A Cross-Cultural Comparative Study on Nonverbal Communication between Chinese and American

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Abstract

Human communication covers two forms: verbal and nonverbal. Verbal communication is commonly regarded as the most important communication. While nonverbal means of human communication is often ignored. However, in face-to-face communication the bulk of information is sent and received through nonverbal channels. This suggests that nonverbal communication also play a vital role in human communication.

Based on culture and communication theories, this research intends to study the nonverbal communication between China and America. The most basic, and important nonverbal codes used in Chinese and American communication are objective of this research.

Through contrastive analysis and detailed discussion, this study has proved that cultural differences between Chinese and America manifest themselves in two aspects. We must pay attention to the differences in intercultural communication.

Keywords: nonverbal communication, cross-cultural communication, culture
Introduction

The systematic research on nonverbal communication from the perspective of intercultural communication has not gone far although some scholars have done some work. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore the cultural differences in nonverbal communication between China and America.

Based on culture and communication theories, applying contrastive and analytic method, this research intends to study the nonverbal communication between China and America. The materials for contrast and analysis are collected from nonverbal codes of daily use. The most basic, familiar and important nonverbal codes used in Chinese and American daily communication are the objective of this research. The contrastive study is based on two comprehensive categories of nonverbal communication: those that are primarily produced by the body, and those that the individual combines with the setting. Abundant examples are provided for the study and some typical cases serve for detailed analysis to offer valid and convincing descriptions.

The significance of this exploration is evident. Firstly, we realize that in developing our competence of intercultural communication, the perception of nonverbal communication and the awareness of nonverbal difference are essential. Secondly, in our language teaching nonverbal communication should be stressed. In fact,
nonverbal communication has been almost completely neglected in the teaching of both native and foreign languages for a number of historical reasons. The exploration is significant because understanding nonverbal communication styles that vary cross-culturally is a critical aspect of our increasingly global society.

**Chapter 1 Definition of Nonverbal Communication**

Human communication is usually divided into verbal and nonverbal systems. We communicate more than we say. Actually, in everyday life, we spend a considerable amount of time on nonverbal communication. In addition, we receive much of our emotional meanings through nonverbal elements.

1.1 The History of Nonverbal Communication

The study of nonverbal communication primarily began after World War II. The history of nonverbal communication studies as a discipline is not very long. In the first half of the twentieth century, the study of nonverbal communication still remained unsystematic. There were only studies of dress, facial expression, voice and appearance. Its birth was marked by the publication of Birdwhistell's *Introduction to Kinesics* in 1952.

1.2 The Definition of Nonverbal Communication

Scholars give different versions of definition on nonverbal communication, each from a different perspective.

1.2.1 Martin and Nakayama

Martin and Nakayama regard it having the nature of not involving language, hence denote it as: “Nonverbal communication is communication through means other than
language, for example, facial expression, personal space, eye contact, use of time, and conversational silence” (Martin & Nalayama 2005:149)

1.2.2 Dodd

By contrast, Dodd refuses to neglect the role of language: “Nonverbal communication involves not only the actions but the cultural interpretation of those actions in relation to the verbal communication uttered simultaneously” (Dodd 1998:135)

A more detailed definition of nonverbal communication in terms of the process and mechanism is: “Nonverbal communication involves all those nonverbal stimuli in a communication setting that are generated by both the source and his or her use of the environment and that has potential message value for the source or receiver.” (Samovar et al. 2000:149)

There were still many other factors such as culture, human nature and context involved in nonverbal communication. The meanings of nonverbal communication often have to be interpreted via considerations of because these factors may help make clear the complexity such aspects, of nonverbal communication. However, these factors are so diverse and complex that a perfect definition is impossible. It is so natural that current definitions are different from the ones in their orientations.

Chapter II Classification of Nonverbal Communication

Scholars more or less agree on the contents of nonverbal communication study. But as for the classification, they have different perspectives. In the following, I will introduce the one of the classifications. Most classifications divide nonverbal
messages into two comprehensive categories: those that are primarily produced by the body, and those that the individual combines with the setting.

2.1 Produced by the Body

The body behavior includes the appearance, movement, facial expressions, eye contact, touch, and paralanguage. Such behaviors as eye contact, facial expressions, body movement, gestures of hands and legs are usually termed as kinesics.

2.1.1 Posture

Posture refers to the general way people carry out their body. Postures are usually classified into three categories: standing, bent-knee positions (includes sitting, squatting, and kneeling) and lying. Each culture has its own distinctive nonverbal cues despite of universal ones. Posture and sitting habits offer insight into a culture's deep structure. This is true in Chinese and American cultures. There exist many differences in stance and sitting habits between Chinese and Americans, which may confuse both parties.

In China, both men and women are obliged to stand when they are introduced to others, while in America when a lady is introduced to a man, she need not stand up except when the man's social status is very high. In America, when a student is asked to answer the teacher's question in classroom, the student usually assumes a sitting posture. But in China, students usually answer the teacher's questions standing. Standing with arms akimbo is common in America with neutral meaning. Such a posture may be adopted both by men and women. Women adopt this posture to show their impatience. However, such a posture in China is regarded as a signal to protect
oneself from being approached. There are also cultural differences as far as gait is concerned. Chinese people may regard Americans' big strides when they walk as being arrogant, and Americans may consider Chinese people's gait shy and timid. The differences are caused by the simple reason that Americans need more space than Chinese do while Chinese culture stresses modesty that it is improper to swagger.

From these differences, people may note the values, norms, and beliefs or subjective culture of a particular group reflected in the nonverbal codes of the two nations. In the United States, the emphasis is upon informality and people seem to have a loose and easy stance, but Chinese ancient philosophy values a rigid, erect and quiet stance. As an old adage says, "Stand as straight as a pine and sit as upright as a bell."

### 2.1.2 Facial Expressions

Facial expression is also a kind of way to convey messages in communication. Face is one of the most essential sources of emotional information. People in different cultural backgrounds may have the same facial expressions with the same meaning to a large extent. For example, smile and relaxed facial muscles are the signs of joy, happiness; crying and contracted facial muscles are the symbols of sadness, grief. Slight frowning means that he/she is uninterested in something. In a conversation, a person shows that he/she is listening by looking at the other person's face and often with a smile; it is a symbol of sincerity in Chinese and American culture. And when greeting somebody without words, people in both cultures will nod their heads with a smile at the same time.

Facial expressions, however, may also communicate different messages in both
cultures. Americans often stretch tongues to indicate disdain, while Chinese Tibetans regard this as politeness and respect to the guests, and the Han nationality in China use it to show surprise. People in American culture smile more to others, especially to strangers, than people in Chinese culture. Because in American culture, affective relationship is not socially predetermined but must be acquired by each individual personally, whereas in Chinese culture, friendship is predetermined by stable social relationship into which one is born, so people have less need to make specific friendship.

2.1.3 Eye Contact

Eye contact is another important aspect of kinesics. It is the study of messages sent by eyes, including eye contact, gaze, starting and pupil dilation. Eyes play an important role in human interaction. People can use eye contact to regulate communication, convey emotions, and indicate degrees of attentiveness, interest, and arousal. Different cultures have developed a variety of uses for the eyes in the communicative process. The differences of using eyes in conversation between Chinese and western cultures are obvious. In the U.S.A. people must direct his/her eyes to the person who is communicating with him, because it is a symbol of honesty and sincerity, while in China, direct-eye-contact could be regarded as a sign of rudeness, contempt, disrespect, uneasiness or bad manners. When Chinese communicate, they always avoid direct eye-to-eye contact intentionally; they will lower their eyes as a sign of deference and respect.

As is discussed above, rules about eye language are numerous and complex. Different
cultures have different customs of using eye movement, so we should conduct them accordingly.

2.2 Individual Combines with the Setting

2.2.1 Time

Time is the study of chronemics, or more precisely, the study of how humans structure and use time in communication. Although we can not hold or see time, we respond to it as if it has control over our lives. Because time is such a personal phenomenon, all of us perceive and treat it in a manner that expresses our character. For example, arriving late for an important appointment with or without apology respectively send certain messages about ourselves. As in the case with all aspects of nonverbal communication, culture plays a substantial role in how we perceive and use time. In China, people tend to spend more time thinking about matters. We often hear, "Buzhaoji, manmanlai." (不要急，慢慢来) However, in America, it is common to hear people saying, "Time is money."

Time is perceived dramatically different in these cultures, which then influence interaction involving Chinese and Americans. If people are ignorant of the differences misunderstandings or even conflicts between different time systems are unavoidable.

2.2.2 Silence

Silence is defined as the absence of sound during speaking or conversing, such as making soundless reaction or pause. In the light of Samovar et al, silence can indeed be a powerful message.

Chinese culture belongs to high-context cultures. Meaning, therefore, is not
necessarily contained in words. Information is provided through gestures, the use of space, and even silence. In America, as a low-context culture, the verbal message contains most of the information and very little is embedded in the context or the participants.

During a conversation, the Americans dislike the Chinese listener making no feedback and keeping silence. They regard the silence in the conversation as a disrespectful behavior. The Chinese, however, highly value the role that silence and pause play in the conversation: showing soundless approval; voiceless objection; agreeably acquiescence; or preserving one's own idea and so on. It is their firm belief that silence can be more meaningful than language.

To sum up, silence is regarded as gold in China. Chinese people apply it to many circumstances. Differently, the Americans are living in a complex and changeful environment, so they need to communicate, explain, so as to further mutual understanding. In cross-cultural communication, Americans should try to understand that the silence of Chinese people also conveys lots of meanings; while Chinese people should keep in mind that Americans value verbal or vocal feedback rather than keep silence.

**Chapter III Characteristics of Nonverbal Communication**

The important position of nonverbal communication in the whole communication process cannot be separated from its characteristics. Just because of these special features, we could not neglect it in our social interaction. The main characteristics of nonverbal communication are summarized as follows:
3.1 The Close Relation of Cultures

One significant feature of communication is that it is culture-bound. Human's nonverbal behaviors vary from one culture to another. For example, the gesture to show "OK" by using fingers is a cheery affirmation to most Americans, but it has less positive meanings in some other parts of the world. In France and Belgium it means "You are worth zero". Not only gestures, many other nonverbal cues such as head movement, gaze, distance and time use also deliver different messages to people from other cultures. Besides, not across cultures, even within a culture, various groups can have different nonverbal rules.

3.2 The Expression of Feelings and Emotions

Nonverbal communication is a primary mode to communicate feelings and emotions. Human usually communicates about content and tasks through verbal communication. While nonverbal communication is a way of sharing feelings with one another and dealing with the process of human relationships. For example, from the way of looking, one can interpret love, hate, interest, trust, desire, score and so on. Face is an effective way of expressing likes and dislikes; approval and disapproval. Besides, gestures such as tapping the fingers or foot can communicate impatience, boredom, or nervousness.
Conclusion

Human communication covers two forms: verbal and nonverbal. Verbal communication is commonly regarded as the most important, efficient, powerful means of communication. Thus, by far, much attention has been given to the research on verbal communication and much stress has been laid on the verbal form of intercultural communication, while nonverbal means of human communication is often ignored. However, in face-to-face communication the bulk of information is sent and received through nonverbal channels. This suggests that nonverbal communication also plays a vital role in human communication.

From the above discussion and contrast, we can discover some reasons for differences of nonverbal communication in different cultures. We can come to conclusion that nonverbal behaviors are subject to cultural variation as with other aspects of the behaviors such communication process and they are derived from some diverse as body movement, the use and organization of space, etc. They become critically important in nowadays cross-cultural communication, and thus many researchers make all their efforts and pay great attention in this field.

The study on Nonverbal behaviors in cross-culture is just at a preliminary and premature stage in China, Both impending social demands and academic imperatives
call for a comprehensive study on this issue. Due to the limited knowledge of the author, this paper does not go to very deep into this issue. Thus, this paper is just a tentative attempt in this field of study. However, it is hoped that discussion and exploration can shed light on further explorations.

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