

# Nonverbal Intercultural Communication



**Nonverbal codes** encompass the ways that people communicate without words, and they include all forms of communication other than linguistic ones

## CHARACTERISTICS OF NONVERBAL CODE

- Multichanneled - it means that nonverbal messages can occur in a variety of ways simultaneously.
- Multifunctional – it can fulfill several goals or communicative functions simultaneously.
- Spontaneously and subconsciously they convey their meanings in covert ways

**Nonverbal code systems** are the “silent language” of communication. They are less precise and less consciously used and interpreted than verbal code systems, but they can have powerful effects on perceptions of and interpretations about others.

# CULTURAL VARIATIONS IN NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Cultures vary in their nonverbal behaviors in three ways.

**First**, cultures differ in the specific way of behaviors that are enacted (certain movements, body positions, postures, vocal intonations, gestures, spatial requirements, and even dances and ritualized actions are specific to a particular culture).

**Second**, all cultures have display rules that govern when and under what circumstances various nonverbal expressions are required, preferred, permitted, or prohibited.

**The third** way that cultures differ in their nonverbal behaviors is in the interpretations, or meanings, that are attributed to particular nonverbal behaviors.

(Lustig 183)

Lustig, Myron W., Jolene Koester. *Intercultural Competence, 7th Edition*.  
Pearson Learning Solutions, 07/2012. VitalBook file.

Three possible interpretations could be imposed on a given instance of nonverbal behavior: **it is random, it is idiosyncratic, or it is shared**

An interpretation that the behavior is **random** means that it has no particular meaning to anyone.

**An idiosyncratic** interpretation suggests that the behaviors are unique to special individuals or relationships, and they therefore have particular meanings only to these people.

For example, family members often recognize that certain unique behaviors of a person signify a specific emotional state.

(Lustig 183-184)

**The third interpretation is that the behaviors have shared meaning and**  
Lustig, Myron W., and Jolene Royster. *Intercultural Competence, 7th Edition*. Pearson Learning Solutions, 07/2012. Vitalbook file.

# **NONVERBAL FUNCTIONS IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION**

## **\* PROVIDING INFORMATION**

Nonverbal codes are most useful to convey global meanings and emotional information; verbal codes are most useful to convey logical and factual information.

## **\* MANAGING IMPRESSION (what we wear, how we move, how we stand)**

### **• EXPRESSING EMOTIONS**

Nonverbal facial expressions that convey feelings often occur spontaneously, without conscious or intentional control: a smile of happiness, and other facial expressions that display emotions such as pride, surprise, fear, anger

### **• REGULATING INTERACTION**

Nonverbal codes help to maintain the back-and-forth sequencing of conversations

## **\* CONVEYING RELATIONSHIP MESSAGES**

Interpersonal relationships develop, and they are sustained, primarily through the exchange of nonverbal communication.

# **NONVERBAL MESSAGES IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION**

Messages are transmitted between people over some sort of channel.

Unlike written or spoken words, however, nonverbal communication can occur in multiple channels simultaneously.

Thus, several types of nonverbal messages can be generated by a single speaker or listener at any given instant.

Nonverbal codes that are dynamic and can change during interactions:

- body movements,
- personal space,
- touching, and
- the characteristics of the voice

## **The person's physical attributes or physical appearance.**

Some aspects of a person's physical appearance are relatively permanent (one's body shape, body size, body type, facial features, height, weight, skin color, eye color, and various qualities that denote age and gender).

Other aspects of one's physical appearance involve body modifications such as piercings, tattoos, and cosmetic procedures that are also relatively permanent.

Finally, some aspects of one's physical appearance can and usually do change from one situation to another, but they usually don't change within a specific interaction.

These body adornments may include one's clothing, makeup, jewelry, glasses, hair characteristics, and body scents both natural (such as from sweat) and artificial (such as from perfumes and colognes).

Nonverbal code that does not change during a specific interaction is the **environment**, which encompasses the physical features or characteristics of our surroundings.

The environment might be a home, a classroom, a store, or a specific outdoor location.

**Formality** refers to the heightened sense of decorum and politeness that some environments seem to require.

Informal environments allow you to have a more relaxed and casual demeanor.

**Warmth** refers not to the physical temperature of the setting but to the emotional tone conveyed by the environment. A warm environment feels comfortable and seems to invite you in; it is appealing and welcoming.

**Privacy** refers to the degree to which the environment allows you to be surrounded by others or isolated from those who might learn what you are saying and doing.

**The dimension of familiarity** describes the degree to which the environment is well known and therefore predictable to you, or strange and unpredictable to you. In familiar environments within your own culture, you are more likely to be relaxed and to feel at ease.

**Constraint** refers to your perception of the extent to which you feel “stuck” in a particular environment or free to leave it.

**Distance** refers to the spatial arrangements of the environment.

Personal space “bubble.”

Edward Hall coined the term **proxemics** to refer to the study of how people differ in their use of personal space *(page 208 text book)*.

**Territoriality**, a set of behaviors that people display to show that they “own” or have the right to control the use of a particular geographic area.

**Touch** is often used to indicate affect, the expression of positive and negative feelings and emotions.

Touch is used as a sign of **playfulness**.

Touch is frequently used as a means of **control**.

**Touching** for ritual purposes occurs mainly on occasions involving introductions or departures

Touching is also used in **task-related activities**.

The study of body movements, often inaccurately called body language, is known as **kinesics**.

Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen have suggested that there *are five categories of kinesic behaviors:*

- *emblems,*
- *illustrators,*
- *affect displays,*
- *regulators, and*
- *adaptors*

**Emblems** are nonverbal behaviors that have a direct verbal counterpart. Emblems that are familiar to most U.S. Americans include such gestures as the two-fingered peace symbol and arm waving to indicate hello or good-bye

**Illustrators** are nonverbal behaviors that are directly tied to, or accompany, the verbal message. They are used to emphasize, explain, and support a word or phrase. They literally illustrate and provide a visual representation of the verbal message.

**Affect** displays are facial and body movements that show feelings and emotions. Expressions of happiness or surprise, for instance, are displayed by the face and convey a person's inner feelings.

**Regulators** are nonverbal behaviors that help to synchronize the back-and-forth nature of conversations.

This class of kinesic behaviors helps to control the flow and sequencing of communication and may include head nods, eye contact, postural shifts, back-channel signals (such as “Uh-huhm” or “Mmm-mmm”), and other turn-taking cues.

**Adaptors** are personal body movements that occur as a reaction to an individual's physical or psychological state. Scratching an itch, fidgeting, tapping a pencil, and smoothing one's hair are all behaviors that fulfill some individualized need.

The study of time—how people use it, structure it, interpret it, and understand its passage—is called **chronemics**.

**Past-oriented cultures** regard previous experiences and events as most important (UK, China).

**Present-oriented cultures.** These cultures place a major emphasis on spontaneity and immediacy and on experiencing each moment as fully as possible. Present-oriented cultures believe that unseen and even unknown outside forces, such as fate or luck, control their lives (the Philippines and many Central and South American)

**Future-oriented cultures** believe that tomorrow—or some other moment in the future—is most important. Current activities are not accomplished and appreciated for their own sake but for the potential future benefits that might be obtained. (Europe)

## CONCLUSION:

Although there is some evidence that certain nonverbal communication tendencies are common to all humans, cultures vary greatly in the repertoire of behaviors and circumstances in which nonverbal exchanges occur. A smile, a head nod, and eye contact may all have different meanings in different cultures.

The nonverbal code systems relates to:

- physical appearance,
- the environment,
- body movements,
- personal space, touch, the voice, and
- the use of time.

## FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are some examples of cultural universals? Can you think of examples from your personal experiences that either confirm or contradict the idea of cultural universals?
2. It is widely believed by many that “a smile is universally understood.” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
3. Touch is one of the most fundamental parts of the human experience. But cultural differences in the norms for touching can cause problems in intercultural interactions. Provide examples of your touching norms that you believe differ for people from cultures other than your own.
4. We know that cultures use and value time differently. What kinds of judgments might be made of those who use time differently from the ways that your culture does?



**THANK YOU**  
FOR  
**YOUR ATTENTION**