

Differences of Cultural Nonverbal Communication
Between American and Chinese
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Abstract

This paper aims at the differences of nonverbal communication, and focuses more on the differences between Americans and Chinese. Also in the paper, I use the research method of theory which find in *Looking Out Looking In* to analysis and a lot of practical examples that find in the research paper. And in this paper I am trying to provide a comparison study to show the cultural differences in nonverbal communication between Americans and Chinese. In the paper, it emphasis on the comparisons of some parts of nonverbal communication such as posture, gestures, eye contact, touch, silence, nonverbal sounds and time, body space. This kind of research is important for the development from one country to another since the whole is more connect than older times, and for this paper, it will give some idea for both Americans and Chinese to understand each other better from the nonverbal part. And it gives people an general idea that what to do under the different culture.

Keywords: Nonverbal Communication, Cultural, Chinese, American

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Introduction

What is nonverbal communication?

From the word “nonverbal” we can easily know that this single word means that “no words”, and “nonverbal communication” means that people try to communicate with each other without using the word. In the book *Looking Out Looking In*, Adler define nonverbal communication as “messages expressed by nonlinguistic means.” (Adler, 2011)

When we talk to people face-to-face, we can always get some information from the word that others saying. Meanwhile, we can also get a lot of information from the body language. Even in real life we sometimes will pay more attention on words, however, when we make the judgment or a fair guess about other people, we will consider the nonverbal communication and words are the same. And research shows that the verbal communication only 30% in conversation and nonverbal communications play an important role during the communications. Pease said that nonverbal communication involves all the nonverbal actions in the communication. And there are lots of types of nonverbal communications. In general we can break nonverbal in three parts: the body language, paralanguage, and environmental language (Na, 2009).

Why it is important to know the differences between two different cultures?

In communication, we divided the culture into two contexts. One of these is high-context cultures; another one is called low-context cultures. Anthropologist Edward Hall identified that low-context culture generally like using more words to explain their thoughts, feelings, and ideas, they like people telling things more directly; for people who belong to the high-context culture, they use language to keep social harmony, and they do not like saying thing in a direct way. For

the nonverbal communication, the high-context culture emphasizes nonverbal communication more implicit, indirect, and vague while low-context emphasizes explicit, direct, and obvious. (Adler, 2011) Moreover, Chinese belong to high-context culture, and for Americans, they belong to the low-context. In America, people are more relying on verbal information, while Chinese are relying more on nonverbal information. (Zhang, 2006) Americans like being directly while Chinese are vaguer. Thus, we need to learn about the differences in cultural patterns so that we can understand each other, and adapt to the behavior of people from another culture.

Discussion

Body Language

Body language in nonverbal communication usually means that people use the body posture, gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact to sending or receiving messages. (Adler, 2011) People from different culture will have some differences of body language. That means that people from different culture will have the same body language, but have the different meaning; or using the different body language, but have the same meaning.

Posture is a way that people carry out their body, for example, the body posture contains standing, lying. In China, when you need to call a taxi on the street, you need to wave your arms from one side to another side, and this means that you need a taxi; however, in US, most people will face to the taxi that drive though, and make a fist without the thumb, and then move it around .However, that moves in China, only means that people agree with others idea, or means word “good” or “I am okay”. Also in China, if a student is asked a question by the teacher, he or she has to stand up and answer the question; however, in most western countries, students do not have to stand up to answer the question.

Gesture is a movement by using hands or arms, and gesture is an important type in body language (Na, 2009). It is also a nature thing for most people. When we were born, we already know how to use this move. And gestures already consider as the first form of human communication (Chen, 2007). Both Chinese and American using nod the head up and down for words “yes”, and shock the head from one side to another side means word “no”. But in India, nodding head means “no”, and shocking head from one side to another side means “yes”, this make a big different. However, in China, nodding head can also be an action to greet people or asking someone to come.

The most important channel for us to receive and send the nonverbal message is our eyes (Matsumoto,2006). For now, a lot of studies of eye communications have been concerned with the eye contact. The main idea of eye contact is to look or not. In America, people like look someone’s eyes and talked. For most western people, they think that if people are fair to look others eyes, that means they are hiding something, or lying. However, in China, it will make people feel wired if someone making a long time eye contact. In China, people frequently avoid direct eye contact with others. (Matsumoto, 2006)

Touch contact is also called physical contact, or touching behaviors. It is to feel or strike or make connection with a part of the body and the study of touch is called haptics (Adler, 2011). Touch is considered as a bonding gesture. Asians do more touch than Americans. In Asian culture, people always like living together, the family means a lot. This living model of togetherness refers to the pleasant feeling of being united with others in relationship, friendship, and understanding. By contrast, since America belongs to individualistic cultures, in this culture “the needs of each person are considered important, and most people would agree that it is an individual’s right to stand up for himself or herself” (Adler, 2011). In China, a lot of girls like

holding each other's hand walking or put arm on others shoulder when they are walking on the street. For Americans, this action seems too close, and some of them may think that those girls are the homosexual.

Paralanguage

The paralanguage is "to describe nonverbal, vocal message." (Adler, 2011) Once a message sends, people can get more than one meanings for a single word. Sometimes, how a word or words is said may not be the actual meaning of the word or words that be spoken.

Silence is an example of the paralanguage. Silence means that people will not make sounds during the talk. In China, we have an old saying said "Silence is gold". And sometimes, Chinese will hold an idea that silence means everything. In Chinese culture, people give more meaning for silence, and understand the silence well. For Chinese, we can easily understand what the silence means in some certain condition, the silence would be agree or disagree in some situation; or under some circumstances, the silence would be support or against some opinions. However, for Americans, they usually think being silence is impolite, and sometimes, they will misunderstand the movement of the silence. In communication, Western people are more prefer to be straight, even if sometimes they may got a negative feedback like "I don't want to talk to you", "I don't like you". They think that it is better to get a negative feedback than being silence, because at least they know what others think. And the silence makes them feel that they are not important, and sometimes they think that being ignored is a huge humiliation (Zhang, 2006). However, for Chinese, people rather say nothing than give somebody a negative feedback.

Turning-taking is making some sounds which make no meaning during the conversation (Song, 2012). Americans like doing turning-taking during the communication. The words like "oh", "en", "em", are all the turning-taking words, they have no meanings during the

communication. The reason that Americans love to do this is that they prefer talk rather than keep silence. People do not want make the talking become a sudden cold field, which will make them feel uncomfortable (Song, 2012).

Environmental language

In environmental language, it contains the time, space, color and so on (Adler, 2011).

Chronemics is the term that “describe the study of how humans use and structure time” (Adler, 2011). Time is abstract for most time, we cannot hold the time or see it, but we still respect to it since it can control our lives. From this we can see how important time is in our normal life. Most time, we take about time is how we spend the time or how we use the time. Under different culture, people have different views about using time. In Germany, arrive on time is a respect and politeness, being late is rude. Germans think that people should do everything on time, which means that they do not want the visitors come too early or too late.

In China, when you are invited to someone’s house or party, you should be there on time or little bit early. And as the host, you should prepare the food or other things early. However, in America, if someone invited you a party, you should be there a little bit late, and people think that being a little bit late is polite. I still remember my first Christmas party, I went to the party on time, however, I was the first one in that party, and when I been there, the hosts were still preparing the food for the party. The hosts were very surprised when they saw me, and after that I learned that if someone invited you to a party, you should courtesy late for a moment, but not too long. And in China, people love to say “Take your time”, “Slow down, do not worry about the time”, however, in America, especially in Wall Street New York, you will see people walk so fast, and you will hear people saying that “Time is money”, “Don’t waste your time”.

Body space is also an element in environmental language. People will keep a distance when they talk. The social distance is different in different culture. In America, people generally stand “at arm’s length” (about 30 inches) from a person when they are having a conversation. And only family members or little children come closer (Wang, 2007). However, in China, people love stand a little bit closer, and if two friends stand too further, people will feel that they are not friends at all. It is very important for Americans to keep a social space, however, for Chinese, they are used to crowding, and for most Chinese, if they find some places are very crowded, in their mind, they will think that place is the best and very attractive. Whereas, under the same situation, Americans will choose to leave and come back later.

Conclusion

There are two types of communication in the world, one is verbal and one is nonverbal communication. The researches for verbal communication have got a lot of attentions, and many researchers focus more on the verbal communication; however, in face-to-face communication, a lot of information is sending by nonverbal communication. From this, we can say that nonverbal communication plays an important role for the communication.

With the development of the world’s economy and new communication technology, people from different parts of the world get closer than we used to, international communication becomes much easier and faster, and cultural communication happens more frequently. So if people want successful in cultural communication, it is not enough for us just knowing how to say the language, we need to know more about the cultural differences, and understand the nonverbal actions from another country. And in the cultural communication, the first thing we need to do is “Do in Rome as Rome Does.” This means that people from different culture should make communication under understanding and respect each other’s the cultural features, national

customs, and religion faith. And under some situation, people should change themselves a little bit to fit into the new culture. However, that does not mean that people should give up all of the cultural customs that they used to have. We should change ourselves when we are in a new culture, but the most important thing is that we need to find the common and different. We can try to avoid the mistakes and stereotype. Also, we can play some roles when we communicate with others (Song, 2012).

However, in my research, I find it that with the world connects more frequently, the nonverbal communication is more likely from one culture to another culture. Like people in America, also use nodding head to say “Hi”, when they cannot speak to others. And when I try to find some research about the differences between China and America, I noticed that most researches were using the experiments that people did in early 90’s, and it is really hard to find some experiments that researchers did in recently years. The old experiments need to be improved since the world is more connected. And the new generations are not the same as the older generations. And for now, China are more open than it used to, and as a new generation in China, I think that the culture in China had changed a lot. The culture type needs to improve, and in different part of China, the culture is different. Some parts are more open, while others are more traditional.

Also, I found that the article that talks nonverbal differences between Chinese and Americans is hard to find, and for most article I find that useful for me are written by Chinese scholars, for American scholars, they are more concentrated on a big part not just a single country. So for this research, I get a lot of information for the Chinese scholars’ views, but only have little information from American scholars’ views. For the future research, I will pay more attention on the nonverbal differences between western culture and Asian culture.

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