

A Comparative Study of Body Language Between China and the West

MU Qian, MENG Fan-mao
Linyi University, Linyi, China

As a communicative tool to exchange ideas and express feelings, body language plays an indispensable role in intercultural communication. It is an important part of nonverbal communication, closely connected with culture. In intercultural communication, it must be admitted that the meaning of body language varies greatly; even the same body language has various meanings and functions in different cultural backgrounds. Using body language wrongly can make people fail in interpersonal communications, which would also cause misunderstanding and conflict in international communication. Therefore, it is important to know the differences of the same body language in different countries and how to use body language correctly.

Keywords: body language, cultural differences, intercultural communication, nonverbal communication

Introduction

Body language is one of the most important parts of nonverbal communication. In communication, it plays an essential role. But many people pay much attention to the acceptance and correctness of the verbal communication and overlook the influence and cultural differences of nonverbal communication. Then misunderstandings and cultural crashes often occur, especially in cross-cultural communications. To avoid misunderstandings and cultural crashes and communicate more successfully and effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds, people must know much about body language and its connotations.

Many scholars have performed studies on body language, such as Michcal Prosser (2004), Peter Collett (2006), Allan Pease and Jacqueline Kent (1981), ZHOU Zeng-wen (2009), etc.. It is easy to find that body languages have different meanings between China and the West as well as similarities. Some researchers divide body language into a broad sense and a narrow sense. For instance, Peter Collett said broadly: There are two types of body language: "quality", like height or weight; "action", like smile and hold arms or unconsciously say some words, which reveal one's intention; while ZHOU Zeng-wen deals with body language from a narrow sense. These studies show that body language takes an important role to help people communicate and has different meanings in China and Western countries. And they have created many contrastive body languages, which will be good for further study in this area and for successful intercultural communication.

MU Qian, School of Foreign Languages, Linyi University.

MENG Fan-mao, associate professor, master, School of Foreign Languages, Linyi University.

This paper is to deal with the functions and cultural similarities and differences of body language between Chinese and English, in an attempt to provide people from English-speaking countries and China with communicative tips. To illustrate the similarities and differences of body language between China and the West, the authors employed an experimental study.

Contrasts of Body Language Between China and the West

Differences of Body Language Seen Through Its Classifications

There are several classifications of body language. Now the authors will briefly talk about contrasts from the following points. They are eye contact, facial expression, gestures, proper distance, and touch.

Eye contact. As the saying goes “The eyes are the window of the soul”. That is to say, people can read one’s mind through his/her eyes. The eyes are extremely important tools for communication, and eye contact is also an important aspect of body language. Patterns of eye contact vary from culture to culture. Generally speaking, people from English speaking countries have more eye contact when they are in conversation.

The main difference between Chinese and English eye contact focuses on the eye etiquette. According to American tradition, on man-to-man occasion, Americans are required to look at the other man in their eyes to show their honesty, or they will be regarded as disdained, scared, indifferent, or absent-minded. Thus, there is a saying in American English: “Never try to believe those who dare not look squarely at your eyes”.

When they communicate, Americans are used to staring at their counterpart’s eye, look at him or her carefully and treat it as confidence. However, in Chinese culture, people who are engaged in interpersonal communication will not look directly into others’ eyes, especially when the youth talks to the old or the subordinate talks to his superior. They are asked to lower their head and nod in order to show their modesty and respect. (YANG, 2002, pp. 119-121)

Meanwhile, it is impolite to stare at people or holding a glance too long. Even when the look may be one of appreciation or of beauty, it may make people uneasy and embarrassed. However, it is interesting that most Chinese people often gaze at foreigners curiously in the public. In fact, such behavior has violated the taboo of the communication. But for Chinese culture, it is quite common and is nothing more than curiosity.

Facial expressions. Many people and scholars have claimed that facial expressions are probably the most significant areas of the body for nonverbal communication, especially, attitudes and emotion.

The face has been called an “organ of emotion” because we constantly read facial expressions to understand what others are feeling. The face provides vital clues to our own feelings and those of the people around us. We may be able to hide our hand, and may choose to be silent; however, we cannot hide our face without making people feel we are attempting to deceive them. Since we cannot “put the face away,” we are able to control the expressions we reveal to others. And it is apparently true that when conversing with each other parts of the body. Of all the nonverbal channels, the face is the most important broadcaster of emotions. (WANG, 2008, p. 588)

Facial expressions carry meaning determined by contexts and relationships. Many facial expressions have been identified as having an innate basis in humans. For instance, smile, which is typically an expression of pleasure, has many functions.

A smile may show affection, convey politeness and so on. Pain is conveyed by a grimace, which also signifies disgust or disapproval. Surprise, shock, or disbelief can be shown by raising the eyebrows. A wink given to a friend may mean “You and I have a secret.” Or “I’m just kidding.” Between a man and woman, a wink can be flirtatious. Our faces easily reveal emotions and attitudes. (WANG, 2008, p. 588)

Smile and laughter usually convey friendliness, approval, satisfaction, pleasure, joy, merriment. This is generally true in China as well as the English-speaking countries. However, there are situations when some Chinese laugh that will cause negative reactions by Westerners. For example, when a foreigner drops a plate quite by accident and feels badly and Chinese onlookers laugh, compounding his discomfort and causing anger and bad feeling.

Such laughter, of course, is not at the person or his misfortune—whether he is a foreigner or a Chinese. It can convey a number of feelings: don't take it so seriously, laugh it off, it's nothing, such things can happen to any of us, etc.. (DENG & LIU, 1989, p. 135)

However, for people are unaware of this attitude, the reaction to such laughter is usually quite unpleasant and often generates ill feeling towards those laughing.

Gestures. Gestures are an important component of nonverbal communication, without which the world would be static and colorless. In a broad sense, gestures refer to specific body movements that carry meanings. In a narrow sense, they are hand movements that are closely related to speech and illustrate it. Here the authors study on the narrow sense.

The hands are able to communicate a great deal. Some gestures may indicate general emotional arousal, which produces diffuse bodily activity, while others appear to be expressions of particular emotional states. Gestures are both innate and learned. They are used in all cultures, tend to be tied to speech processes, and are usually automatic. (HU, 1999, p. 103)

In the United States, pointing is a very common kind of gesture. Americans point to objects and at people with the index finger. Germans point with the little finger. In China, pointing at a person with the index finger is considered rude. They always make the gesture with the hand or with the palm up.

People from Western countries turn their rings around constantly to show nervousness or uneasiness. Now people from Taiwan and Hong Kong also have this gesture. But if people in the mainland of China act like this, they will be regarded they are showing off richness. It is clear to see the same gesture with different meanings in different cultures, and people from different cultures will express same meaning by different gestures. So it is necessary for people to know the cultural difference to avoid misunderstanding.

Proper distance. During the conversation, distance between the two communicators is a key factor. "The conversion of distance between you and the people with whom you communicate is as much a part of communication experiences as the words you exchange" (Hall, 1973, p. 95). It is possible that you might allow one person to stand very close to you while you keep another at a distance. Different people have different ideas about the proper distance between people's conversation. According to Dr. Hall (1973), there are four kinds of boundaries of distance for Americans as follows:

- (1) Intimate distance, 0-45 cm. It is fit for married couples and lovers.
- (2) Personal distance, 45-120 cm. It is fit for the communication between friends, acquaintances or relatives.
- (3) Social distance, 120-360cm. It is used in the situation of dealing with impersonal affairs.
- (4) Public distance, 360-750cm. It is available in informal parties. (as cited in Jules, 1988)

"The important thing to keep in mind is that most English-speaking people like the English, Americans and Australians do not like people to be too close unless there is a reason, such as showing affection or encouraging intimacy" (DENG & LIU, 1989, p. 128). There is a typical example. Watch an Arab and an Englishman in

conversation. The Arab, showing friendliness in the manner of his people, will stand close to the Englishman. The latter will move back, wanting to keep a certain distance considered proper by the English custom. The Arab will then move forward to be closer; the Englishman will keep moving backward. In the end, the two men may be quite a distance from the place where they were originally standing.

Touch. Touch refers to the way people exchange information by touching one's body. Cultures differ in the overall amount of touching that they prefer. High-contact cultures such as those in the Middle East, Latin America, and southern Europe touch each other in social conversations much more than people do from non-contact cultures, such as Asia. These cultural differences can lead to difficulties in intercultural communication.

In English-speaking countries, such as the United States, common friends and acquaintances will avoid body touch. Even in the crowded elevator, body touch is not allowed. Touching the other people slightly or unconsciously, people will say "Sorry", "Very Sorry", "Excuse me" in a hurry to express apology. Or else he will be treated with disdain or even more intense response. In these countries, people particularly mind their private space, which often represents people's privacy and intimacy. However, in China, the sense of private space is comparatively weak. It is crowded in China because of a large population. So Chinese have got used to it and they often show their understanding and tolerance. Sometimes, people may feel uncomfortable with the physical contact in crowd. But they would forgive and endure this kind of behavior rather than get angry.

However, Arabs would be more in favor of physical contact. They like to stand close, no matter at home or in public areas. When encountering friends, they would embrace, caress and touch the noses. Western people would be terrified by the sight of these kinds of greeting. (Jules, 1988, pp. 32-33)

In English speaking countries, people used to hug or kiss each other in public between males and females, which is unacceptable and only exists between lovers and couples in private in China. It is common to see youth of the same sex hold hands and hug in China. But in English speaking countries, it will be regarded homosexuality.

Culture is all-persuasive and boundless. It is everywhere and in everything. The same is also true of body language on nonverbal communication. All human beings perform actions to which other people attach meaning, but these meanings are culturally based on. And it is also found that all these differences in body language among countries are cultivated over many years by an intricately constructed mixture of cultural, historical, and racial differences. To understand such differences is essential in one's attempt to understand another society. Therefore, when communicating in a certain language, it can save you from anxiety and ethnocentrism, and make the intercultural communication easier and better. Understanding nonverbal communication improves with practice. The first step in practice is to recognize the power of nonverbal communication. Along with your life experiences, training, beliefs and all that make up your past, it is your inner expert on nonverbal communication.

Differences Between Body Language and Its Meaning

"A comparative study of Chinese and American body language shows a number of diversities and similarities of body language. It shows the importance of knowing the specific gestures that go with a language" (DENG & LIU, 1989, p. 136).

Same body language, different meanings. (1) Body language: stamping one's foot
Meaning in China: anger, irritation

Meaning in U.S.: impatience

(2) Body language: speaker or performer clapping at the same time audiences applaud

Meaning in China: thank you; mutual positive feelings

Meaning in U.S.: applauding oneself; immodest

Different body language, same meaning. (1) Meaning: “come here” (beckoning someone to come)

Body language in China: hand extended toward person, open palm, with all fingers crooked.

Body language in U.S.: hand extended toward person, closed hand, with forefinger only moving back and forth. (In China, this gesture would be considered offensive.)

(2) Meaning: I am very full. (After a meal)

Body language in China: one or both hands open, lightly patting one’s own stomach.

Body language in U.S.: hand raised to throat, fingers extended, and palm down (often with the remark: I am full up to here.)

Body language and meaning in one single culture. (1) Body language: thumbing one’s nose

Meaning in U.S.: contempt, defiance

(2) Body language: thumb down (arm crooked in front of body, closed fist, thumb extended down, and one or several downward movements)

Meaning in U.S.: rejection of a proposal, idea, person; nonverbal way of saying a strong “No”.

These examples are by no means complete, but enough to illustrate the diversity of body language and to show the importance of knowing the specific gestures that go with a language. People should learn to communicate in a correct way, not only by words, but also by body language.

Comparisons of Body Language Between China and the West

People must admit that body language has some similarities. As economy and culture become mingled, communications are more close and frequent. The world becomes smaller and smaller, which has been called “global village”. In it the cultural meaning of body language tends to be similar. For instance, the signal “V” means “Victory”—People can see a Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) infected person use it to show his firm confidence to overcome the terrible disease in China. “OK” means “Consent”—People often use it to show our positive ideas. “Shrugging one’s shoulders” means “negative, uninteresting”—People use it to show that they do not know when asked by others in the daily life.

The authors have discussed different cultural meanings of body language and its cause. Though different cultures result in different body languages, they also have common features. For example, master of comedy, Chaplin was very popular with people all over the world because of his humorous behavior in the silent films during the 1920s and the 1930s. Now, the authors will go on the similarities of body language.

Charles Darwin mentioned emotional expression of human and animals. In his book *The Origin of Species* (1872), he discussed whether the same expressions and postures suggested the same meaning both for human and animals. And he asked people all around the world and collected their possible replies. Surprisingly, the answers were almost same, especially on facial expressions. Head nodding often means agreement or greeting in most countries. And shaking one’s head often means disagreement or “No”. Applauding means appreciation or agreement and so on.

If a person is hurt, he/she will cry to express painfulness. And people smile when they are happy. Waving one's hand means goodbye. Even some Chinese and English expressions and their meanings are totally the same. For example, patting on the back means encouragement and appreciation. Pulling a long face indicates unhappiness and anger. Being all smile means happiness, standing with folded arms means indifference and so on.

Researchers can analyze the reason why different cultures have the same meaning on body language from psychology, linguistics, anthropology, philosophy, and so on. From anthropology, body language is the symbols and a tool of human communication. Human beings have the same ancestor, which determines the similarities of body language. Nowadays, with the development of the world, people from different cultures communicate more and more often. People have more chance to exchange culture and economy. The expert, McLuhan (1994) compared the world to "global village" to describe the world, which means the world becoming smaller and smaller because of more and more communication. On the one hand, people from the East have accepted the body language from the West, such as thumbing a ride, shrugging, "OK" gesture, "V" gesture, and so on. On the other hand, with rapid development of East Asia and Southeast Asia, the body language from East world has a great influence on that of the west world. In the communication of East and West people, many Westerners have learned Chinese customs and etiquettes.

Conclusion

Being a branch of the means of nonverbal communication, body language can express what the verbal language cannot directly do. The study of body language makes people understand others well and behave in proper ways without making too many mistakes. If one wants to be a successful communicator in intercultural communication, it is necessary for him/her to learn and respect cultures of the countries or regions from which the communicating partners come. It is difficult to master body language completely because of its complexity, but people can improve their communicative abilities if they do the utmost to remember how people from different cultures act and keep an understanding and tolerant attitude towards the differences. Only when people make a clear understanding on body language and its cultural connotations can they use it to avoid misunderstanding and create an efficient communication.

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