

Politeness in Chinese-American non-verbal intercultural communication

Li Ri

School of Foreign Studies, Weinan Normal University, Weinan 714099, China

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Abstract: There are a lot of studies of politeness which focuses too much attention on verbal communication, and little attention has been paid to non-verbal communication. This paper is mainly about politeness in Chinese-American non-verbal intercultural communication by studying body language, the use of space, touch, and the concept of time.

1. Introduction

There are a lot of studies of politeness which focuses too much attention on verbal communication, and little attention has been paid to non-verbal communication. Except from written and spoken words, there is another way of communication, nonverbal communication, which includes such kind of communication not directly depending on the use of language, such as body movements, space, touch, time, etc. Nonverbal behavior is significant in communication. It can complement, repeat, substitute and contradict a verbal message.

2. The Movement of the body

The movement of the body, or body language, refers to such physical behaviors used to communicate, such as eye behaviors, facial expressions, and shaking hands.

In American culture, when people want to speak, or to change the conversation topics, they express such behaviors as breaking eye contact, foot contact with the floor, smiling or leaning forward 40 degrees. Americans are familiar with such gestures as arm waving meaning hello or goodbye and extending the index and middle fingers upward from a clenched fist indicating peace or victory. Comparatively speaking, in Chinese culture, people have few such gestures, but young Chinese people are gradually using these American gestures more and more through Hollywood films.

Leathers (1986:42) said that eyes “indicate degrees of attentiveness, interest, and arousal; influence attitude change and persuasion; regulate interaction; communicate emotions; define power and status relationships; and assume a central role in impression management.” Americans value eye contact highly and look each other in the eye when engaging in communication. They believe in such saying: “Never trust anyone who cannot look into your eyes”. In china, people avoid direct eye-to-eye contact in interaction as a way of showing respect. Especially for those who are young or in a low position, making eye contact with older people or people in a higher position in communication is considered disrespectful and rude.

Cultural differences in body movements are a constant source of misunderstanding in intercultural communication because the shared meanings for the movement of bodies in one culture may be different in another. For Chinese, Americans are very exaggerating when they are communicating, because they typically have higher frequency, duration and intensity of affect displays than us. Matsumoto (1996:54) pointed out: “Different cultures recognize the power of the face and produce many rules to regulate not only what kinds of facial behavior are permitted in social interaction, but also how it may be even to attend to the faces of others during interaction.” Facial expressions can express such emotions: surprise, fear, anger, happiness, disgust and sadness. Chinese people don't often display such negative emotion as anger or disgust in public, because this may violate their face-saving rules by demolishing harmony.

Just some years ago, when a man and a woman were introduced to each other in America, they

would just nod to each other. But now it is a common practice, particularly in professional or business circles, for a man and a woman to shake hands when being introduced.

The Chinese used to clasp their hands before their chest and bowing a little when greeting others. But this form of greeting can no longer be seen gradually. They now adopt the western manner, shaking hands, when they are introduced to others. For them, shaking hands between a man and a woman is quite acceptable.

Let's take another culturally different body movement-smile-for example. In the United States, a smile means happy or friendly and is regularly used. Actually Chinese are more likely to use communication (verbal or non-verbal) as a way to promote interpersonal relationship, and smile or laugh more regularly than Americans when they are uncomfortable or embarrassed. On the contrary, Americans tend to think that communication (verbal or non-verbal) is to transfer information or advance personal welfare, and that a smile means pleasure or agreement.

3. The use of space

A person's personal space is the zone he/she occupies and claims for himself/herself with an invisible borderline circling his/her body. Everyone is the owner of his/her personal space, so he/she chooses who can enter and who can not. According to Edward Hall, there are four comfort zones of personal space within which people interact with each other: intimate, personal, social and public. The intimate zone is one used only for close relationships. The personal zone is reserved for friendship and confidentiality. The social zone is used for normal conversations. The public zone is the public speaking space. As these four zones become larger, the relationships of the participants become more distant. Different cultures differ in the distance of the four zones. The intimate zone for northern Americans may be the personal zone for Chinese.

Personal space is culture different. People from individualistic culture generally demand more personal space than people do from collectivistic culture. When a person who prefers large physical distances wants to have a simple informal conversation with one who uses close distances, there must arise some negative evaluations from both sides. The former may think the latter has intruded his personal space and try to walk backward in an attempt to maintain his/her comfortable distance for such conversations while the latter may think the former is too distant and try to walk closer in order to keep the "proper" conversational distance. When people's personal space is invaded, they react differently according to the cultures that they are from. Americans tend to react more actively and aggressively when their personal space is invaded than Chinese do.

Cultural differences in space use would always cause a lot of misunderstanding and confusion in intercultural communication. Americans who stress individualism have a larger sphere of personal space than Chinese who emphasize collectivism. Chinese in America would feel that people are quite distant from each other.

4. Touch

Different cultures have different rules of touching. Our culture teaches us whom to touch and where people could be touched in communication. Among the Americans, high status people tend to touch their subordinates than to be touched, while those in low status tend to receive touching from their superiors than to touch.

Chinese people touch each other much more than American people do in social communications. In America, the head should not be touched by others, but in China the elders always touch the head of the young as a way to show care and kindness. Mouth-to-mouth kissing is a common practice in America, but it not accepted in China. Generally speaking, Chinese men and women scarcely show physical affection in public.

Both in China and in America, females' touching other females' during conversation is more frequent than makes' touching other males.

5. The Concept of time

Chinese culture is past-time oriented culture, in which it is believed that what lies behind in the past is absolutely better than what is present now, while American culture is future-oriented culture, in which it is believed that the time of the future is better than the times of the past. Chinese people believe that previous experiences and events are most important and put great emphasis on tradition. As the Chinese proverb says “consider the past and you will know the present”, they put great importance on history. They also show great respect for elders, who are considered to be the links to the past wisdom. Americans consider the future as most important and believe that they can control their own fate through being responsible for the consequences of their actions. They tend to think of time linearly instead of cyclically.

Americans view time as valuable commodity and are time-driven. Events are carefully scheduled in specific time. They would arrive for a dinner party no later or earlier than ten minutes. But for the Chinese, they always arrive hours earlier as a dinner guest in an attempt to help the host/hostess cook the meal. The different attitudes of Americans and Chinese toward time can be seen in the different proverbs of the two cultures. Americans always say “He who hesitates is lost” and “Don’t waste too much time”, but Chinese all know such saying “He who hurries cannot walk with dignity” and “Think three times before you act”. People from the United States move at a much faster speed than people do from China.

These cultural differences in the concept of time can result in difficulties in intercultural communication. It is not surprising that a person from the future-oriented culture would regard those who are from the past-oriented culture as incoordinate, backward-looking and resisting to change in communication. People from future-oriented culture are eager to move forward and realize their goals, while people from past-oriented culture are not in any hurry to take actions and resist any change. People from different cultures that differ in the concept of time may regard each others’ responses to time as unfriendly and impolite. People from different cultures should learn to adopt their time concept to the prevailing social and situational restrictions when they participant in intercultural communications.

6. Intercultural skills for nonverbal communication

There are no behaviors universally correct. Instead, the proper behaviors are those which are appropriate in the prevailing situational context of the culture. What is right in one culture may be wrong in another. We should try to develop our intercultural skills for nonverbal communication.

When we encounter what we think inappropriate or impolite nonverbal behaviors, we should avoid making any negative judgments about others’ intentions and feelings first. We should observe what members of other culture do and the way how they behave. After observing, we should always be alert to the interpretations and generalizations that we have made. Then we should pay more attention to exceptions to our generalizations. Finally, we can put what we have learned about another culture into practice so as to improve our ability in intercultural nonverbal communication.

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