

Intercultural Communication: A comparison of Iranian and American Nonverbal Behaviors

Sahar Najarzagadean *

Islamic Azad University, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, Isfahan, Iran

Abstract

Communication is an art we should master, especially in the professions that involve interpersonal relations, which are emotionally, diplomatically and historically charged (Gheorghita, 2012). Communication can be carried out either verbally or nonverbally. A lot have been written concerning verbal behaviors; however, as an intrinsic part of culture, nonverbal behavior has not yet received enough attention. Since intercultural relations are highly important and language learner should be aware of the second language culture he is learning, Iranian nonverbal behaviors are compared in this article with those of North Americans. Thus observing what is acceptable and what is taboo in the other language can help not only the second language learners and travelers of both countries but also any traveler coming to these two countries avoid an embarrassing time in social or public situations.

Keywords: nonverbal behavior (NVB); verbal communications; intercultural relations

INTRODUCTION

Pragmatics

The Center of Advanced Research in Language Acquisition at the University of Minnesota (2006) has defined Pragmatics as the way we convey meaning through communication. This meaning includes verbal and non-verbal elements and varies depending on the context, the relationship between people talking, and many other social factors. This definition puts the emphasis on communication and names social factors influencing the ways in which meaning is expressed and conveyed. Thus, pragmatics can be defined as the subfield of linguistics intended to study the use of the individuals' language with the most accurate level of appropriateness and correctness possible on their performance according to the context or situation where the language is used, and the pragmatic elements that it involves, such as proxemics, chronemics, haptics, and register Echeverria Castillo (2009).

All aspects of appropriate communication are referred to as “pragmatic elements.” Moran (2001) organizes these elements into two broad categories: linguistic and extralinguistic. Linguistic features are those that deal with language, verbal or written, including paralanguage and the vocal effects that accompany oral language. Extralinguistic features are those that are commonly referred to as non-verbal communication.

NVC and intercultural relations

With the development of globalization, intercultural communication has become more frequent and more significant than even before (Wang, 2007). According to Chen and Starosta (1996), the abilities of negotiating cultural meanings and executing appropriately effective communication behaviors allow people to become competent in intercultural communication. Intercultural communication and nonverbal communication have become two important areas of communication study. The fascinating relationship between these two areas has attracted many scholars and the close relationship between the two areas on a theoretical basis have been shown through some studies (Althen, 1992; Barnlund, 1989; Ma, 1996) which explored the specific nonverbal behavior in cross-cultural or intercultural context.

Nonverbal behaviors are able to function as “actional semiotic resources” for the creation of meaning (Thibault, 2004). "Since nonverbal behavior arises from our cultural common sense (our ideas about what is appropriate, normal, and effective as communication in relationships), we use different systems of understanding gestures, posture, silence, emotional expression, touch, physical appearance, and other nonverbal cues" (LeBaron, 2003).

Since English is the international language and most Iranians are learning American English as their foreign language, there is a necessity for them to know about intercultural differences. Not only that, but also observing what is acceptable and what is taboo can help both the foreign language learners and those Iranians who visit US as well as Americans who come to Iran to avoid an embarrassing moment in social or public situations.

Consider an Iranian student staying in North America to continue his studies or a North American living in Iran, they should both send and receive nonverbal messages either to their teacher or other peers in the class. Teachers need nonverbal feedbacks to see whether the students learned everything well; teacher's feedback is also necessary in order for the students to see whether they are answering correctly. Thus, because of the importance of nonverbal communication and the need the learners have to facilitate their daily interaction, the authors focused on some specific differences between American or Iranian nonverbal behaviors and those which are dedicated to both.

KINESICS

Gestures

Hand gestures as a form of kinesics represent an interactive element during communication. The majority (90%) are produced along with utterances and are linked semantically, prosodically (Mc Neil, 1992) and pragmatically (Kelly, Barr, Church & Lynch, 1999). According to Gullburg (2013) hand gestures reflect and interact with cultural, linguistic, cognitive, and more general aspects of communication, showing systematic variation across a range of measures in each of these domains.

Here are some of the differences between Iranian and North Americans regarding their gestures. For instance, using the left hand for eating, greeting, especially writing used to be unacceptable in Iran in the past. However, nowadays it is sometimes even important to use both hands. For instance, Iranian people use both hands to give something to someone as a sign of respect, and the receiver is expected to do the same; otherwise, it is interpreted as the person being rude or at least not paying respect.

One of the commonest ways of using hand gesture is handshake which is also a common way of greeting all over the world including US ; however, people, especially males should be careful when tending to shake a woman's hand which belongs to the Islamic culture like Iran, since it is a serious disapproved action to touch a woman, even for a handshake.

When an American puts his index finger on his thumb and makes a ring with them, it means 'everything is well or good'. It can also mean 'I agree' or 'Good idea'. This gesture is not used by Iranians.

In America, Having a thumb up is a sign of approval or hitchhiking. In America when a person stands by the road and uses this sign, it means he wants to take a free ride. But in Iran it's not a usual habit; especially in the urban areas which might be dangerous. Besides, since having your thumbs up is a very rude gesture in Iran even if they want to take a free ride, they do it extending their forefinger as well as their arm.

When a North American wants to tell someone "come here", (s)he sticks his/her hand in the front and makes a pulling motion curling his/her forefinger upward. In Iran, to be polite it's better to use all of your fingers and curl them downward.

Young men often have a fist-to-fist greeting and lightly punch each other to show friendliness in US. There isn't any specific gesture used by Iranian young men; they may shake hands, touch each other's' hand palm or else.

Another gesture which is used by Americans but not Iranians is 'quotations in the air'. Depending on the context, it can have two different meanings; first, it is used when a person is quoting someone else. Second, it can be a sign of sarcasm; that is, saying one thing, but meaning another.

While Iranians may whisper to God and pray when they are worried about a future event, Americans often cross their fingers with their forefinger on top. They believe it brings good luck.

There are body movements in Iran that are considered bad; however, for Americans they are okay to be done even in public places. Some of them are pointing directly at someone particularly at strangers, giving a thumb up since it is interpreted as being aggressive, blowing someone's nose and turning one's back to another person. Conversely, there are some other body movements which are considered polite in Iran but are meaningless to Americans; like a slight bowing as a greeting while placing the right hand on the chest, getting up as a sign of respect whenever a person enters the room, using both hands to shake hand to show friendliness, using both hands beside head to salute; somehow like army men.

Having hand in hand with the same sex in Iran is a sign of mutual respect and relation. But in US it conveys the sexual relations. While it's not very common for the opposite sexes to be hand in hand in public places in Iran, for North Americans it is a very usual habit.

Some gestures are common between the two cultures in the study of kinesics. For example, in both cultures, men have a tendency to sit or stand with legs apart and hands outward, whereas women tend to keep legs together and hands at their sides. While men fidget more in their seats, women are apt to have better posture than men, and usually sit still more. Other common gestures between the two cultures is cupping hands by the ears which means 'I can't hear you', opening hands with the palms up which means 'I'm sincere' and shrugging which means 'I don't know'.

Oculesics (Eye Contact)

Shahshahani (2008) believes eyes are the doors towards one's inner self and they are also the windows towards the outer world. In Iranian verbal and nonverbal history, "eyes" are so important that according to Sharifian (2011) an analysis of the everyday expressions in Persian including "eye" term reveals conceptualizations in relation to emotions, including love, envy, greed, as well as character traits such as naivety or willfulness. And in this regard, eye contact is very powerful in non-verbal communication (Gabriel & Raam, 2007).

According to Dresser (1996) Americans and many other English speaking countries, you look down when speaking and you look up when listening. You reflect that you are listening to the person who is speaking when you look up to the person. Since in Iran looking at a person while listening is a sign of respect, this simple behavior might lead to misunderstandings and the Iranian would think that the American is not listening or showing disrespect and ignorance. Of course this differs between speakers of different genders in Iran due to the Islamic culture. Some males prefer not to look directly to females' eyes when either speaking or listening or at least they try to look away

sometimes. While staring at somebody in the eye in both cultures means an invitation to violence called “mad-dogging” in US.

Another example for eye contact is provided by Novinger (2001), where she talks about a Brazilian woman moving to the United States. When out in public, the woman felt invisible because nobody looked at her. The woman did not understand that looking at somebody in the Brazilian culture meant admiration or interest, whereas in the United States looking at somebody especially for a long time is considered to be threatening or inappropriate. In Iran mostly those who respect their Islamic culture try to avoid looking at women outside. However, there is no problem in having eye contact with a woman when talking especially when she is familiar with the man.

In both cultures, avoiding eye contact as a teacher or lecturer is sign of lack of self-confidence or knowledge; as for the audiences, it shows lack of interest to the topic or sign of disrespect to the lecturer.

Chronemics

Chronemics is the study of time management in nonverbal communication. Time perception plays an important role in the nonverbal communication process across cultures. It includes punctuality, willingness to wait, and interactions. Chronemics has become an area of study primarily for anthropologists, who look at cultural norms around the use of time, and the way cultures can vary and converge around different norms.

Guerrero, DeVito & Hecht, 1999 write that the act of making an individual of a lower stature wait is a sign of dominance. They note that one who “is in the position to cause another to wait has power over him. To be kept waiting is to imply that one’s time is less valuable than that of the one who imposes the wait.” (P.32)

When you face a foreigner, there might be situations when even though you are a very timely person, you have to adapt your communication to his/her needs. These adaptations can vary depending on the position of the person you are dealing with, as well as the cultural background of that person. Although you will sometimes have to adapt to others, there will be times that things would be more positively balanced if the other parties adapted to your concept of time.

Daily life in the United States generally requires conformity to the precise measurement of time. Watches are almost never forgotten since they are parts of their clothing. Everything to be done is according to schedules, timetables and appointments. Many North Americans are considered to be “monochronic,” that is, focused on the sequential completion of tasks, very structured and time conscious. However, other cultures like Asian, including Iran are considered “polychronic.” These cultures are less focused on accounting for individual measures of time, but are more focused on tradition, relationships and freedom.

This is so much revealed that Merriam (1982) argued a key element in the conflicts between Iran and the United States over the seizure of some fifty Americans at US embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979. There were involved deeply ingrained and culturally determined differences in the perception of time. Chronemics behavior in the United States is described as linear, formal, and Precise and the conflict started when US president said, "we are running out of patience". A week later the United States attempted to free the hostages with a daring helicopter mission which was unsuccessful. The results would have been different if the Americans had been more patient.

However Iranians proved to be more patient in business, politics, and even in their daily lives. Patience, though having a positive connotation, might produce a kind of misunderstanding and aggression to an American. Of course, the insult period in different cultures as well as different society classes vary from minutes to hours. However nobody likes to be waited long.

Posture

Posture is another aspect of nonverbal communication. Different postures such as bowing, slouching, sitting with legs crossed, leaning, standing with arms crossed, and showing soles of feet may have different meanings and convey different messages in an intercultural situation (Ardila & Neville, 2002).

Posture can be used to determine a participant's degree of attention or involvement, the difference in status between communicators, and the level of fondness a person has for the other communicator, depending on body openness. Studies investigating the impact of posture on interpersonal relationships suggest that mirror-image congruent postures, where one person's left side is parallel to the other person's right side, shows that the person talking has a good rapport; a person who displays a forward lean or decreases a backward lean also gives the interlocutor a positive feeling during communication. Conversely when a person has his/her arms on the table while leaning forward and another person in the front has his/her hands on his/her lap, it is a sign of embarrassment and lack of good rapport.

Coshkun (2010) indicates that American businessmen put their feet on the table especially when speaking on the phone. However, for Iranians it is not accepted to show the soles of your feet to anybody. Thus this action is perceived to be rude even in intimate situations let alone in business ones.

As Shahshahani (2008) mentions, in Iran male are having more relaxed posture; relaxed they wait at a street corner, rest on a tree, a wall or a lamp-post with one arm or the entire body. Some may sit under the shade of a tree. They may stand by a car door talking for a while, in a friendly manner. However, female's posture in Iran is preferred to be serious. For instance, they are seen with one hand holding their shoulder bags, crossed over their chests whilst the other hand hangs by their sides. While for Americans this is a bit different; In American culture, men have a tendency to sit or stand with legs apart and hands outward, whereas women tend to keep legs together

and hands at their sides. Women tend to have a better posture than men. Compared to Iranian culture, women are more relaxed in their posture; especially, in public places like restaurants and parties as well as parks and streets.

In a study by Tiljander (2008) on the analysis of leg postures in relation to the gender it is common between most cultures to have women tending to sit in closed postures or with their legs crossed, which is regarded feminine, while men sitting in wide positions with their legs spread, which is regarded masculine.

Most of Iranian and American negotiators sit in a formal way during the meeting and they consider this posture as acceptable and even polite; however, more Americans prefer to sit informally later in negotiations and believe it can show familiarity while Iranians may interpret it as impoliteness. Of course posture can be situation-relative, that is, people will change their posture depending on the situation they are in.

It is common in most cultures, including Iranian and North American to have a straight and relaxed posture to show self-confidence. Conversely a slumped posture with the head down shows one is either shy or lack self-assurance. An upward position while leaning backward shows one is proud of himself/herself or wants to show superiority.

Haptics (Touching)

This nonverbal behavior is among the first things one should know about when communicating with Iranians. It usually happens while greeting. Greetings between the same sexes are generally the same; shaking hands is certainly permissible and preferred in public, but you may also see two men or two women kissing each other on each cheek, kissing the air, or embracing each other as greeting. This is considered normal and carries no sexual connotation. However, between men and women the question of how one should greet the other depend on how much they are abide by the rules of their Islamic culture. At least in public places you do not see such a behavior. To be on the safe side, for the foreigners that would be best to simply acknowledge the other by offering a slight bow or nod.

As for the Americans handshakes are usually acceptable almost everywhere, even between strangers and different sexes; however, while men usually embrace each other or have a pat on the back when they are intimate, women usually lean toward each other kissing the air as well as shaking hands. The United States is a fairly nonhaptic society, particularly between men. To US males it might appear effeminate or overly intimate to see men walking with arms interlinked or holding hands.

Proxemics (Spatial Distance)

Proxemics, what Menninen&Kujanpaa (2002, p.3) call "spatial behavior" is the physical distance we place between ourselves and others (Helmer and Eddy, 2003, p.43). It is also referred to as body bubble. How far apart people stand when speaking or how far apart they sit in meetings carries significant information to people who are aware of

that specific culture. Here, too, as with other nonverbal behavior, such information is likely to be garbled across cultures.

In Iranian culture, for instance, a comfortable conversational distance would be close; Friendly conversations between buddies are conducted so close to feel the breath of the speaker on one's face. The US communicator unaware of this may face a very discomforting situation, with the speaker literally backing his or her US counterpart into a corner as the speaker continues to move closer to the retreating listener. When unaware of this cultural difference, the American might feel the encroaching speaker to be pushy, overly aggressive, or rude. He might think "why is he invading my territory?" An Iranian would likely feel distrustful and even spurned by the listener with the large body bubble. He may wonder "why the American is standing so far from him (Are they trying to run away or what?)".

Facial Expressions

Facial expressions reveal the attitudes of a speaker. That's why a foreigner tries to understand what a native says through reading his face as well as his lips. Lip movements are the primary, though perhaps not the sole source of facial cues to speech (Sueyoshi & Hardison, 2005).

A smile is one of the most common examples of a facial expression in different cultures. While Americans smile freely at strangers, Iranians smile at those whom they had either seen before or are going to have a job with; that is, they are not totally strangers. In Iranian culture a smile isn't necessarily an expression of joy and friendliness but it can be used to convey pain and embarrassment; especially, in Islamic culture that they believe they should be patient toward pain and life embarrassment.

Researchers have discovered that certain facial areas reveal our emotional state better than others. Mehrabian (1971) believes verbal cues provide 7 percent of the meaning of the message; vocal cues, 38 percent; and facial expressions, 55 percent. This means that, as the receiver of a message, you can rely heavily on the facial expressions of the sender.

Facial expressions continually change during interaction and are monitored constantly by the recipient. There is evidence that the meaning of these expressions may be similar across cultures. For instance, raised eyebrows means disagreement or surprise; however, in American culture it also means "I don't know".

Also when an American wants to render to the interlocutor that something is disgusting to him, he might wrinkle his nose sometimes accompanied by nodding. The same meaning is rendered by an Iranian through frowning as well as opening his mouth a bit. Dilating eyes while opening mouth is common between the two cultures to show surprise.

CONCLUSION

Since nonverbal behavior has different cultural connotations in different cultures, nonverbal communication has a highly important role in intercultural communication. According to Larry A. Samovar and Porter (1991) intercultural communication occurs whenever a message is produced by a member of one culture for consumption by a member of another culture, and the message must be understood. If it is not understood or misinterpreted, a kind of conflict may happen. Foreign language learners should also put culture understanding and cultural comparison as the key point of the target language learning, being aware of the target language country's social system, ways of thinking, customs, values, and our differences, and finally intercultural communication. Thus to improve foreign language learners' intercultural communication ability, it is necessary to make comparison between our nonverbal behaviors and those of the foreign language which is also the international language. Understanding cross-cultural communication should be a prerequisite to understanding intercultural communication because cross-cultural communication looks at how people from differing cultural backgrounds endeavor to communicate. Findings of Gao (2000) and Xiao and Petraki (2007) which indicates that nonverbal behavior as a part of socio-pragmatic rules is one of the biggest obstacles in intercultural communications strongly support this fact.

Despite their importance, nonverbal behaviors are often overlooked in second language teaching programs. This paper has a potential to help Iranian EFL learners to ease the current difficulties they encounter as well as EFL instructors to understand the problems they face. It can also be beneficial for travelers from Iran to North America and the opposite. Further research can also be done for an exploration in teaching nonverbal communication in EFL classrooms. The possibility of incorporating the knowledge of nonverbal communication into the EFL curriculum can be checked. If that is possible then the students who are sent abroad for study or work would survive and function adequately in the new cultural environment. The other issue that should be explored is the learnability and the teachability of nonverbal behaviors. It is necessary to investigate whether and how learners can acquire nonverbal behaviors, and to deal with pedagogical challenges such as teaching and assessment methods.

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