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AMERICAN NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION CONTEXTS

Verbal messages in face-to-face interpersonal communication are invariably accompanied by different types of nonverbal behavior. Tone of voice, gestures, facial expressions, interpersonal distance, touching, and other expressive nonverbal signs are proved to be direct analogic expressions of emotion and attitude. People in social situations who are attuned to the presence and the feelings of others will respond more substantively to the analogic meaning of nonverbal communication than those who are not (Kendon. 2000). Only a small percentage of the meaning created in a social communication exchange is based on language, so understanding the more important nonverbal aspects of communication is vital to an overall comprehension of intercultural contexts (Серякова, 2012). Language studies traditionally have emphasized verbal language, but recently have begun to consider communication that takes place without words. The study by A. Mehrabian (2017) showed that in the communication of attitudes, 93 percent of the message is transmitted by the tone of the voice and by facial expressions, whereas only 7 percent of the speaker's attitude is transmitted verbally.

Interpretation of nonverbal behavior is cognitively affected by the processes of visual, audial or kinesthetic perception: a nonverbal cue that may be “a figure” in one culture may be “ground” in another. It would be incorrect to assess the different meanings of a gesture or voice tone in several cultures without knowing whether that nonverbal communication sign was being socially and pragmatically recognized by

the lingual community. This fact makes nonverbal behavior a crucial factor in intercultural understanding or misunderstanding with a wrong interpretation. To prove that, let us consider some features of American nonverbal behavior in intercultural communication contexts.

One particularly difficult area of nonverbal behavior is paralanguage—the tone, pitch, stress, volume, and speed with which language is spoken. For example, Americans rely heavily on voice pitch within sentences (but not within words) to establish the nature of a conversational relationship. A medium falling tone at the end of the question *"What can I do for you?"* indicates a normal interaction. Too sharp drop in pitch changes the tone of the question to one of a demand. Extending the pitch drop makes the question more inviting or friendly. This convention does not hold for all languages. In Chinese, for example, pitch may change within words, but it does not change systematically at the end of sentences. When English is spoken with Chinese inflection, sentences lack the rise and fall in pitch that Americans expect in friendly conversation. To the American ear, this flat speech sounds imperious or angry.

In the area of kinesics, or body language, Americans tend to be moderately expressive. In contrast to people in many Asian cultures, Americans use gestures freely, but compared to those in Mediterranean, Latin, or Arab cultures, Americans seem quite restrained. Americans may mistakenly interpret Asians as inscrutable or devious and Italians as theatrical, based only on unrecognized differences in gesturing norms.

Americans interpret a smile as pleasant or happy, or at least as a vacuous attempt to please, as in a polite smile of some airline attendants. In Japanese society, on the other hand, the smile enjoys a much wider area of application. Smiles disguise

embarrassment, mask bereavement, and barely conceal rage, while happiness hides behind a straight face.

Other nonverbal behaviors such as eye contact, touching, and interpersonal spacing can follow similar patterns. Americans rely significantly on eye contact as a measure of trust and honesty. Standing close in conversation may signal fight or aggression for Americans while representing the appropriate distance for conversational interaction prescribed by another person's culture. Both spacing and touching are rather precisely coded with social or sexual meaning for Americans. Thus, the norms of Arabs and, to a lesser degree, of Latins, may suggest to Americans that these peoples are socially aggressive and sexually promiscuous.

In conclusion, nonverbal signs are able to manage the immediate social situation, to express attitudes and communicative intentions, and to reveal the cultural values of people.

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