Journal of Translation and Languages مجلة الترجمة واللغات
ISSN : 1112-3974

Non-verbal Communication
An Essential Cultural Dimension

Bouhadiba Zoulikha
University of Oran-Algeria
bouhadibaz@yahoo.fr

Abstract: *Communication embodies verbal and non-verbal signs. Among the various non-verbal signs, body language is very important and helps to understand the message transmitted. It varies from a culture to another and is generally indicative of the culture one belongs to. It includes gestures, facial expressions, touch, glance, body motion, eye contact, proximity and so on.*
Non-verbal communication (which is perhaps the most important component of communication) responds to cultural rules. Ignoring or violating these rules may lead to confusing, misleading or embarrassing situations that may break the whole process of communication (which is the most important component of communication). What is perceived as normal in one culture can be perceived as illogical, rude or shocking in another. The fact that all cultures have internal variations, and that they continuously evolve, adds up to the difficulty of understanding cultures.
Keywords : *Body language, non-verbal, communication, culture, cross culture, code, interaction, message.*
Résumé : *La communication comprend des signes verbaux et non verbaux. Parmi les différents signes non verbaux, le langage corporel est très important et aide à comprendre le message transmis. Il varie d'une culture à l'autre et est généralement révélateur de la culture à laquelle on appartient. Cela comprend les gestes, les expressions faciales, le toucher, le regard, les mouvements du corps, le contact visuel, la proximité, etc.*
La communication non verbale (qui est peut-être la composante la plus importante de la communication) répond à des règles culturelles. Ignorer ou violer ces règles peut conduire à des situations confuses, trompeuses ou embarrassantes qui peuvent briser l'ensemble du processus de communication (qui est l'élément le plus important de la communication). Ce qui est perçu comme normal dans une culture peut être perçu comme illogique, grossier ou choquant dans une autre. Le fait que toutes les cultures ont des variations internes et qu'elles évoluent continuellement ajoute à la difficulté de comprendre les cultures.
Mots clés : *Langage corporel, non verbal, communication, culture, interculturel, code, interaction, message.*

1. Introduction

Non-verbal communication is defined as the non- communication modes used in a given communication. It makes use of "non-verbal codes" available to the speaker to transmit his message. It goes hand in hand with "verbal codes" and is of a great help to the listener whose task is to decode the message conveyed.

2. Non-verbal communication

Non-verbal communication involves those non-verbal stimuli in a communication setting that are generated by both the source (speaker) and his or her use of the environment and that are potential message value for the source or (receiver). Basically, it is sending and receiving messages in a variety of ways

without the use of verbal codes (words). It is both intentional and unintentional. Most speakers/listeners are not conscious of this. It includes but is not limited to: touch, glance, eye contact (gaze), proximity, gestures, facial expression, posture...

Communication embodies verbal and non-verbal signs. Among the non-verbal signs, body language is important when transmitting a message, and varies from a culture to another.

The way one communicates is indicative of the culture he belongs to. It is said that one may behave in more than one culture, or may use a combination of nonverbal signs of different cultures. While communicating, one unconsciously uses non-verbal signs (symbols) that helps the person one is interacting with discover and learn a lot about his cultural background. For understanding and interpreting correctly a message, one should give paramount importance to the non-verbal signs that accompany the verbal message to complement communication.

Chantal Besson, in 'The Importance of Non-Verbal Communication in Professional Interpretation" reminds: For the understanding of and for the correct interpretation of an utterance and its simultaneously conveyed non- verbal elements, it is crucial that there is a shared knowledge of the rules and codes of non-verbal communication which are embedded in the participant culture.

3. Some Key elements of Non-Verbal Communication

Like verbal communication, non-verbal communication reflects something of people's identity and provides some necessary information for the grasp of the communication in general and for the context of communication. Non-verbal communication also carries information about "the state of mind of a person (fascinated, bored, scared, sceptical, relaxed etc.) and the cultural traditions the person was brought up with...".

To understand the message transmitted, one has to take into consideration the way it is transmitted besides what is communicated. The way one communicates non-verbally gives more information about what one thinks, how one feels and what one wants to communicate. In other words, communication messages deliver information about "what is said", and "why" and "how" it is said. In this respect, Cross Cultural Communication, Chapter One, states: "In order to separate "what" is said from "how" it is said, interpersonal communication is required".

So, in order to comprehend most of the message conveyed one should not neglect the informative messages, i.e. the non- verbal messages that the speaker intentionally or unintentionally delivers when communicating. These are inevitable components of verbal communication. Among the different ways of non- verbal communication, one can refer to the way one greets, laughs, uses facial expressions and gesture, noise, distance, and so forth.

In "Aspects of Non-Verbal Communication", Steve Darn lists the following non-verbal signs:

- Kinesics (body motions)
- Proxemics (spacial separation)

- Haptics (touch)
- Oculesics (eye contact)
- Chronemics (use of time)
- Olfactics (smell)
- Vocalics (tone of voice, timber, volume, speed)
- Silence (absence of sound)
- Adornment (cloting, jewelry, hairstyle)
- Posture (position of the body)
- Locomotion (Walking, running, limping)
- Expression (frowns, grimaces, smiles...)

4. Non-Verbal Behaviour: Body Language

The purpose of this paper is to be concerned only with the first four non-verbal signs, i.e. kinesics, proxemics, Haptics, and oculesics. The other non-verbal signs are also important but will not be treated in the present paper.
They will be the object of another research work in terms of paralanguage.

5. Non-Verbal Communication

- Paralanguage (Sound, silence, speech rate, tone, volume...)
- BodyLanguage (gestures, facial expressions, posture, touch...)

Messages are transmitted both verbally and non-verbally. Researchers have reached agreement that most of the message conveyed is provided through non-verbal signs. This is generally referred to as non-verbal behaviour. The latter is generally suggestive of culture. In the present paper, we will be concerned only with body language, which is the most important element of non-verbal behaviour. Body language includes:

- Oculesics
- Haptics
- Kinesics
- Proxemics

According to Stephan Dahl, "kinesics looks at body movement as a factor in non-verbal behaviour, whereas oculesics, or eye behaviour, looks at the influence of visual contact on the perceived message that is being communicated. Haptics describes touching behaviour whereas proxemics is concerned with personal space usage and paralanguage looks at non-words utterances and other non-verbal clues relatively closet related to language source".

6. Oculesics (eye contact)

According to the culture or cultures one belongs to, one uses more or less eye contact. The latter may be perceived as positive in some cultures and as negative in others, i.e. it may be perceived as respectful in some cultures and as disrespectful in

others. For example, in most Arab countries eye contact may be perceived as a broken rule whe used by women. It is widely recognized by most cultures of the world that women:

- Rarely stare are men
- Break eye contact more than men.
- Signal interest by sustaining eye contact.
- Are generally the first to avert on initial gaze.
- More likely interrupted when eye contactisn't maintained with the speaker.

Occulesics, the use of the eyes in communication gives non-verbal messages that provide information not only on the message conveyed but on the attitude and mood of the speaker. Most of the time the listener can get interesting information on the message delivered. He can detect a wide range of emotions that help him better interact.

As already mentioned, eye contact is submitted to cultural rules that guides the speaker. Long eye contact or staring is perceived as uncomfortable in most cultures, and can be misinterpreted. Staring at someone is generally interpreted as a warning, as a feeling of contempt, or as a discreet order (given to children to watch their utterance or behaviour).

7. Haptics

Haptics refers to the touching behaviour. Some cultures use more haptic behaviour than others. So, haptics is also culture-bound, i.e. conditioned by culture. Countries like Italy, Latin America, Middle East and Africa are considered "touching countries", whereas countries like France, Japan, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia are considered as "non-touching countries".

In "touching countries" people tend to touch each other when a/ giving information or advice rather than receiving it; b/ giving an order rather than responding to one; c/ requesting a favour rather than reacting to it; d/ attempting to persuade someone rather than being persuaded; e/ engaging in deep rather than casual conversation; f/ attending social events rather than being at work; g/ conveying excitement rather than receiving it from someone else; h/ receiving reactions of concern rather than communicating them .

8. Kinesics (Body language)

According to culture, one uses more or less gestures to communicate non-verbally. Among the gestures used one can consider facial expressions that are a fundamental body sign punctuating the verbal communication. This eye behaviour or commonly called eye contact (by most anthropologists) varies with culture, age, and of course, gender.

Writing about the issue, Desmond Morris states:

I've been to 91 different countries now, looking at gestures. For example, as you go South through Europe down through the Mediterranean, gestures become more and more extreme and exaggerated. They are more frequent and with greater amplitude.

9. Proxemics (cultural use of space)

Proxemics varies considerably from a culture to another. One communicates; he uses a certain distance which may be close, medium, too close, or far, according to the proxemics code used in his culture. The cultural use of distance in interpersonal communication, can be the object of misunderstanding and discomfort when use inappropriately:

This aspect of communication is easily violated when someone invades another's personal space. For example, an Iranian has a much smaller personal space than an American. This becomes obvious as they talk—often the American will back up uncomfortably to compensate for the perceived invasion of personal space, while the Iranian will move closer for the opposite reason.

When communicating, one should pay attention to the interlocutor use of space and respect it, and not impose his cultural use of distance. Of course, one is not aware of the importance of distance when communicating and does not realise how much one can violate the cultural code of space used by the listener and make him feel uncomfortable, and therefore put a barrier to cross cultural communication. "Most of us are unaware of the importance of space in communicating until we are confronted with someone who uses it differently."

Among the various types of non-verbal communication, proxemics is perhaps the element that has the most undesired results on interactions. It may lead to a deep misunderstanding, or to an uncomfortable situation because of the violation of the cultural code of behaviour.

10. Personal territory

Personal territory is an important cultural element of proxemics. It is, of course, culture bound, and perhaps a vital condition for the success of communication. Anthropologists consider three types of space: public space, social space, and personal space (personal territory or personal zone). There are personal codes of conduct in using proxemics. According to Michael Sheppard, public space ranges from 12 to 25 feet and is the distance maintained between the audience and the speaker... Social space ranges from 4 to 10 feet and is used for communication among business associates, as well as to separate strangers using public areas such as beaches and bus stops. Personal space ranges from 2 to 4 feet and is used among friends and family members and to separate people waiting in lines.

The above proxemics code is appropriate, and seems to be universal, but it is generally used by Western cultures. It does not correspond to the Arabs proxemics code in general. To illustrate the point Michael Sheppard gives the example of Saudi Arabia where two persons can be found negotiating "nose to nose" even though they might be strangers. Their culture being completely different from the Western one,

their social space is used accordingly and may be misunderstood or perceived as personal space by other cultures.

11. Body Language, Non-verbal Communication, and Culture

Body language communicates enormously, and it is assumed, even more than verbal communication. During the process of communication, there is a direct link between verbal and non-verbal messages. Facial expressions, gestures, the movement of the body, the use of space, etc. all, simultaneously, communicate.

Facial expressions such as smiles, frowns, and yawns can have enormous consequences. Eye contact alone can carry and mis-carry a lot of information and is more typical of the Western world. Staring at strangers is impolite. Extended eye contact is rude. Avoiding eye contact can be a sign of insecurity. Shifting eyes could diminish the credibility of one's words or could be interpreted as hiding something

Of course, gestures and body movements or posture have different meanings and belong to particular codes, according to culture. They can belong to usual codes in one culture but can be interpreted as shocking, or rude in another. Sometimes, they can be the object of serious misunderstanding. For example, beckoning to a person with the forefinger is generally perceived as rude or ill-mannered, whereas noses touch (used as a greeting in some Arab countries) can be shocking or misunderstood. Axtell, R.E., in Gestures: The Do's and Taboos of Body Language around the World, states:

We must learn that every culture has different types of values, beliefs, customs, norms and taboos. We have to accept them and to respect them for what they are...It is very important to put ourselves in their shoes, and not judge their traditions, values and ways of communicating...They are just different bodily behaviour in public settings is sometimes shared by most cultures. Generally, anthropologists refer to the bodily behaviour and to the silent code and set of rules that guides it. They most of the time illustrate the point by giving the example of "using the lift". Concerning the issue, Gary Imai quotes Axtell, R. E.:

> When people enter an elevator. One or two persons: they each lean against the walls of the elevator Four persons: occupy a corner Five or six: all turn to face the door get taller and thinner hands and purses and briefcases hang down in front of the body must not touch each other in any way unless the elevator is crowded at the shoulder or lightly against the upper arm. have a tendency to look upward at the illuminated floor indicator.

12. Some examples of Arab Body Language

Like Proxemics, Arab body language is culturally conditioned and is different from Western body language in general. The list below gives the most known signs of body language

- Hand on heart (to greet)

- Finger on the nose (to agree)
- The chin scratch (to think)
- Kissing the shoulder (to show respect)
- Biting right finger (to show contempt)
- Staring (to give attention)
- Hand on stomach (to show that the speaker is a liar)
- Hugging (to show friendship)
- Scratching claw (to beckon)
- The cup sign, i.e. putting all fingers and thumb together (to interrupt)

13. Body Language and Cross Culture: Some North African/ Mediterranean Non-Verbals

North African/Mediterranean people are known for their excessive use of gestures when communicating. This is understandable on the grounds that they are Mediterranean. Of course, most gestures are used unconsciously and accompany the message they want to communicate. They use their hands to punctuate and emphasise the important elements they want tp transmit to their interlocutor. This is especially so when they express their anger, reproach, disagreement, or dissatisfaction.

It is common to see that the behaviour of a North African person (especially a young one) changes suddenly when he is interacting. This generally indicates that the person is expressing a feeling of anger. In this case, he will use more threatening gestures and facial expressions, before breaking the communication. In general, people tend to ignore or forget that body language, just as language, is culture-specific and communicates enormously. In many instances, people will try to adjust their body behaviour in a cross-cultural interaction.

14. Some Widely Used North African Non-Verbals

Use the index finger to point to someone or something.
Embrace and kiss to greet.
Slap people's shoulders.
Use too much eye contact (except when they are telling lies, hiding something, or have told lies or criticized the interactor.
Use familiar gestures (sometimes even with strangers).
Hiss (to beckon someone or to greet).
Use the Victory sign and the thumb's up and down too much.
Clap hands (to show surprise, happiness, or agreement).
Laugh a lot when communicating (they punctuate communication with laughter).
Use the madness sign inappropriately (most of the time when joking).
Walk hand-in-hand or arm-in-arm with their friends.
Do not respect the rule of taking turns in conversation.
Make too much noise when they speak.
Avert their eyes when telling lies.

Wink a lot (before laughing, when greeting, or beckoning to someone).
Breathe in people's face.
Show disinterest by turning head right and left.
Look down when they greet (when they have done something wrong).
Show the palm of the right hand to ward off the evil eye, and to greet.
Nod too much (sometimes even when they disagree with a point).
Use clenched fist to joke.
Cover the mouth when speaking (when they give wrong information).
Run hand/hands through hair (when they lie, when they do not know the answer to a question, when they want to hide something, when they cannot take a decision, or when they are embarrassed).
Walk with hands in pocket.
Use touch (to call the listener's attention).
Look up and down at someone (when they notice a change in a person's look).
Show aggressive gestures with head and hands (when they do not want to lose face).
Invade people's personal space (personal territory or personal zone).
Tap foot (to show disinterest or eagerness to change conversation topic or interrupt communication).
Turn back to the interactor (when they do not like him, when they have done something wrong to him, or when they are angry with him).
Shrug shoulders to indicate that they do not care or are not afraid.

15. Conclusion

To sum up, non-verbal communication (which is perhaps the most important component of communication) responds to cultural rules. Ignoring or violating these rules may lead to confusing, misleading or embarrassing situations that may break the whole process of communication (which is the most important component of communication). What is perceived as normal in one culture can be perceived as illogical, rude or shocking in another. The fact that all cultures have internal variations, and that they continuously evolve, adds up to the difficulty of understanding cultures.

References

[1] Axtell, R.E. (1998). Gestures: The Do's and Taboos of Body Language around the World. New York: Wiley.
[2] Dahl, S. (2008). Kinesics. http://stephan.dahl.at/nonverbal/kinesics.html