

A Study on the Interpretation and Misinterpretation of Non - verbal Signs in Cross - cultural Communication

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Abstract: Non - verbal signs play a crucial role in cross - cultural communication, carrying rich cultural connotations. However, due to cultural differences, misinterpretations often occur, hindering effective communication. This paper, based on relevant theories of cross - cultural communication, analyzes the types of non - verbal signs and their interpretations in different cultures, and explores the reasons for misinterpretations, aiming to provide practical suggestions for improving cross - cultural communication ability. By studying non - verbal signs such as body language, facial expressions, space and time, this paper reveals the complexity of cross - cultural communication and emphasizes the importance of understanding cultural differences to avoid misinterpretations and promote smooth cross - cultural exchanges.

Keywords: Cross - Cultural Communication; Non - Verbal Signs; Interpretation; Misinterpretation

1 Introduction

In the context of globalization, cross - cultural communication has become increasingly frequent. Non - verbal signs, as an important part of communication, account for a large proportion in the communication process. American scholars L. Birdwhistell estimates that in a two - person communication situation, 75% of social meanings are conveyed through non - verbal signs. Another scholar, Albert Mehrabian, proposed a formula: communication understanding = intonation (38%)+ expression (55%)+ language (7%), which further demonstrates the significance of non - verbal signs in communication.

Non - verbal signs refer to symbol systems that use other visual, auditory and other symbols as information carriers instead of artificial natural languages. They can be divided into two main categories: visual non - verbal signs and auditory non - verbal signs. Visual non - verbal signs include body language (such as gestures, postures, facial expressions, eye contact, touch), spatial distance, and static visual elements (such as clothing, environmental layout). Auditory non - verbal signs include paralinguistic (such as intonation, volume, speed of speech) and other sounds (such as sighs, laughter, music).

However, in cross - cultural communication, due to the influence of different cultural backgrounds, the interpretations of non - verbal signs vary greatly, often leading to misinterpretations. These misinterpretations may cause communication barriers, misunderstandings between people, and even affect the success of cross - cultural communication in various fields such as business, education, and diplomacy. Therefore, studying the interpretation and misinterpretation of non - verbal signs in cross - cultural communication has important theoretical and practical significance.

2 Literature Review

Research on non - verbal signs in cross - cultural communication has been an important topic in the field of cross - cultural communication in recent years. Many scholars at home and abroad have conducted in - depth research from different perspectives.

In terms of the classification of non - verbal signs, Samovar et al. (2019) divided non - verbal communication into eight categories, including body movement, body characteristics, paralinguistics, space language, time language, object language, environmental language and silence. This classification comprehensively covers various forms of non - verbal signs, providing a clear framework for subsequent research.

Regarding the cultural differences in the interpretation of non - verbal signs, Hall (2020) proposed the theory of high - context and low - context cultures. High - context cultures, such as those in East Asia, rely more on non - verbal information and context in communication, while low - context cultures, such as those in the United States, tend to rely more on explicit language. This theory helps to explain why there are significant differences in the understanding of non - verbal signs between different cultures.

In terms of misinterpretations of non - verbal signs, Scollon and Scollon (2018) pointed out that misinterpretations often occur because

people unconsciously use their own cultural norms to interpret the non - verbal behavior of others. For example, in Western cultures, direct eye contact is often regarded as a sign of confidence and sincerity, while in some Asian cultures, excessive eye contact may be considered impolite.

Domestic scholars have also made a lot of contributions. Hu Wenzhong (2021) analyzed the influence of cultural differences on non - verbal communication from the aspects of values, thinking patterns and social norms, emphasizing the importance of understanding cultural differences in cross - cultural communication. Gao Yongwei (2022) studied the misinterpretations of body language in cross - cultural communication, such as the different meanings of gestures in different cultures, and proposed corresponding countermeasures to avoid misinterpretations.

However, current research still has some limitations. For example, most studies focus on the differences in the interpretation of non - verbal signs between two specific cultures, lacking a comprehensive comparison and analysis of multiple cultures. In addition, the research on the solutions to misinterpretations of non - verbal signs in cross - cultural communication needs to be further deepened. This paper attempts to make up for these deficiencies by comprehensively analyzing the interpretation and misinterpretation of non - verbal signs in cross - cultural communication and putting forward more practical suggestions.

3 Types of Non - verbal Signs and Their Interpretations in Different Cultures

3.1 Body Language

3.1.1 Gestures

Gestures are one of the most common forms of body language. In Western cultures, the “OK” gesture, with the thumb and index finger forming a circle and the other three fingers extended, usually means “agree”, “good” or “everything is fine”. However, in some cultures, such as Brazil and Greece, this gesture has vulgar or offensive meanings. In Japan, it can represent “money”. Another example is the “thumbs - up” gesture. In Western countries, it generally means “good”, “excellent” or “approval”. But in some Middle Eastern countries, this gesture may be considered disrespectful.

3.1.2 Postures

Postures can also convey rich information. In Western business cultures, standing or sitting upright is often seen as a sign of confidence and professionalism. For example, in a business negotiation, a person who sits straight, with his shoulders back and head held high, is likely to be regarded as self - assured and in control of the situation. In contrast, in some Asian cultures, such as Japan, a more humble posture, like slightly bowing when sitting or standing, is considered polite and respectful. When meeting someone of higher status, the Japanese may bow deeply, with the angle of the bow indicating the degree of respect.

3.1.3 Facial Expressions

Facial expressions are considered to have certain universality in expressing basic emotions. For example, a smile is generally recognized as a sign of happiness, friendliness or agreement across cultures. However, the specific meaning of a smile can also vary. In Western cultures, a broad smile is often used to show genuine joy or enthusiasm. In Japanese culture, a smile may also be used to cover up embarrassment, discomfort or negative emotions. When facing an awkward situation, a Japanese person may smile to ease the tension, which may be misinterpreted as not taking the situation seriously by people from Western cultures.

3.1.4 Eye Contact

Eye contact varies significantly across cultures. In Western cultures, especially in the United States, maintaining direct eye contact during communication is seen as a sign of respect, attention, and honesty. A person who avoids eye contact may be suspected of lying or lacking confidence. In contrast, in many Asian, African and Latin American cultures, people may avoid direct and prolonged eye contact, especially when communicating with someone of higher status. For instance, in traditional Chinese culture, when talking to elders or superiors, lowering one's eyes slightly is considered a sign of respect.

3.1.5 Touch

The attitude towards touch also differs among cultures. In Western cultures, especially in the United States and some European coun-

tries, a handshake is a common form of greeting among acquaintances and in business settings. Hugging and kissing on the cheek are also common among family members, close friends and in some social occasions. In Latin American and Middle Eastern cultures, physical contact during communication is even more frequent. People may stand closer, touch each other's arms or shoulders during conversation to show friendliness and intimacy. However, in some Asian cultures, such as Japan and South Korea, people are more reserved about physical contact. Excessive touch in public may make them feel uncomfortable, and a simple bow is often the preferred form of greeting.

3.2 Spatial and Temporal Non - verbal Signs

3.2.1 Spatial Distance

The concept of personal space, which refers to the physical space an individual likes to maintain around themselves, varies across cultures. In Western cultures, particularly in the United States and northern Europe, people generally prefer a relatively large personal space. In a conversation, they may stand about an arm's length or more apart. In a waiting room, they tend to choose seats that are not too close to others. In contrast, in Middle Eastern, Latin American and some Asian cultures, people are more comfortable with a closer spatial distance. In these cultures, people may stand or sit close to each other during communication, and this close proximity is not seen as an invasion of personal space but rather as a sign of friendliness and intimacy.

3.2.2 Time

Time perception also has cultural differences. Western cultures, especially those in North America and northern Europe, generally have a monochronic time orientation. They view time as a linear and precious resource, emphasizing punctuality, scheduling and efficiency. For example, in a business meeting in the United States, starting and ending on time is of great importance. Being late is often considered disrespectful and unprofessional. In contrast, many Latin American, African and some Asian cultures have a polychronic time orientation. They view time as more flexible and cyclical, and relationships and social interactions are often given more priority than strict time schedules. In these cultures, it is not uncommon for meetings to start late or for people to engage in multiple activities simultaneously without feeling rushed.

4 Reasons for Misinterpretations of Non - verbal Signs in Cross - cultural Communication

4.1 Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism is one of the main reasons for misinterpretations of non - verbal signs. People tend to interpret the non - verbal behavior of others based on their own cultural norms and values. Since different cultures have different understandings of non - verbal signs, when individuals from one culture encounter non - verbal behavior from another culture, they may unconsciously use their own cultural standards to judge, resulting in misinterpretations. For example, in Western cultures, people are accustomed to expressing emotions directly through body language, while in some Asian cultures, emotions are expressed more subtly. A Westerner may misinterpret the reserved body language of an Asian as lack of interest or enthusiasm because they are using their own cultural concept of body language expression.

4.2 Lack of Cross - cultural Awareness

Lack of cross - cultural awareness is also a common cause. Many people are not aware of the significant differences in non - verbal signs among different cultures. They may assume that non - verbal communication is universal and ignore the cultural background. For instance, a person who is not familiar with the cultural differences in eye contact may feel offended when someone from a different culture avoids looking directly at them during a conversation, not realizing that it is a cultural norm in that person's culture. In international business negotiations, if negotiators lack cross - cultural awareness of non - verbal signs, they may misinterpret the opponent's body language, such as gestures or postures, which could affect the outcome of the negotiation.

4.3 Stereotyping

Stereotyping can lead to misinterpretations of non - verbal signs. Stereotypes are fixed and oversimplified beliefs about a particular

group of people. When people have stereotypes about a certain culture, they may misinterpret the non - verbal behavior of individuals from that culture. For example, if someone has a stereotype that all people from a certain Asian culture are shy and introverted, they may misinterpret the normal body language of an individual from that culture as shyness, even if the person is just behaving according to their cultural norms. Stereotyping ignores the individuality within a culture and the complexity of non - verbal communication, thus increasing the likelihood of misinterpretation.

5 Strategies for Avoiding Misinterpretations of Non - verbal Signs in Cross - cultural Communication

5.1 Enhancing Cross - cultural Education

Enhancing cross - cultural education is crucial. Schools, especially universities, can offer more courses on cross - cultural communication, including in - depth studies of non - verbal signs in different cultures. These courses can use real - life cases, videos and role - playing to help students understand the differences in non - verbal communication among various cultures. For example, in a cross - cultural communication course, students can analyze the different meanings of gestures in Western and Eastern cultures through watching videos of people from different cultures communicating. In addition, companies can also provide cross - cultural training for employees who are involved in international business. This training can focus on the non - verbal communication norms in the target countries, so as to help employees avoid misunderstandings in cross - cultural business negotiations.

5.2 Developing Cross - cultural Awareness

Individuals should actively develop cross - cultural awareness. This requires people to be open - minded and willing to learn about different cultures. When communicating with people from different cultures, one should be aware that their non - verbal behavior may be different from what they are used to and should avoid making hasty judgments. For example, when traveling abroad, people can observe and learn the local non - verbal communication habits, such as how people greet each other, what kind of body language they use in public places. By being sensitive to cultural differences, individuals can better understand the non - verbal signals of others and reduce the possibility of misinterpretation.

5.3 Practicing Empathy

Practicing empathy is an effective strategy. Empathy means being able to put oneself in the other person's position and understand their feelings and perspectives. In cross - cultural communication, when encountering non - verbal behavior that is difficult to understand, instead of judging based on one's own cultural background, one should try to think from the perspective of the other person's culture. For example, if a person from a Western culture is confused by the lack of direct eye contact of an Asian counterpart, they can try to understand that in the Asian culture, this may be a sign of respect. By practicing empathy, people can build better relationships with people from different cultures and avoid misunderstandings caused by cultural differences in non - verbal signs.

6 Conclusion

Non - verbal signs are an essential part of cross - cultural communication, carrying diverse cultural connotations. However, due to cultural differences, misinterpretations of non - verbal signs are common in cross - cultural communication, which may pose obstacles to effective communication. By understanding the different types of non - verbal signs and their interpretations in various cultures, as well as the reasons for misinterpretations, and taking corresponding strategies such as enhancing cross - cultural education, developing cross - cultural awareness and practicing empathy, people can improve their cross - cultural communication ability, avoid misinterpretations of non - verbal signs, and promote smooth cross - cultural exchanges. In the future, with the continuous deepening of globalization, further research on non - verbal signs in cross - cultural communication is needed to better adapt to the needs of cross - cultural communication in different fields.

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