, their environment. Further, it is believed that striking the balance between self and one’s physical environment brings good health, happiness, and wealth. You can observe the signs of this philosophy in Chinese homes and the way some members of the family organize themselves at a table. For example, when at a business meeting, Chinese executives will often seek out a seat that they believe is synchronous with the environment.

Just as *feng shui* reflects some of the history and values of China, furniture arrangement can also mirror some of the values found in the United States, where furniture

is often arranged to achieve privacy and interpersonal isolation. It is a way of circumventing interaction. People who value conversation, such as the French, Italians, and Mexicans, are often surprised when they visit the United States and see that the furniture in the living room is pointed toward the television set so people can focus on the television program rather than the other people in the room. They believe that such an arrangement is rude and stifles conversation.

In Japan, offices are usually open and shared with many colleagues, and the furnishings are, like the workers, placed in close proximity. The contrast between office arrangements in the United States and Japan can create problems. As Nishiyama notes, “Because of its lack of privacy, Westerners, especially individualistic Americans, might find the Japanese office arrangement very uncomfortable and annoying.”¹⁴⁰

The arrangement of furniture in offices can also give you a clue to the character of a people. “French space is a reflection of French culture and French institutions. Everything is centralized, and spatially the entire country is laid out around centers.”¹⁴¹ Hence, offices are organized around the manager, who is at the center. In Germany, where privacy is stressed, seating is dispersed throughout the office. By comparison, in Japan, where group effort and hierarchy are important, office seating is arranged according to seniority, with desks abutting each other.

TIME

When the Dutch mathematician Christian Huygens built the first pendulum clock over three centuries ago, he probably had little idea that his invention would have such an impact on the world. This intrusion on how people live is now more profound than ever. As Flaskerud illustrates,

In these days of speed up communication, there are messages to us about time from many sources: smartphones, desktop and laptop, and iPads, not to mention clocks, watches, and their bells that ring and chime. These sources of communication demand that we speed up our responses to one another.¹⁴²

Gonzalez and Zimbardo echo Flaskerud’s observation when they add, “There is no more powerful, pervasive influence on how individuals think and cultures interact than our different perspectives on time—the way we mentally partition time into past, present and future.”¹⁴³ After some reflection you will see how time communicates. In the United States, if you arrive thirty minutes late for an important appointment and offer no apology, you send a certain message about yourself. Telling someone how guilty you feel about your belated arrival also sends a message. Studies point out that one of the markers of a successful and intimate relationship is the amount of time people spend together and how patient they are with each other.¹⁴⁴

The connection of time to culture is profound, and like most aspects of culture, it is part of the enculturation process early in life:

Culture begins to educate each of us at an early age as to the value of and the means by which we distinguish time. Each culture has its own particular time norms, which are unconsciously followed until violated. When such violations occur, however, they are perceived as intentional messages associated with that particular culture. In this regard, each culture teaches its people what is appropriate or inappropriate with regard to time.¹⁴⁵

Let us look now not only at *how* cultures teach, but also *what* they teach about the use of time. To accomplish this, we will examine two cultural perspectives: (1) *informal time* and (2) *monochronic and polychronic classifications*.

Informal Time

Informal time is usually composed of two interrelated components—punctuality and pace.

Punctuality. Rules that apply to punctuality are taught implicitly and explicitly. On a conscious level, young children are taught the importance of being prompt. They are told that a lack of punctuality equals being inconsiderate, lazy, and discourteous. In addition to these conscious messages, there are numerous messages sent and learned on an unconscious level. You would probably have some difficulty remembering where you learned some of the following informal rules:

- The boss can arrive late for a meeting without anyone raising an eyebrow.
- A secretary arriving late might receive a reprimand in the form of a stern glance.
- A rock star or a physician can keep people waiting for a long time, but the warm-up band and the food caterer had better be at the event on time.

You know these “rules” about time but cannot point to the moment you learned them, as they operate below the level of consciousness. The imperatives about time are also often linked to a culture’s worldview. For example, in the Western perception, response to time can be traced to the Judeo-Christian worldview. We see time beginning with the Creation and ending with the Second Coming or the arrival of the Messiah.¹⁴⁶

Experience tells you that in the United States, most members of the dominant culture adhere to Benjamin Franklin’s pronouncement that “Time is money.” Think of what is being said about the use of time in these common expressions: “Don’t put off until tomorrow what you can do today,” “He who hesitates is lost,” and “Just give me the bottom line.” For U.S. residents,

REMEMBER THIS

Cultures vary in how they perceive punctuality, the amount of time they set aside for socializing, whether they value a fast or slow pace of life, and the importance of work versus leisure time.

time is fixed and measurable, and where we feel seconds ticking away, we attach much significance to schedules. We measure our efficiency according to our ability to meet deadlines and cross off items on our checklist by the end of the day. Getting things done on schedule has a value in itself.¹⁴⁷

As mentioned, cultures vary in their punctuality standards. Argyle highlights a few of those variations:

How late is “late”? This varies greatly. In Britain and America, one may be 5 minutes late for a business appointment, but not 15 and certainly not 30 minutes late, which is perfectly normal in Arab countries. On the other hand, in Britain it is correct to be 5 to 15 minutes late for an invitation to dinner. An Italian might arrive 2 hours late, an Ethiopian after, and a Javanese not at all—he had accepted only to prevent his host from losing face.¹⁴⁸

Status relationships can influence punctuality in Japan. As Nishiyama points out, “The time usage in Japan is usually determined by the status relationships between

the people involved.”¹⁴⁹ A lower-status person in Japan would wait much longer for someone of higher status than they would for a lower-status individual. For the Japanese, a person’s use of time is yet another way of showing respect.

A few additional examples will help illustrate how reactions to punctuality are rooted in culture. In Spain, Italy, and Argentina it is typical for people to be thirty or more minutes late for a meeting or dinner appointment. Punctuality is also not highly regarded in much of the Arab world. Comparing Arabs to westerners, Nydell notes, “Arabs are thus much more relaxed about the timing of events than they are about other aspects of their lives.”¹⁵⁰

In Africa, people also might “show up late for appointments, meetings, and social engagements.”¹⁵¹ There is even a Nigerian expression that says, “A watch did not invent man.” These views of tardiness might be perceived as rudeness in places such as the United States, Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

Pace. The Irish have a saying: “Life is a dance not a race.” This somewhat cavalier approach to life is often confusing to westerners, who are raised to adhere to the biblical statement that “Idle hands are the devil’s workshop.” These two examples demonstrate cultural attitudes toward pace. Because of the tempo of life in the United States, to “outsiders” U.S. citizens always appear to be in a hurry. As Kim observes, “Life is in constant motion. People consider time to be wasted or lost unless they are doing something.”¹⁵² From fast-food restaurants to gas stations where you can do your shopping while putting gas in your car, to microwave cooking, to computers that use the fastest available processors, U.S. Americans live life at a frenzied pace. Even the expression “rush hour” describes how commuters in major cities are dashing to get from point A to point B. Children in the United States grow up hearing others tell them not “to waste so much time” and to “hurry up and finish their homework.” Think how those expressions differ from the Latin proverb “Haste manages all things badly” or the Mexican saying “You don’t have to get there first, you just have to know how to get there.”¹⁵³

People in much of the world use time differently than the pace found in the United States. For instance, “the French do not share the American sense of urgency to accomplish tasks.”¹⁵⁴ Japanese culture considers time in ways that often appear at cross-purposes with U.S. American goals. Brislin illustrates how the Japanese pace is reflected in the negotiation process:

When negotiating with the Japanese, Americans like to get right down to business. They were socialized to believe that “time is money.” They can accept about fifteen minutes of “small talk” about the weather, their trip, and baseball, but more than that becomes unreasonable. The Japanese, on the other hand, want to get to know their business counterparts. They feel that the best way to do this is to have long conversations with Americans about a wide variety of topics.¹⁵⁵

The Chinese also value a slow pace. For them, the completion of the mission is what matters, regardless of the amount of time it takes. The Chinese proverb “With time and patience the mulberry leaf becomes a silk gown” captures the notion of time being unhurried. In Africa, where a slow pace is the rule, “People who rush are suspected of trying to cheat.”¹⁵⁶

The idea that nonverbal behavior is directly linked to a culture’s religious and value orientation is manifest among Arabs. Earlier, we pointed out that Muslims believe that their destiny is predetermined. The connection between this religious

view and the pace of life is pointed out by Abu-Gharbieh: “Throughout the Arab world, there is nonchalance about time and deadlines: the pace of life is more leisurely than in the West. Social events and appointments tend not to have a fixed beginning or end.”¹⁵⁷

Monochronic (M-Time) and Polychronic (P-Time)

Hall established a classic taxonomy for examining the link between culture and time. He proposed that cultures organize time in one of two ways—either *monochronic* (M-time) or *polychronic* (P-time),¹⁵⁸ which represents two approaches to perceiving and utilizing time. While Hall’s system of analysis has been part of intercultural literature for over thirty years, it has taken on added significance in this era of globalization and electronic methods of communicating. Not only are international messages often received and responded to in different time zones, but the ways people create and respond to electronic “tools” like email are influenced by how each culture perceives the various notions of time. For example, issues such as punctuality, time set aside for socializing, fast or slow paces of life, and the importance of work versus leisure time are just some of the concerns facing people who use electronic devices to send and receive messages to people from cultures different from their own.

In reference to Hall’s classifications, we should add that although M-time and P-time are presented as two distinct categories, it is much more realistic to perceive the two classifications as points along a continuum. There are many cultures that do not fall precisely into one of the two categories but instead contain degrees of both M-time and P-time.

M-Time. As the word “monochronic” implies, this concept views time as linear, sequential, and segmented. More specifically, “A monochronic view of time believes time is a scarce resource which must be rationed and controlled through the use of schedules and appointments, and through aiming to do only one thing at any one time.”¹⁵⁹ Cultures with this orientation perceive time as being *tangible*. When speaking of the M-time orientation Hall states, “People talk about time as though it were money, as something that can be ‘spent,’ ‘saved,’ ‘wasted,’ and ‘lost.’”¹⁶⁰ Acting out this view of time a person would value punctuality, product over process, and the judicious use of time. The English naturalist Charles Darwin glorified this approach when he wrote, “A man who dares to waste one hour of time has not discovered the value of life.”

Cultures that can be classified as M-time include Germany, Austria, Sweden, Norway, England, Finland, Canada, Switzerland, and the dominant U.S. culture.¹⁶¹ As Hall explains, “People of the Western world, particularly Americans, tend to think of time as something fixed in nature, something around us and from which we cannot escape; an ever-present part of the environment, just like the air we breathe.”¹⁶² In the business or educational setting, M-time culture people would schedule appointments in advance, try to be on time to meetings, be concise in making presentations, and have a strong penchant for following initial plans. When those plans are not adhered to, they are apt to become frustrated.

P-Time. People from cultures on polychronic time live their lives quite differently from those who move to the monochronic clock. The pace for P-time cultures (Arab, African, Indian, Latin American, South Asian, and Southeast Asian) is more leisurely than the one found in M-time cultures. In P-time cultures, human

relationships, not tasks, are important. “A polychronic view of time sees the maintenance of harmonious relationships as the important agenda, so that use of time needs to be flexible in order that we do right by the various people to whom we have obligations.”¹⁶³ These cultures are normally collective and deal with life holistically. For P-time cultures, time is less tangible, and people are usually not in a hurry to finish an assignment or chore. In addition, P-time participants can interact with more than one person or do more than one thing at a time. Because P-time has this characteristic of engaging in several activities at once, people of these cultures often find it easier to employ “multitasking.” As Dresser notes, this trait “explains why there is more interrupting in conversations carried on by people from Arabic, Asian, and Latin American cultures.”¹⁶⁴ African cultures also place great stock in the activity that is occurring at the moment and emphasize people more than schedules. The person they are interacting with is more important than an event or individual that is someplace else. In short, “Time for Africans is defined by events rather than the clock or calendar.”¹⁶⁵

As we conclude this section on how time communicates, it is important to remember that specific settings and occasions can influence how a person “acts out” M-time or P-time. In one context, you might be extremely prompt (M-time); in another situation, you might be multitasking or making a decision that what you are doing at a particular moment is essential and hence postpone your next appointment (P-time). Two cultural examples will further underscore the contextual nature of the use of time. While Arab culture manifests all the characteristics of P-time cultures, “Modernization has influenced approach to time in the Arab regions, particularly in regional business centers and other urban environments.”¹⁶⁶ Hall offers another instance of how the setting can determine which orientation a person utilizes: “The Japanese time system combines both M-time and P-time. In their dealings with foreigners and their use of technology, they are monochronic; in every other way, especially in interpersonal relations, they are polychronic.”¹⁶⁷

Table 9.1 summarizes the basic aspects of M-time and P-time. The table takes many of the ideas we have mentioned and translates them into specific behaviors.

SILENCE

We conclude our analysis of the types of nonverbal messages by looking at how silence can be an important component in intercultural communication. Within the interpersonal setting, silence can provide an interval in an ongoing interaction during which the participants have time to think, check or suppress an emotion, encode a lengthy response, inaugurate another line of thought, call attention to certain words, express various emotions, or indicate thoughtfulness.¹⁶⁸ Silence also provides feedback, informing both sender and receiver about the clarity of an idea or its significance in the overall interpersonal exchange. In most Western cultures, talk is highly valued, and as such, it is often difficult to determine the meaning behind someone’s silence. It can be interpreted as an indication of agreement, anger, lack of interest, injured feelings, shyness, a means of showing respect, contempt, or even a way concealing the truth.¹⁶⁹ And reflect for a moment on the meaning of silence when young children in the United States are given a “time-out”—a period when they are expected to be silent and not have any sort of human interaction. Hence, many

TABLE 9.1 A Comparison of Monochronic and Polychronic Cultures

MONOCHRONIC TIME PEOPLE	POLYCHRONIC TIME PEOPLE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do one thing at a time • Concentrate on the job 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do many things at once • Easily distracted and subject to interruption
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take time commitments (deadlines, schedules) seriously • Are low context and need information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider time commitments an objective to be achieved, if possible • Are high context and already have information
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are committed to the job 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are committed to people and human relationships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhere to plans • Are concerned about not disturbing others; follow rules of privacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change plans often and easily • Are more concerned with people close to them (family, friends, close business associates) than with privacy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show great respect for private property; seldom borrow or lend • Emphasize promptness • Are accustomed to short-term relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Borrow and lend things often and easily • Base promptness on the relationship • Have tendency to build lifetime relationships

Source: Adapted from E.T. Hall and M.R. Hall, *Understanding Cultural Differences: Germans, French, and Americans* (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1990), 15.

U.S. Americans grow up perceiving silence as a frightening experience. This is one reason they try to fill up the silence with “small talk.”

The intercultural implications of silence as a means of interpreting ongoing verbal interactions are as diverse as those of other nonverbal cues:

Cross-cultural differences are common over when to talk and when to remain silent, or what a particular instance of silence means. In response to the question, “Will you marry me?” silence in English would be interpreted as uncertainty.... In Igbo, it would be considered a denial if the woman were to continue to stand there and an acceptance if she ran away.¹⁷⁰

Knowing how cultures use silence can offer essential information for anyone who interacts with a different culture. As Braithwaite points out,

One of the basic building blocks of competence, both linguistic and cultural, is knowing when not to speak in a particular community. Therefore, to understand where and when to be silent, and the meaning attached to silence, is to gain a keen insight into the fundamental structure of communication in that world.¹⁷¹

As noted, silence is not a meaningful part of the life of most members of the dominant U.S. culture. Conversing at coffee houses, talking or texting on cell phones (even when driving an automobile), watching television, or listening to music on an iPod keeps U.S. Americans from living in a silent world. In fact, silence often takes on a negative connotation. Think of the U.S. American saying that “the squeaky wheel gets the grease” or the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson when he wrote, “Speech is power: Speech is to persuade, to convert, to compel.” We can observe a fascination

with “talk” over silence in the popularity of radio and television programs called “talk shows.” Members of the dominant culture not only enjoy talking and avoiding silence, but also “often experience problems when they go international and place themselves in face-to-face contacts with more silent people of the world.”¹⁷²

U.S. Americans are not the only group who prefer talking rather than silence. In the commercial world, “a silent reaction to a business proposal would seem negative to American, German, French, Southern European and Arab executives.”¹⁷³ You will notice that the German culture appeared on the list we just presented. The German proverb that states that “Silence is a fence around wisdom” illustrates how some Germans might diminish the importance of silence. There is a link between cultures that emphasize social interaction (Jewish, Italian, French, Arab, and others) and their perception of and use of silence. Talking in these cultures is highly valued. In Greek culture, there is also a belief that being in the company of other people and engaging in conversation are signs of a good life. The concepts of solitude and silence are overshadowed in Greek history and literature, which contain numerous allusions to rhetorical techniques and dialogues. The culture that produced Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates is not one that will find silent meditation appealing. For people who follow this Greek tradition, talking is often used as a means of discovering and communicating the truth.

Let us now look at a few cultural variations in the use of silence so that you might better understand how a lack of words can influence the outcome of a communication event. In the Eastern tradition, the view of silence is much different from the Western view. As you learned in Chapter 5, Buddhists feel comfortable with the absence of noise or talk and actually believe that words can contaminate an experience. They maintain that inner peace and wisdom come only through silence. This idea is brought out by the Buddhist scholar A. J. V. Chandrakanthan:

In the stories and discourses attributed to Buddha, one can clearly see a close link between Truth and Silence. Wherever Truth is mentioned in references to Buddha it is always said in relation to silence. In fact, popular Buddhist religious tradition attests that whenever someone asked Buddha to explain truth, he invariably answered in silence.¹⁷⁴

Barnlund associates this Buddhist view of silence with communication: “One of its tenets is that words are deceptive and silent intuition is a truer way to confront the world; mind-to-mind communication through words is less reliable than heart-to-heart communication through an intuitive grasp of things.”¹⁷⁵ Silence is also used by many Asian people as a means of avoiding conflict. “A typical practice among many Asian peoples is to refuse to speak any further in conversation if they cannot personally accept the speaker’s attitude, opinion, or way of thinking about particular issues or subjects.”¹⁷⁶ The Chinese represent an excellent example of how silence is a part of many Asian cultures. Going back 2,500 years, Confucius stressed the importance of social harmony. Embedded in that philosophy is a belief that direct face-to-face conflict should be avoided. Silence is one way to circumvent that conflict. To help accentuate that point Confucius wrote, “Silence is the true friend that never betrays.”

CONSIDER THIS

How would you explain the African proverb, “Silence is also speech”?

Silence is also important to the Japanese. In many instances, people are expected to sense what another person is thinking and feeling without anything being said. Some scholars even refer to this mode of communication as “implying rather than saying.”¹⁷⁷ The Japanese emphasis on silence serves a variety of purposes. First, among family members, silence is actually seen as a way of “talking.” The following example offers an explanation of how silence takes the place of words for the Japanese: “When people say, ‘There’s no communication between parents and children,’ this is an American way of thinking. In Japan we didn’t need spoken communication between parents and children. A glance at the face, a glance back, and we understand enough.”¹⁷⁸

Second, silence in Japan is linked to credibility. Someone who is silent is often perceived as having higher credibility than someone who talks most of the time. Think of the message contained in the Japanese proverb that states, “The silent man is the best to listen to.” In Japanese culture, the restrained individual is one who is perceived as honest, genuine, and straightforward. Finally, the Japanese also use silence to avoid conflict and as such lessen the chance that they may lose “face.” This Japanese view of silence is reflected in the following proverb: “It is the duck that squawks that gets shot.” You can imagine how this use of silence might create communication problems when U.S. Americans and Japanese come together. For example, during business negotiations, each will give a different interpretation to the same silent period. The Japanese might use silence to evaluate the Americans’ recommendation before responding so that their response will not embarrass or humiliate them. The U.S. Americans could read the silence of the Japanese as a rejection of the proposal. The same use of silence to save “face” can be seen in the classroom settings. And, of course, it has the same potential to be misunderstood if the person observing the silence fails to understand how the Japanese employ silence. In one study using Japanese studying in Australia, it was found that when the Japanese used face-saving silence, they were evaluated negatively.¹⁷⁹

Silence plays a central role in Indian culture. Hindus believe that “self realization, salvation, truth, wisdom, peace, and bliss are all achieved in a state of meditation and introspection when the individual is communicating with himself or herself in silence.”¹⁸⁰ Many Scandinavians also have a view of silence that differs from that of the dominant U.S. culture. In Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, silence conveys interest and consideration. In fact, your silence tells the other person that you want them to continue talking.¹⁸¹

Some co-cultures in the United States also use silence differently than does the dominant culture. A good example is American Indians. Silence for them is a major value. It can be a sign of acceptance or a manifestation of group harmony or used as a marker for a person of great wisdom or as a means of showing respect to persons of authority and age. In fact, for American Indians the tendency to respond too quickly when asked a question is considered immature, as it indicates that the person did not have the insight to use a period of silence to think about their response. The lack of speaking can create intercultural communication difficulties. Plank points out that these difficulties are often seen during employment interviews, in doctor–patient relationships, and in the classroom.¹⁸²

DEVELOPING NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCY

In the Preface and during many of the discussions that followed, we have accentuated the idea that *communication is an activity*. This was a way of declaring that

communication is a behavior that you engage in and that others respond to. Therefore, we conclude this chapter by offering a brief section on how you can exercise some control over that behavior and become a more competent communicator.

YOUR INTERPRETATIONS SHOULD BE TENTATIVE

At the beginning of this chapter, we noted that nonverbal messages can be intentional (waving good-bye to a friend) or unintentional (frowning because you are looking into the sun and your friend believes you are upset). In our second example, it was as if you were nonverbally “saying” two different things at the same time. The same stage for confusion can also be seen if you tell someone, “I am so happy to see you again,” while at the same time you are pulling away as they try to embrace you. What we are suggesting is that nonverbal messages are subject to a great deal of ambiguity. *This potential for ambiguity can be partially minimized by making your conclusions tentative.*

BE CONSCIOUS OF THE CONTEXT

As you have already learned, *communication is rule governed*. Some self-reflection tells you that your behavior is different as you move from place to place. Think of all the “rules” that are in operation in school rooms, courtrooms, churches, business meetings, parties, restaurants, sporting events, funerals, and the like. Each of these settings requires behaviors that you have learned as part of the acculturation process. When trying to improve nonverbal communication skills, you need to understand how each situation might influence the meaning given to a specific action. During a job interview, a person’s actions might reflect a degree of nervousness brought about by the formal setting (fidgeting, talking fast, etc.), while at home, that same person might be relaxed and speak at a slower pace.

Culturally, you can also observe vast differences in how people respond nonverbally when thrust into an unfamiliar environment. In North American classrooms, students move around, interact with the teacher, and are often animated. In Japan and China, nonverbal behavior is much more subdued and restrained as students follow the classroom “rules” in these cultures, where silence and constrained gestures are the norm. When trying to improve your ability to read nonverbal behaviors, ask yourself if the observed actions are appropriate for the setting.

UTILIZE FEEDBACK

Utilizing feedback means being aware of the interactive nature of communication; that is, the recipients of your messages are not passive observers. They receive your verbal and nonverbal symbols and respond in a variety of ways. As explained in Chapter 2, these responses are known as *feedback*. Hence, our next suggestion is that you *encourage feedback as a way of improving the accuracy of your perceptions of the communication encounter*. Utilizing both verbal and nonverbal feedback devices

allows you to make qualitative judgments about the communication encounter. Feedback also affords you the opportunity to immediately correct and adjust your next message. When appropriate, it even means that you can ask questions of your communication partners so that you can better understand the nonverbal messages they are sending.

Because feedback is critical, you need to create an atmosphere that encourages it. Communication skills that promote feedback include smiling, head nodding, leaning forward, and even laughing. Although the nonverbal actions just mentioned are found in Western cultures, they often produce positive reactions in other cultures as well. Each of these nonverbal activities contributes to a relaxed atmosphere that fosters an accurate “reading” of your receiver’s nonverbal response to your messages.

KNOW YOUR CULTURE

That you need to know your own culture should be obvious, as at this stage, you have learned that perceptions of how you and other people use nonverbal communication is colored by culture. Aspects of communication, such as what is considered attractive or how close to stand to someone, are influenced by culture. Therefore, a certain degree of introspection about your own culture is an important step in improving nonverbal behavior. A cultural accounting can provide you with important insights regarding how you might be presenting yourself and judging other people.

MONITOR YOUR NONVERBAL ACTIONS

We turn to that overused yet significant expression “know thyself” as we conclude this chapter. Our reason for this admonition is simple: What you bring to the encounter influences all aspects of that encounter. The novelist James Baldwin highlighted the idea of self-knowledge when he wrote, “The questions which one asks oneself, begin, at last, to illuminate the world, and become one’s key to the experiences of others.” Hence, to understand these “others,” you need to monitor your actions in order to better understand the experiences of others. By knowing how you “present” yourself, you can gain insight into how people are reacting to the messages you are sending. We urge you to consider some of the following questions that will help you understand the responses displayed by your intercultural communication partner:¹⁸³

1. Is my behavior making people feel comfortable or uncomfortable? Am I smiling or glaring at the other person? Am I standing so close that I am making him or her feel uncomfortable? Does my body appear relaxed, or do I appear stiff and nervous?
2. Am I adjusting my nonverbal messages to the feedback I am receiving from my communication “partner”? Does it appear that I am talking at such a rapid pace that I am confusing him or her? Am I pausing often enough to allow the other person to talk?

3. If my messages are being misinterpreted, is it because my unintentional messages, rather than my intentional messages, are confusing my communication “partner”?
4. Am I positioning my body as if I want to end the conversation and move on to someone or something else? Am I standing such that I appear to be seeking a power position? Am I observing and respecting cultural “rules” as they apply to the use of space?
5. Am I engaging in touching behavior that is inappropriate because of gender or cultural reasons?
6. Am I yielding to physical distractions in the setting instead of focusing on the other person?

SUMMARY

- Nonverbal communication is important to the study of intercultural communication because people use nonverbal communication to express internal states, create identity, regulate interaction, repeat messages, and substitute actions for words.
- Nonverbal communication is culture bound.
- Nonverbal communication involves all nonverbal stimuli in a communication setting that (1) are generated by both the source and his or her use of the environment and (2) have potential message value for the source and/or the receiver.
- Nonverbal messages may be intentional or unintentional.
- Nonverbal messages can work alone or in tandem with verbal messages.
- When studying nonverbal communication, it should be remembered that nonverbal messages involve multichannel activity, can be ambiguous, and are composed of numerous interacting variables.
- Nonverbal behaviors and culture are similar in that both are learned, both are passed from generation to generation, and both involve shared understandings.
- The body is a major source of nonverbal messages. These messages are communicated by means of general appearance, judgments of beauty, skin color, attire, body movements (kinesics), posture, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, touch, and paralanguage.
- Cultures differ in their perception and use of personal space, seating, and furniture arrangement.
- A culture’s sense of time can be understood by learning how members of that culture view informal time and whether their orientation toward time is monochronic or polychronic.
- The use of silence varies from culture to culture.
- You can improve your nonverbal communication skills by keeping your interpretations tentative, being conscious of the context, employing feedback, knowing your culture, and monitoring your nonverbal actions.

ACTIVITIES

1. Go to YouTube and view videos of services of three different religions: Catholic, Buddhist, and Jewish. Observe the nonverbal elements, noting particularly the differences in how members of each group use paralanguage, space, and touch.
2. Locate pictures from magazines, newspapers, and the Internet that you believe are showing the following emotions through facial expressions: (a) anger, (b) joy, (c) sadness, (d) fear, and (e) revulsion. Show these pictures to people from various cultures and see what interpretations they give to the facial expressions.
3. Go to YouTube and type in “culture and body language.” View some of the videos for examples of how cultures differ in their use of body language.
4. Watch a foreign film and look for examples of proxemics, touch, and facial expressions. Compare these to those of the dominant culture of the United States.

CONCEPTS AND QUESTIONS

1. Why is it useful to understand the nonverbal language of a culture?
2. What are some potential obstacles to accurately reading the nonverbal messages of other people?
3. What is meant by the following: “Most nonverbal communication is learned on the subconscious level”?
4. Give your culture’s interpretation of the following nonverbal actions:
 - Two people are speaking loudly, waving their arms, and using many gestures.
 - A customer in a restaurant waves his hand over his head and snaps his fingers loudly.
 - An elderly woman dresses entirely in black.
 - A young man dresses entirely in black.
 - An adult pats a child’s head.
5. Two men kiss in public.
6. How can studying the intercultural aspects of nonverbal behavior assist you in discovering your own ethnocentrism? Give personal examples.
7. How late can you be for the following: (a) a class, (b) work, (c) a job interview, (d) a dinner party, or (e) a date with a friend? Ask this same question of members of two or three cultures other than your own.
8. What is meant by “Nonverbal communication is rule governed”?
9. Do you believe that in the United States a person who knows how to effectively employ nonverbal communication has an advantage over other people? How would the use of these same skills be received in Japan, China, Mexico, and India?