

# KINESIC CHANNEL OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION: BARRIERS FOR THE ENGLISH-LEARNING JAPANESE

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## Abstract

In this rapidly growing multi-cultural society, some nonverbal codes may significantly differ between cultures. Some of these may result in communication barriers. In order to communicate effectively, these differences should be taken into account. Such an idea comes mainly from the experience of living in New York and London for 13 years. This essay especially looks closely at the kinesic aspect of nonverbal communication in the context of a Japanese person learning English.

## Introduction

One would agree that language takes an important role in interpersonal communication. However, it is not the only essential component. People maintain a certain degree of eye contact, body posture, facial expression, and voice tone while exchanging language. Consciously or unconsciously they use nonverbal communication. Hence, it is essential to pay attention to both verbal and nonverbal communication, and it is necessary to realize how both forms of communications act differently to support each other. Birdwhistell (1970) argues that only 35 percent of the message is transmitted through language (verbal communication); the rest of the contents are passed to the receiver using nonverbal communication. He suggests that both types of communication affect one another within human interaction.

In order to achieve communication, i.e. to convey meaning to the receiver, there is a necessity to have a certain degree of knowledge of the language. Language has three elements: phonology (set of rules of sounds), syntax (words and meaning — grammar) and semantics (meaning system). It is also necessary to look at nonverbal aspects of commu-

nication that play important roles in conveying the meaning from the sender to the receiver in human communication. Here, we must take care for the cultural differences in nonverbal communication. Especially after living in New York and London, I have come to believe that the most different aspect of non-verbal communication from Japan's counterpart is found in kinesics, and I would like to explore this further in this essay.

The term "kinesics" refers to body language, and was first used by Birdwhistell, who used to be a dancer and began his study as an anthropologist, later on. Kinesics includes hand and arm movements, leg movements, facial expression, eye contact and blinking, stance and posture. This is the most noticeable form of nonverbal communication and also varies in different cultures, which I will mention later on.

### **Features**

It is easy to state that there are two aspects to human communication — verbal and nonverbal communication. However, defining nonverbal communication is not such an easy task. The analysis of human conduct is not as simple as to be able to state that: Communication – Language = Nonverbal Communication. To take a further look at nonverbal communication, it should be agreed that language must be considered a disjoint entity from nonverbal communication. First of all, I would like to clarify the definitions of verbal and nonverbal communications.

#### Verbal communication

A significant proportion of verbal communication consists of language. Then what is language? There have been many linguists who have tried to define what language is. "Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communication ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols" (Sapir, 1921). "A language is 'a set out (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements'" (Chomsky, 1957). "Language is 'the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols'" (Hall, 1964).

Languages are created by human beings. Language itself does not have a meaning. Language has three elements as stated previously (phonology, syntax, semantics). Languages symbolize meanings. Crystal (1987) states that the reason why so many people are fascinated by language as an object of study is its unique role in capturing the breadth of human thought and endeavor.

#### Nonverbal communication

Nonverbal communication does not involve words. One may be let believe that non-

verbal communication consists purely of body gestures. However, there are many other elements, such as space, appearance, or even people's body scent or smell. As a college lecturer, I often notice the students' nonverbal messages during class through their eye contact, body posture or even yawning. These are more reliable than verbal messages because these are deliberated involuntarily. Paralanguage takes a part in nonverbal communication. Examples include: sighs, screams, vocal qualities (volume, pitch, pause). Through paralanguage, people communicate their emotional state, veracity, and sincerity (Neuliep 1957).

There are four features of nonverbal communication; (1) independency from language (2) change of meaning according to the situation (3) unsuitability in transmitting abstract or logical matter (4) efficiency in transmitting interpersonal attitudes and emotions. I would like to discuss each specific feature of nonverbal communication.

#### **( 1 ) Independency from language**

Nonverbal communication supports verbal communication and vice versa. For example, when people are in love and want to declare his or her love, body movement and kinesics, such as, sincere facial expression, straight eye contact, body direction, body posture, and intimate distance play very important roles. Nonverbal communication is sometimes a more reliable extension of intensions and emotions than verbal communication. For example, if you receive an unwelcome guest late at night, you may be using a cold voice, stiff facial expression and a flat intonation all the while voicing a polite greeting. The guest would probably notice that he or she is not welcome contradicting what the host says. Thus, nonverbal communication may sometimes trigger the opposite effect to that which would have been perceived in the absence of nonverbal communication. The reason why nonverbal communication is more reliable is that it is more difficult to control consciously.

There are cases when nonverbal communication is used instead of verbal communication, or only nonverbal communication can be used. At a concert hall or a crowded station, people would wave their hands towards their friends or acquaintances instead of shouting. Like in this example, people are able to communicate without verbal communication, but the opposite does not exist; whenever a speaker sends a message across to a receiver, the nonverbal element always accompanies the transmission to an extent.

#### **( 2 ) Change of meaning according to the situation**

The meaning of nonverbal communication is often dependent on the situation, circum-

stance and context of the sentence; nonverbal behavior used in nonverbal communication rarely transmits a specific meaning.

For example the sign “putting an index finger on lips vertically” could have a variety of meanings:

1. Do not shout.
2. Do not make a noise.
3. Let’s be quiet.
4. This is a secret.

The sign “making a circle with the index finger and the thumb” could mean:

1. Well done.
2. I understand.
3. OK
4. Money (in Japan)
5. Nothing or zero

Eye contact or gaze can sometimes hold totally opposite meanings. For example when a loving couple holds eye contact, it is obviously a favorable sign. However, when one has their foot stepped on in a crowd and holds eye contact with the offender, it is a hostile sign.

### **( 3 ) Unsuitability in transmitting abstract or logical information**

Nonverbal communication is not suitable for transmitting either abstract or logical information. For example, it is almost impossible to explain the formula to calculate the area of a circle using nonverbal communication. Compared to that, verbal communication enables this task easily. If you try to recount your Christmas holiday using only nonverbal communication, you would see how difficult it is.

### **( 4 ) Efficiency in transferring interpersonal attitudes or emotions**

Nonverbal communication is a simple and highly effective way to express feelings or personal attitudes. Unlike logical explanations, nonverbal communication is suitable for expressing people’s feelings and emotions. Facial expression is especially an important factor in telling how someone is feeling.

For example at a funeral, a sincere expression on your friend’s face without any word may be enough to infer their sympathy. In this case, the facial expression may say more than a thousand words would. However, it is often more difficult to control the nonverbal aspect of communication.

Strong messages can be encoded and decoded by exchanging an eye gaze without saying anything. An absence of facial expression can be a strong way to communicate.

The majority of nonverbal communication is less deliberate than verbal communication. For example, people frown when they hear an unpleasant story; this is not to show discomfort to the speaker, but is an unconscious reaction and the speaker receives the sign 'frown' as discomfort. This kind of nonverbal behavior is universal because 'frowning' is a natural human behavior. Burgoon states that especially in child development, people show the same maturation process when it comes to expressing the basic emotions, for example, anger, fear and joy. These are universal across the cultures.

Not only are there unconscious conducts, there are purposeful conducts too: "Waving hand" to say 'good-bye', "shaking head" to say 'no', these are all intentional behaviors. Hand signs for hearing-impaired also exist in this category.

All aspects of human behavior can be read differently according to each receiver. An important consideration in this is that some nonverbal behavior is culturally diversified. In this multi-cultural world we cannot neglect the misunderstandings originating from culturally different nonverbal behaviors. For example, maids in a Japanese 'ryokan' (traditional Japanese hotel) do not walk slowly, but run in small steps. This is to show their enthusiasm and to reassure the customers are being served with respect. If they walk in a moderate or normal speed, the Japanese guests would see them as rude or even lazy. On the contrary, the sales staff or hotel employees do not run in Western counterparts. The action of a hotel staff running could be taken as discourtesy, restlessness or further, the absence of elegance, in Western culture.

When two people do not share the same mother tongue, a difficulty arises in that they must communicate in a language that is communicable for both. In this case they would probably know that they do not communicate in direct translation. Therefore, they would accept that a certain level of misunderstanding might inevitably occur. However, in the context of nonverbal communication, people tend to interpret in their own measure as if nonverbal communication is universal. This is what makes nonverbal communication difficult; it is necessary to realize that 'as you see' is not 'as the other meant' to avoid the misunderstandings in communication.

#### **Cultural Aspects by Kinesics Channels of Nonverbal Communication**

One hypothesis that I have formulated and would like to research further in the future is that people communicate with nonverbal elements according to the culture they belong to. Consciously or unconsciously people assimilate to different styles of communication in

different cultures, from where they naturally start using the different nonverbal communication from their original one to attain more effectiveness.

From my experience, I recognize myself to have three different sub-cultures. Not only do I change the body language when I am meeting someone of a different nationality, I also change the paralanguage, such as voice tone or talking speed, body posture, and even clothes as artifact. I naturally acquired these changes while I lived in different countries. For example, I was once at a train station with my Japanese friend in London, and my train came first and I went on. When the door closed and the train started to move, my Japanese friend bowed deeply to me and I instinctively bowed back deeply to her until I could not see her. Then I realized that this was not Tokyo. I felt the other passengers' curious eye gazes on my back. In contrast, when I bid farewell to a British friend, I usually exchange some departing words and turn my back. Of course it depends upon the situation and the degree of the intimacy, but there is a significant difference between cultures within such a short farewell moment.

I shall now try to explain how each aspect of kinesics varies between different cultures, particularly comparing the Japanese to Western cultures.

#### Facial expressions

Through facial expressions, we are able to communicate our personality, open and closed channels of communication, complement or qualify other nonverbal behaviors, and, perhaps more than anything, communicate emotional states (Neuliep, 1957). It is commonly believed that facial expressions are a combination of innate and socially learned behavior (Ekman, 1982). Ekman believed that there may be distinctive movements of the face for the primary emotions of surprise, fear, anger, disgust, happiness, and sadness that are universal. Hargie (1994) supports this, saying that these behaviors are universal across cultures because they are innate behaviors; one eyebrow raise, both eyebrows raise, yawning, and lip-biting which suggest respectively, concern, surprise, tiredness or boredom, and anxiety. Babies smile when they are happy. However, as they grow, they assimilate with their own society where they belong. So their facial expressions reflect cultural originalities. From this point of view, facial expressions are a socially learned behavior: there is no doubt that they are strongly related to cultures. The Japanese are called the 'inscrutable Japanese' especially from American people (Burgoon). The comment comes from the lack of facial expressions, or the maintaining of smiles even to express unpleasant feelings. When people are not in good command of the second language, they tend to lose some control over the nonverbal expressions. So, an English speaker with a foreign accent is not only hard to understand, but can also elicit uncomfortable feelings through a

poorly controlled tone of voice or awkward facial expressions. Sometimes it is difficult to not judge a person based on such impressions, and it takes some patience to overcome such feelings to know the person.

Even when people get over the primary uneasiness, there are things that can still be thrown in. For example, everyone smiles and laughs, and everyone knows the meaning of that. Yet their use varies culturally. The Japanese are known to maintain smiling faces to not let others worry when they talk about a recent death in the family. They desperately try to maintain their composure. The reason is that the Japanese feel bad if other people sympathize. In addition to that, they are taught to mask negative facial expression with smiles and laughter and to display less facial effect overall (Burgoon, 1989). To a non-Japanese, such smiles and laughs might appear strange to say the least. However, the Japanese feel equally uneasy when a foreigner does not smile in a situation where a Japanese would.

#### Postures

Posture can signify differences in status, attitude, emotional level and persuasion (Hargie, Saunders and Dickson 1994). In postural communication particularly, high-status individuals and low-status individuals differentiate their postures when they are sitting and standing.

In the 'open posture', the neck is straight, the head is up, the shoulder is not strained and there is a comfortable space between the feet. The 'closed posture' is straighter and stiffer. In the Japanese case, the posture could be tilted a little forward, because a 'bow' is the basic factor in Japanese greeting. The typical tilting posture can be seen at department stores throughout Japan. The shop assistants are bowing constantly, so their natural standing posture is affected by their habit and they end up slightly tilting.

Postural nonverbal communication in the context of sitting is comprised of the ways of putting hands and arms, the positioning of feet and legs, the body tension, the angle of body tilting, and the body direction. Positive and negative feelings can be easily shown in 'open posture' and 'closed posture' respectively.

It has been noted that high-status individuals adopt a more relaxed position when they are seated (e.g. body tilting sideways; lying slumped in a chair) than low-status subjects who sit more upright and rigid in their chairs (Hargie, Saunders and Dickson 1994). Japanese women are taught from their childhood to sit with both feet together, both knees together, both hands on the knees and the fingers straight.

#### Eye contact:

Kendon (1977) says that eye gaze has three important roles: to express our emotions, to

monitor the actions of the other person, and to regulate how the conversation flows. This is exemplified by a number of phrases that are in common usage, including 'He's making eye at me', 'Don't look at me like that', and 'There's something about his eyes' (Hargie, Saunders, Dickson, 1994).

Japanese people do not use eyes as often as Western people. The only time intentional messages are exchanged using eyes is when using "brief glances". In fact, holding a gaze for too long is often seen as "threatening". Western businessmen may find it uncomfortable to talk to their Japanese partners, who often do not maintain eye contact. On the contrary, I was horrified to see a New York yellow cab driver who shifted his gaze away from the traffic to talk to the passenger. Eye-to-eye contact while talking seems to have the utmost priority in some cultures.

In the Western culture, eye contact is used as 'eye language'. Eye contact is used to support words of agreement or encouragement. In conversation, if a speaker tells an incredible story, the listener would stare at him or her in round-eyed wonder. The speaker may react by saying, 'Yes, it's really surprising'. The 'eye language' is established in everyday life within the Western culture.

For the purpose of making a contrast with the kinesics element of nonverbal communication, I would like to relate to haptic communication, which refers to the use of touch. Human beings have an innate desire to touch one another. This is especially strong in childhood. However, in their process of growing, people instinctively know or are educated how to contact other people's body, when, where, whom and even how to suppress their desire to touch.

Hargie, Saunders and Dickson (1994) state the importance of touching in adulthood as well. However, this Western concept does not seem to be applicable in Japanese or other oriental cultures. For example, in greeting, Western people usually shake hands or hug and kiss. Most Japanese who are familiar with the international scene are accustomed to handshakes, but when it comes to hugs and kisses, few Japanese know the rules and manners involved. Even with handshakes it can be awkward because many of them are not able to withhold bows as they shake hands. For a Japanese, bowing is an indispensable means of greeting and courtesy. It allows them to greet one another without invading each other's personal space, which can relate to the proxemics view of nonverbal communication. Thus, the haptic channel of communication changes, as children grow. They are affected by culture and gradually learn the ritual of touching. It has the same natural procedure as the assimilation with the cultures they belong to.

## Conclusion

In interpersonal communication, people hope to effectively communicate with others to transmit their own messages. In communication, verbal and nonverbal messages are combined in intricate manners. As stated before, there are culturally unique signals involved in the kinesic channel of nonverbal communication. Understanding and perceiving its cultural uniqueness will lead to fairness in terms of communication in this cross-cultural society.

I feel that understanding the differences in kinesics will reduce the difficulty for the English-learning Japanese. Although this does not mean that I would encourage these subjects to start by imitating the Western style of kinesics, I do believe that having the knowledge would reduce the learners' stress and lead them to acquire English faster and more effectively. For my future work, I intend to attempt at examining how this hypothesis can be applied practically.

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