

BODY LANGUAGE AND ITS POSSIBLE IMPACT ON FIRST YEAR UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

It has been estimated that up to 65% of our daily communication occurs through non-verbal means such as facial expressions, gestures and general demeanour. Some of these expressions are innate and, therefore, have cross-cultural universality. Other gestures and expressions are learned and may have very similar meanings across cultures. However, others connote radically different, often opposite, meanings. For example, a firm handshake to westerners connotes confidence, whereas to the Japanese it demonstrates aggression. With the potential for misinterpretations, special orientation programs should be made available for professors and incoming foreign students to familiarize themselves with these cross-cultural differences.

INTRODUCTION

In 2002, a blockbuster film entitled, *Rabbit Proof Fence*, made headlines. The film documented the true and poignant story of a small group of half-caste Australian aboriginal girls who, as part of a 1930s government assimilation programme, were taken from their families and sent to a boarding-school 1500 miles away. The film documented their heroic journey home, cleverly following a rabbit-proof fence that had been built to protect eastern farmland from an existing western infestation. In casting the film, Phillip Noyce, the director, initially found it difficult to find apparently redoubtable children who seemed to convey the 'strength of human spirit' the original girls demonstrated. In the documentary, "Following The Rabbit Proof Fence," Noyce talks about his first encounter with Evelyn Sampi, the actress who played the oldest girl, Molly Craig:

"I walked this shy little girl, Evelyn Sampi, and for the first two hours she didn't look at me. There is a tradition amongst indigenous people, which is the opposite of our tradition- we call it 'shyness'. But in fact not looking at a person when you first meet them indicates respect rather than the opposite" (*Rabbit Proof Fence*, 2002).

Noyce's experience demonstrates how, if someone is not aware of cultural differences, one could easily misinterpret the meaning behind a person's body language. "Body Language" is a term with which we are all familiar, but may be defined as:

"...any kind of bodily movement or posture, including facial expression, which transmits a message to the observer. Every part of the human body, either in motion or stillness, conveys a meaning, which depends upon the physical,

social, and cultural context of the action. The message may be deliberately intended, expressed in some sort of accepted code — as when a person points, shakes a fist, or nods the head — or they may be involuntary gestures of response, as when someone grimaces or cries aloud in pain” (Oxford Companion to the Body, 2007).

It has been estimated that 65% of all human communication is accomplished through non-verbal means (Pease and Pease, 2006) and that of the remaining 35% verbal communication, 35% of this occurs paraverbally i.e. as verbal cues, such as hesitation in speech, stuttering, repetition and changes in tone (Wendel & Warren, 1995). Taking this into consideration, it can be estimated that only 22.75% of all communication occurs through the spoken word alone, though some investigators believe it to be as low as 7% (Gunawan, 2001). The 7% calculation comes directly from the results of the study conducted in the late 1960s and early 1970s by Albert Mehrabian, which he reported in his book, *Silent Messages*. In this study, a person’s speech was rated on likeability. Mehrabian reported that the words spoken accounted for only 7% of the overall rating, whereas the tone of the voice and body language accounted for 38% and 55% respectively. The problem is that the results of Mehrabian’s study have been used to argue the importance of body language in communication in general (Oestreich, 1999). This development has compelled Mehrabian to point out that “this and other equations regarding relative importance of verbal and nonverbal messages were derived from experiments dealing with communications of feelings and attitudes (i.e., like-dislike). Unless a communicator is talking about their feelings or attitudes, these equations are not applicable.” (Mehrabian, 2007). Still, whether or not body language and paraverbal cues account for as much as 93%, or as little as the more conservative 77%, together they make up a significant portion of the overall act of communication. It is no wonder that studies have consistently demonstrated that body language and paraverbal cues influence communication and, therefore, professions which rely heavily on communication, should pay attention (Morrison, Porter & Fraser, 2007).

Though body language, as a form of communication, has been recognized since the time of Aristotle (Morrison et al., 2007), it is the much more recent Ray Birdwhistell who is recognized as the father of the scientific study of body language (La Barre, 1972). Back in 1956 Birdwhistell published a book entitled, *Introduction to Kinesics*, in which he argued that body language, like spoken language, had its own particular set of rules and, therefore, like spoken language, could be studied scientifically (Morrison et al., 2007).

Roger Axtell, in his book entitled, *Gestures: The Do’s and Taboos of Body Language Around the World*, indicates that investigators have subdivided body language into three distinct types: Coded, Instinctive and Acquired (Axtell, 1998). Each of these types of body language is important for different aspects of communication.

Coded Body Language

Coded body language includes those gestures, paraverbal cues and expressions that have been previously agreed upon and are only used in

particular circumstances (Axtell, 1998). The hand-signals used on the deck of an aircraft carrier in order to guide take-offs and landings and American Sign Language (ASL) are a couple of examples. Typically, if the particular circumstance in which the body language was intended to be used no longer exists, then it usually disappears from use. However, in some cases, the coded body language can find its way into the general population and survive even though its true origin may be lost. It is believed for example, that the paraverbal component of the Northern-English Lancaster dialect was a result of working in the cotton mills that proliferated there as a result of England's Industrial Revolution. Like the stop-motion animation character, Wallace, from Nick Parks' "Wallace and Grommit" films, some Lancastrians appear to speak in capital letters. The machines in these cotton mills were so loud, that in order to communicate, the workers had to lip-read. This was facilitated by exaggerating the formation of the words. Poet and writer Geraldine Monk speaks of growing up listening to the Lancastrian accent:

"Generally speaking women spoke more slowly and deliberately than men because they spent their days word-miming and lip-reading in the deaf-out of the weaving sheds. It meant there were two types of Lancashire accent co-existing under the same roof: one a slow exaggerated enunciation, the other much faster and elliptical:

Therre. Is. Trub. Bull. At. The. Mill or Thstr ouble ut' mil." (Monk, 2007).

Though these mills have long since closed down, this tendency to speak in capital letters is still in evidence.

In some rare cases, coded body language needs to be learned even if it is no longer generally applicable. One of the authors learned how to drive in the United Kingdom in the early 1980s. To pass her driving test she, like all other drivers, had to study the "Highway Code" with a view to being asked questions at random. This included the ability to recognize the meaning of the whip signals used by coachmen to denote their intent.

Instinctive Body Language

The earliest reports on body language focused mainly on facial expression. Among early scientific reports such as, "Essays on the Anatomy of Expression in Paintings" (Bell, 1806/1984), and "Mécanisme" (Duchenne, 1862/1990), Charles Darwin's "The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals" (1872) was by far the most influential (Geen & Tassinari, 2002). Darwin theorized that certain expressions are instinctive and therefore transcend cultures. He further believed that some of these inherited expressions, such as elements of expression exhibited in the display of anger, are shared with other animals. Darwin also realized that some expressions, while they appear instinctive, might, in fact, be acquired through social interaction. For instance, he thought that nodding or shaking of the head in affirmation or negation may appear instinctive, but since the meanings are not universal, it in fact suggested an acquired origin (Darwin, 1872).

Paul Ekman, in his well-known series of studies involving emotional expressions, has demonstrated a cross-cultural universality, which lends support

to the idea that there is an innate component to emotional expressions. He showed that people were better than chance at identifying emotional expressions such as sadness, happiness, anger, and surprise, regardless of the culture of the person displaying the emotion (Ekman, 2003).

It appears, however, that expressions that were once thought to be solely instinctive, may actually have an acquired component. A recent review of the studies done by Ekman and his colleagues has demonstrated an 'in group' cultural advantage which supports an 'acquired' component to facial expressions. Instead of looking at the results across cultures, the review focused on 'within' and 'between' cultural groups. Identification of expression was easiest for comparisons in which the person identifying the expression and the person displaying the expression were from the same cultural group. This suggests that there is indeed a universality of emotional expression, but that each culture adds unique overtones to the expression, which are culturally specific and contribute to an 'in group' advantage (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2003).

Additional support for both instinctive and acquired body language has been provided in a study examining body posture (Kleinsmith, De Sliva & Binanchi-Berthouze, 2006). People from three different countries: Japan, Sri Lanka and America, categorized different body postures into four preset categories based on the emotions of happiness, fear, anger and sadness. In general, all groups appeared to do moderately well at categorizing the body postures, thus suggesting an instinctive component. However, the Japanese and Sri Lankans interpreted body postures in a similar fashion, which differed widely from those of the Americans, thus suggesting an acquired component (Kleinsmith, De Sliva & Binanchi-Berthouze, 2006). Overall, this would appear to indicate that there is a substantial instinctive element in interpretation of body language as well a strongly identifiable acquired component.

Acquired Body Language

Acquired gestures are those that are learned in the context of social situations and are often culturally specific; for example, the Japanese convention of bowing in greeting (Axtell, 1998). Some acquired gestures, though common across cultures, often connote entirely different meanings. A nodding of the head, for example, means "yes" to a westerner but "no" to a person from Bulgaria (Armstrong & Wagner, 2003; Haynes, 2004). However, just as different words are used across different languages to convey a similar meaning, so too different gestures are often used across different cultures to express a similar sentiment. For example, in China holding up the thumb and index finger is the sign for the number eight, whereas in France it is the sign for the number two (LaRouche, 1998). In North America, holding up the index and middle finger connotes the number two but also, when the palm is facing outward from the body can be the sign for peace. In Britain, however, the display of the same two fingers with the palm facing toward the body used to connote victory, but also has a more profane meaning (Axtell, 1998). The origins of some of these gestures are still under debate. For instance, there is confusion as to the origin of the victory sign, which was so popular with Winston Churchill. Some believe it originated during

the battle of Agincourt in 1415. English longbowmen, whose proficiency was said to have been pivotal in securing the English victory, had been threatened by their adversaries, the French, with having their index and middle fingers cut off if they were captured in order to prevent them from drawing their bow against the French in the future (cf. Axtell, 1998). When the English won the day, the longbowmen stuck-up their index and middle fingers as a sign of victorious defiance. This origin has been contested, however, because longbowmen were not of the noble classes and therefore, instead of been taken prisoner and later ransomed, like all other regular soldiers on the losing side, they were either killed or fled the battlefield (cf. Keegan, 1978). Whatever the truth of the story, it is an interesting one in that it contains the seed of both the profane and non-profane meanings.

The classification of body language into “coded,” “instinctive” and “acquired” has provided a very useful framework to understand the potential miscommunication that can occur across cultures. While there is substantial evidence that many forms of body language are instinctive and thus have cross-culture universality, recent evidence suggests that even these instinctive forms have an acquired component. By definition, the acquired component is learned within a specific cultural framework and, therefore, is more susceptible to miscommunication among members of different cultural backgrounds.

The Impact of Cross-cultural Differences

Increasing globalization has led to a greater need for cross-cultural understanding. Though the international language tends to be English, as evidenced, for example, in the fact that all air-traffic communication is conducted in English, there is still a need, even if the words of any language are agreed upon, to understand the cultural differences in paraverbal cues and body language. In a brief survey of popular bookstores and the web, the authors found more than twenty books and over two-dozen workshops. Though there were a large number of these workshops being offered to a wide variety of professions, including lawyers, nurses, salesman, actors, dental technicians and marketing consultants, none of these workshops was being marketed to university professors. However, though some universities are offering specific courses in their university calendars, these courses, like that offered by the Linguistics Department at McGill University, are typically an integral part of departmental curricula:

“Students will explore the links between language and culture and learn skills necessary to be intermediaries between cultures. Topics include: communication between genders, the cognitive role of metaphor, language and perception, emotions across cultures, culture and advertising, body language and cultural stereotyping” (McGill, 2007).

University professors, like many other professionals, are in the communications business, and with the active marketing of our universities overseas, our student population is becoming a cultural mosaic. The fact that it is time to think about implementing these types of workshops for our professors and students was recently brought home to one of the authors by an encounter

with a foreign student. At the end of class, while the students are leaving, the author typically chooses a student at random and engages them in conversation. This particular time, he approached one of the Japanese students and asked him whether or not he had grasped a new, rather abstruse, concept. The student averted his eyes and answered, "Yes, it was very clear, thank-you." In hindsight, the author must have subconsciously taken his response as a shy "Not really" because he began to explain the concept again. Later in the year, when the author happened to be having a coffee with the same student, the student began to discuss their first meeting and how he had found it strange that the author would have asked him such a question, and then ignored his response. The author then realized that he had misinterpreted the student's gesture.

Yet another of the authors noticed that one of her students from Barbados consistently waited until the end of class to ask questions or to share poignant examples from her own experiences that would have benefited the whole class. She noticed that the student appeared shy and retiring and, therefore, did not pursue the issue at first. During one of the meetings toward the middle of the term, she broached the subject with the student. The student informed her that she was not the least bit shy, but in her country, it was improper to interrupt the lecture; in fact, she found it disconcerting at first that the domestic students felt no compunction in doing so.

As the number of foreign students in our universities increases, it is important to attempt to minimize the likelihood of miscommunications. Luckily, the task of educating both professors and students should not be particularly difficult or time-consuming. Evidence suggests that adapting to cultural differences in body language requires little more than an awareness and a bit of practice (Elfenbein and Ambady, 2003). The anthropologist, Desmond Morris, author of *The Naked Ape*, believes that there is some cultural diversity in the use of gestures. Certain rules are culturally specific, but young people can adapt to these cultural differences very quickly. If you place young people from different cultures in the same room for a get-together, within a short time, they will have found a communicational middle ground (Rose, 2005).

CONCLUSION

There is a clear trend in universities in North America toward recruiting individuals from different cultural backgrounds. This relatively new cultural diversity within the university may result in the alienation of these minorities due, in part, to avoidable misunderstandings. Happily, the gap caused by cross-cultural differences in paraverbal cues and body language may be broached and, to this end, workshops should be offered for both students and professors during orientation week.

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