

# Body Language in Different Cultures

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The paper presents a variety of different body languages in different cultures of the world. Body language can convey a wide range of meanings. It is shown as follows: People in different cultures share the common sense by using the same body language such as gazing and eye management, facial expressions, gestures, and body movements; on the other hand, people in different cultures express the distinctive meanings by using the same body language. It comes in three aspects: First, eye contact is different from culture to culture; second, other nonverbal gestures are varying from culture to culture; third, proper distance between two people shows their various attitudes from different cultures.

*Keywords:* body language, cultures, eye contact, gesture, distance

## Introduction

As we know, culture consists of all the shared products of human society. Language is a part of culture and plays a very important role in it. It can be seen as a keystone of culture. Without language, culture would not be possible. On the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture and it reflects culture. Culture differs from one another and each one is unique. Learning a language means not only learning the pronunciation and the grammar, but also the culture and customs.

Yet language is not the only way to express our ideas and feelings. Body movement, eye contact, gesture, and facial expression can also convey messages. We call this nonverbal communication body language. Body language is as much a part of our culture as our verbal language. Despite our failure to realize it, we communicate by much more than words when the conversation takes place. By using facial expressions, gestures, and other body movements, we send messages to those around us. Different cultures have different ways of making nonverbal communication and different people have different gestures of conveying their expressions. However, nonverbal communication, like traffic, is not random; it has a purpose and there are common rules to guide its flow. Learning the different common rules of body language in different cultures is very useful for us to understand each other better. As William Shakespeare said: "There's language in her eye, her cheek, her lip".

## Sharing the Common Sense by the Same Body Language in Different Cultures

Body language, like unwritten rules, can convey a wide range of meanings. In some circumstances through the same body language we can share the common sense. For example, an outstretched hand shows welcome; waving an outstretched hand with open palm is the gesture for "goodbye". If you have a chance to see the silent

movies, you will find a large amount of body languages displayed there with common understandable meanings in different cultures. Since the body can be regarded as message carrier, and it has a great deal to do with how we communicate as well as what we communicate, we can use a series of stylized facial expressions, gestures, and physical postures to represent different emotions, attitudes, and meanings. Sometimes we can share the common sense from culture to culture.

First, we can use the gaze and eye management to express the same attitudes and meanings. Of the special sense organs, the eye has a uniquely sociological function. The union and interaction of individuals is based upon mutual glances. If there occurred no glance of eye to eye, the totality of social relations of human beings would be changed in unpredictable ways. The ability to look someone straight in the eye is considered significant in a number of countries. In most cultures, looking at a person of the opposite sex is considered rude or an invitation to a sexual relationship. A man may not gaze at another man's wife in front of her husband even when greeting her. It is common sense that women must avoid a long-time eye contact with men unless they are romantically involved. In most cultures, we consider it impolite to stare at others in public so we always try to avoid prolonged eye contact with strangers on the street. But if the glance is accompanied by a smile, it is permissible to keep looking; but if the person doing the looking maintains a stone face, the receiver will be made to feel very uncomfortable. In classrooms, teachers from different cultures manage to keep eye contact with almost every student even at corners. The more opportunity to meet the teacher's eye, the greater the participation.

Second, some of the facial expressions convey the same meanings from culture to culture. The bushy eyebrows that extended high on the forehead show the surprised impression. Smile indicates one's being in good mood or having friendly attitude almost in every culture. Suddenly turning red-faced shows one's anger, shock, excitement, or embarrassment. The wide-eye with a half-opened mouth means terror or surprise. In addition we all share the nonverbal messages that can work in a number of different ways to determine who should speak, when speech is appropriate, to whom speech may be directed in our conversation. And to some extent we rely heavily on nonverbal cues to determine when we speak in a smooth and efficient manner. The common nonverbal behaviors being found to accompany conversational closings are as follows: breaking of eye contact, nodding behavior, or smiling slightly, etc.. Thanks to these useful nonverbal behaviors we never need any verbal cues to determine who speaks next in our interpersonal communication. So we say "Silence is one great art of conversation" written by William Hazlitt.

Third, we can share the common sense by using the same gestures. Talking with your hands in your pockets or pointing with your index finger is considered as impolite in most cultures. Putting your index finger vertically in front of your lips to signal others to stop talking or to speak softly, which is accompanied by "Shhh" at the same time, is universal almost all over the world. Using a toothpick in public is rude in many cultures, and if you do it, you should cover the toothpick with your hand. A simple handshake is the common custom for men. Hugging and embracing in public is fairly common among women in most of the more industrialized European countries, when meeting after a period of absence or at time of departure. The sign "V" means victory almost all over the world.

Last, some other physical postures and body movements can express the same meanings in different cultures. For instance, back in one's seat and yawning at a talk or lecture shows lack of interest and looking at your watch for several times in a conversation demonstrates your absent-minded behavior or having something urgent. As a

matter of fact, body trunk carries information about the intensity of an emotion just like the face reveals which emotion is being felt. By looking at body position and movement alone, we are able to reach some consensus as to the emotion being sent. In another word, degree of muscle tension, body posture, rate of body movement, and overall coordination of body actions all help us judge the intensity of emotion. Besides, students sitting near the front of a classroom are more likely to interact with the instructor than those at the back.

### **Different Expressions of the Same Body Language in Different Cultures**

But not all body languages can indicate the same meanings in different cultures. Gestures can be particularly troublesome for the simple reason that a slight difference in making the gesture itself can mean something quite different from what is expected. Eye contact and some physical postures can also contribute to too much confusion in different cultures.

#### **Various Rules About Eye Contact**

Eye contact varies from culture to culture. It is an important aspect of body language. Just as the old saying goes: “The eyes are the window of the soul”. The way you look at someone conveys important cultural messages. And the rules about eye contact are numerous and complex.

First of all, in some cultures people respect and involve the direct eye contact; sometimes, even public speaking also involves plenty of eye contact. In conversations, American custom demands that there be eye contact between people concerned, and this applies to both the speaker and listener. Without eye contact, people in the conversation would be considered as guilty, indifferent, afraid, dishonest, and so on. In English there is a saying “Don’t trust anyone who won’t look you in the eye”. In many countries, direct eye contact between two people is regarded as essential. This kind of eye contact involves looking straight into the eyes of the other person—not at the other person’s neck or mouth, at some spot far away or at the place on the ground. According to most Western cultures, if a person looks directly at you, it is a sign that the person is honest, intelligent, and sincere and even can be trusted. When you are talking and the other person is listening, a clear and direct gaze by the listener signifies that he or she is interested in what you are saying. According to certain cultures, if a person looks down at the ground or constantly shifts his or her gaze away from the other person’s eyes, he or she is frequently considered to be any of the following: dishonest, insincere, distrustful, stupid, lazy, inattentive, and uninterested in others. In cultures that value direct eye contact from both speaker and listener in a conversation or any other interaction, it would be dangerous for you not to look people straight in the eyes. You would be branded as having many unpleasant qualities.

On the contrary, many cultures believe that direct eye contact from a child to an adult is an act of disrespect or defiance that should be punished. “In a number of places, such as Ghana, Guinea—Bissau, the Philippines, some Hispanic countries, and even Appalachian Mountain areas in the U.S., direct eye contact from child to adult is not allowed” (Oguibe, 1992). Instead, children are expected to look down as a sign of respect for elders. However, it is not only children who cannot look directly into an older person’s eyes in some cultures.

In Bangladesh, though direct eye contact is valued in conversations with peers, everyone—even adults—must show respect for an older people or a person of a higher status by keeping eyes to the ground and speaking only when spoken to. In Japan, speakers are supposed to look at the listener’s neck or elsewhere, not into his or her eyes. (Oguibe, 1992)

Besides, “winking is impolite in Hong Kong, Tunisia, and Bangladesh. And winking at the opposite sex is vulgar in Nepal, Paraguay, and Australia, among other countries. Winking at children in Nigeria tells them it is time to leave the room”. In the U.S., a wink between two people can mean many things such as: “we are having fun, aren’t we?” “The person over there is ridiculous, don’t you think?” “We have a secret between us” “I like you”, or “ I want to get sexually close to you”.

### **Various Signals of Nonverbal Gestures**

The nonverbal world of gestures varies from culture to culture. On the one hand some gestures can express approval. “The OK sign means strong approval or goodness in North American culture” (Oguibe, 1992). To the French, the OK gesture means “zero” or “worthless” not “fine” or “OK”. Many cultures including France and a number of Latin American countries show approval by the thumbs up gesture.

But in Bangladesh, this same sign means rejection, not approval. Two thumbs are better than one in Kenya, where this double sign means approval. In Zimbabwe—just as in many parts of the world—people often use hand clapping to show thanks or positive feelings. Greeks indicate approval or “yes” by shaking the head from side to side. Downward nodding can mean approval in Lebanon and Iran. In Honduras, clasping both hands shows strong approval. In Tonga, raising the eyebrows indicates agreement or liking. An Italian gesture of praise or happiness is the ‘cheek screw’ in which the person pokes his or her index finger into the cheek and twists it. And kissing one’s own fingertips is a sign of happiness, joy, and utter approval of something or someone. (Oguibe, 1992)

On the other hand, some gestures express disapproval. In Greece, Iran, and Italy a slight upward nod shows “no”. Bulgarians nod up and down to indicate dislike. People in Guinea—Bissau indicate “no” by saying negative words and bending one or both arms and quickly flapping them against the body. Lebanese inhabitants show “no” by an upward movement of the head or raised eyebrows, sometimes accompanied by a clicking of the tongue. In Lebanon, negativity can also be expressed by shaking the index finger from side to side.

In addition, some other gestures can express many other different meanings, the chin flick is used in Italy to mean “Get lost”, but in Paraguay and Brazil it means “I don’t know”. Koreans are expected to make smacking and sucking gestures during meals to show that the food is good. The “suck-teeth” gesture in Black American culture involves sucking air through one’s teeth to show anger or annoyance.

Don’t throw small items to someone, always hand them to someone. This is the rule in many Latin countries. Burping in public is uncouth in Quebec, where the thumbs-down gesture is also offensive. Talking with your hands in your pockets is obnoxious to people in Switzerland, Russia, Austria, Germany, France, Finland, Wales, and Guatemala. (Oguibe, 1992)

Spitting is inappropriate in some African lands. But it is accepted in a few undeveloped countries. “Don’t scratch yourself in public in Senegal, Belgium, Wales, or France, but go ahead in the U.S. as long as you are not in a formal setting” (Oguibe, 1992). Using the left hand to pass objects is rude in several cultures around the globe, and gesturing with the left hand is also obscene or impolite in some other cultures.

Sweeping a hand toward your own body means that someone is stealing or getting away with something according to many people in Latin America and the Netherlands, but in Peru, it means “pay me”. To a Honduran or Colombian, a hand placed under the elbow means someone is stingy, but to a person from Holland, this gesture means “He’s unreliable”. (Fast, 1971)

Kissing as a social custom carries different meanings for various groups of people. In the orient, kissing is an

intimate sexual act and is not permissible in public even as a social greeting or display of friendliness. But among the Tapuya of South America kisses are exchanged only among the males as a sign of peace (Fast, 1971).

### **Various Signals in the Distance Between People**

The matter of physical contact between members of the same sex in English-speaking countries is a delicate one. Distance between the two is the key factor. Different people hold different ideas about the proper distance between people conversing. According to the studies, it seems that there are four main distances in American social and business relations: intimate, personal, social, and public. Intimate distance ranges from direct physical contact to a distance of about 45 centimeters; this is for people's most private relations and activities between man and wife, for example. Personal distance is about 45-80 centimeters and is most common when friends, acquaintances, and relatives converse. Social distance may be anywhere from about 1.30 meters to 3 meters. People who work together, or people doing business, as well as most of those in conversation at social gatherings tend to keep a distance of about 1.30-2 meters. Public distance is farther than any of the above and is generally for speakers in public and for teachers in classrooms.

### **Conclusion**

The study of body language should be complementary to language learning because it serves to deepen or promote the understanding of the culture. Some authorities feel that the two are dependent on each other. In a word, all body languages should be interpreted within a given context to eliminate the situation that would be otherwise misleading. Thanks to the means of modern transportation and communication, the world is getting smaller and smaller. People from different cultures have more and more chance to communicate with each other. But the cultural exchanges as well as the cultural shocks of our body language become more and more severe and inevitable. So, in order to communicate effectively in a foreign language, one should also know the different gestures, body movements, mannerisms and so on that accompany a particular language. When we communicate in a certain language, it is advisable to use the nonverbal behavior that goes with the particular language. A truly bilingual person switches his body language at the same time he switches language. This makes communication easier and better.

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