Identifying Differences of Body Language between China and America and Preventing Misunderstandings

Fangyue Dong
Henan Normal University
lesrien@live.cn
(+86) 159-9302-6515
Abstract

Body language plays an important role in cross-cultural communications. This study first explores the differences of body language between American and Chinese cultures, including the comparisons in frequency, postures, facial expressions and eye contacts. Then cultural and social causes of these differences are discussed. Finally the author provides an easy-to-use guideline with the purpose of helping Chinese and American people avoid gesture ambiguity in their communications through correct use of body language. In conclusion, people in China and the America need to respect the differences existed in body languages, to understand each other’s culture, to learn to imitate what native people do and to participate in more cross-cultural conversations to reduce misunderstandings and embarrassments in interactions.

Keywords

body language; cross-culture communication; misunderstanding
Introduction

Body language is a terminology for forms of communication using body movements or gestures instead of sounds, or other forms of oral communication (Quirk et al, 1985). It is often called kinesics, composed not only of gestures and posture, but also of facial expressions and eye contacts (Zhang, 2008). The Oxford English Dictionary defines body language as the conscious and unconscious movements and postures which attitudes and feelings are communicated. The Oxford Business English Dictionary offers a slightly different definition: The process of communicating what you are feeling or thinking by the way you place and move your body rather than by words.

Body language is used more frequently than most people think. In the book Introduction to Kinesics, American psychologist Ray Birdwhistell (1952) states that verbal communication counts 30% at most in all kinds of social communication, and the rest is carried out through body language. Psychologist Albert Mebrabian attributes the impact of a message as 7% verbal, 38% vocal, and 55% facial expressions and behaviors (Cohen and Manion, 1983).
Communications between American and Chinese people have increased drastically in the last decades. To adapt to the new trend, more and more people begin to improve their capability of communicating to their counterpart. However, people seem to focus largely on learning the spoken language. The importance of body language is greatly overlooked. Since same gestures may have significant different meanings Chinese and American cultures, confusion and misunderstanding of each other’s intentions may arise because of the careless use of body language. For example, the American-style OK sign (a circle made with thumb and index-finger with other fingers fanned or outstretched) is not widely accepted in China. Chinese are not used to hugging each other to show friendship. Misunderstanding of body language may account for inefficient or misleading communications, thus bringing great difficulty in mutual understanding among people from different cultures. Therefore, it is critically important to accurately understand body language in different cultures and to use body language as an effective tool in the cross-culture interactions.

To address the aforementioned problem, this study aims to explore differences
between Chinese and American body languages and to provide advices to help reduce misunderstandings existing in the cross-cultural communications between China and America. To achieve the goal, this study will 1) find out the differences between Chinese and American body languages in frequency, gestures and meanings 2) explore social causes of the differences and 3) provide a guideline for properly application of body language. Finally, the conclusion that people should know each other’s culture, learn to imitate others and participate in more cross-cultural conversations to reduce misunderstandings and embarrassments in interactions.

**The Differences Between Chinese and American Body Languages**

**Frequency**

American people use body language nearly all the time in conversations to help express their emotions and clarify their points. They use body languages frequently in daily occasions such as chats, interviews and business presentations. A typical example is President Obama’s inaugural speech, in which he used a lot of gestures to help listeners receive his message. Chinese people, on the other hand, use body language much less frequently. Comparing to President Obama, President Xi only
slightly waved his hands once in his nine-minute 2015 New Year speech (see http://youtube/G9NjrB8-70Q). In general, Chinese people prefer to express themselves only by verbal communication. It is not a custom for them to use body language.

**Gestures, Facial Expressions and Eye Contacts**

Because of different cultural backgrounds, body language of a country has its cultural accent (Li, 2011). Each culture in the world is unique and has its own system of expressing body language in communication. It is the uniqueness of different cultures that cause misunderstandings or even conflicts in intercultural communication (Li, 2006). As the differences exist, only by knowing them and paying attention to them can people avoid the misunderstandings. In the following subsections, some representative elements of the body language of American and Chinese people, including gestures, facial expressions and eye contacts, are discussed with the purpose of identifying the differences in them.

**Gestures**

Gestures are movements made with body parts (e.g. hands, arms, fingers and
legs) and they may be voluntary or involuntary (Kurien, 2010). Gestures are the incomparable componentry of body language. It refers to specific body movements that carry meanings. 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). Differences of gestures can be grouped into two classes.

1) Same gestures, different meanings

In America, it is not considered to be offensive to point at someone. In China, it is regarded as a rude behavior. The person that is pointed at may think people are talking gossips about her or him. So Chinese people choose to use hand to remind others rather than point directly. In America, turning rings around when having social activities may suggest this person is nervous or anxious. On the other hand, it is likely that Chinese people think of it showing off his or her richness.

2) Different gestures, same meanings

When expressing the meaning “I’m full”, American people tend to put a hand
flatly under the neck to show what they just ate is already piled up to their throats.

Chinese people always pat their own belly with one hand, which means the stomach cannot contain more food. In China, the gesture of a forefinger stretched with its tip touching one’s own face several times quickly conveys “shame on you”. In America, to express the same meaning, people would use forefinger of each hand stretched, palms down in front of somebody’s body, and one forefinger brushing on the face several times. (Che, 2009)

Facial expressions

Facial expressions can reveal one’s emotions. Research shows that most basic emotions can be expressed by facial expressions (Tang, 1996). Facial expressions help form different moods of an individual through combinations of eyes, eyebrows, lips and cheek movements (ibid, p4).

The meanings of facial expressions around the world are almost the same, such as smile normally stands for cheer or appreciation and frown indicates anxiousness, angriness or pain. However, the use of facial expressions in China and America differs from each other. In America, people tend to make exaggerated facial
expressions so that their feelings can be understood easily. For historic reasons, Chinese people are inclined to keep their own emotions inside. They turn to make slightly movements on the face. For example, “laugh without showing teeth” is the unwritten rule for formal social activities.

*Eye Contacts*

Eye contact is an important element in social communication system. The differences of eye contact between Chinese and American people are significant in conversations. American people have an old proverb: Never trust a person who can't look you in the eyes (ibid, p4). When engaged in a conversation, people should focus on the speaker’s eyes to show respect to her or him and interest to the conversation. Moreover, frequent eye contacts will impress others with confidence and honesty. However in Chinese culture, it is impolite for people in a face-to-face talk to look directly into others’ eyes. Especially when young people talk to the older or the subordinate talks to the superior, direct eye contact is considered to be very offensive. The young and the subordinate are asked to lower their heads and nod at times to show their modesty and respect (Yang, 2002).
Causes of the Differences between Chinese and American Body Languages

Traditions and Cultures

Traditions and cultures affect Chinese people’s behavior unconsciously and accumulatively. Chinese people are overcautious in body language. For example, smiling without showing one’s teeth can traces to Nv Lun Yu, an ancient book written in Tang dynasty, which says Every woman should learn how to live life under the principle of living Qing and Zhen. Qing is keeping duteous and Zhen is living with good reputation. Do not look back while walking and do not smile with teeth out. Another example is from Sanguozhi, records of the three kingdoms, which says Conceal one's angry and delight. As time goes by, such ancient thoughts are still influencing Chinese people’s life today. Chinese people inherit these thoughts from generation to generation. They get used to expressing themselves cautiously, humbly and politely. Therefore, body language, the tool usually used to amplify one’s points, emotions or personalities, is not very compatible with traditional Chinese culture. America, on the other hand, is a young country without too much cultural burdens. Its
culture was created by a group of people who sought for spiritual freedom from the old continent. They wanted to build their own country and make themselves heard desperately. Thus, body language seems to be a good fit for these pioneers.

*Social Customs*

In Hofstede's theory of cross-cultural communication, he defined that individualism is more like loose associations than coherent organization. People living in individualistic culture value their own interests and pay less attention to other people’s thoughts. Collectivism, however, is a well-organized social group with clear goal for the whole team (Song, 2009). It is obvious that Chinese culture is collectivistic and American culture is individualistic. Chinese people lay stress on creating intimate social network and finding the sense of belonging to his or her own group. Prominent or odd behaviors are not wise options as it may break the inside harmony. On the contrary, American culture values personal interest. American people prefer to regard themselves as independent individuals. Under such circumstance, they use body language without too much concern.

**Recommendation on Avoiding Misunderstandings Caused by Body Language**
“When in Rome, do as the Romans do”

This famous saying should be considered as the primary principle of cross-cultural communication. One can always imitate other people’s postures, gestures and ways of eye contacts when having communicative activities even if she or he is not familiar with the body language system of another cultural environment.

Learn Cultural Background

People who are going to have intercultural communication can get access to the cultural background of the body language through many ways, for example, by watching foreign movies, lectures or other video materials, by asking foreign friends for help and by searching tips on-line. Only by knowing the culture in every aspect can one use body language effectively and correctly.

Participate Intercultural Communications

Practice makes perfect. The best way to improve one’s communicative skill is to have more face-to-face communicative activities with native speakers. Getting oneself involved in multicultural communicative environment is a good way to learn how to properly use body language and when to use it. The more practices, the fewer
mistakes one will make.

**Conclusion**

As an important element of nonverbal communication, body language remedies the shortage of verbal language. It is extremely necessary to learn body languages of different cultural environments to ensure the success of the cross-cultural communication. To avoid misunderstandings and to achieve the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication, people can learn, practice and improve their use of body language. In cross-culture communications between Chinese and Americans, people are encouraged to know each other’s culture, social customs and even histories to reduce misunderstandings. Americans tend to be more independent and more talkative with various body languages. Most Chinese are quieter and lack of body languages. Even for some similar body languages, the meanings behind them are quite different. Therefore, people should keep an eye on how others use body languages and learn to imitate what they do. Also, getting involved in cross-culture conversations more often with foreigners is a shortcut to help people avoid misunderstandings and embarrassments. In future studies, the reasons that make body
languages so different should be deep explored.

Reference


