

Body Language Difference in Meaning in Cross-cultural Communication

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Abstract: Body language is widely used as a kind of means of nonverbal communication. Not only can it help people express their thoughts and feelings, but also transmit all kinds of communicating information. This paper discusses the significance of body language by analyzing the difference in meaning in cross-cultural communication of several typical behaviors. Firstly, the first part gives a brief introduction of body language, including its definition, characteristics, and functions, which make readers have a clear understanding. Then, the classifications of body language according to several typical behaviors is presented in the second part, including facial expression, gesture, body posture and spatial distance of body. The third part mainly describes body language difference in meaning in cross-cultural communication. It is concluded in the last part that the function of body language in cross-cultural communication is indispensable, this paper will give some inspirations to people when they are engaged in cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication, nonverbal communication, body language

1. Introduction

When it comes to communication, we naturally refer to countless words we say every day. However, in addition to verbal language, there is also body language which has made a great contribution in cross-cultural communication. Body language is a kind of tool for expressing and exchanging information, which is composed of human facial expressions, gestures, body postures, and distance of body^[1]. Generally speaking, when human behaviors can transmit relevant information, they also have the communicating functions of language. In reality, body language is widely used to help information conveying more clearly and efficiently. Psychologists have concluded that 30% of the information is transmitted through language and 70% of the information depends on body language^[2]. American psychologist Edward Hall once said with great certainty that silent language shows much more meaning than verbal language. People from different regions and different cultures can communicate effectively through body language to a large extent. For instance, before people talk to foreigners, they choose to shake hands with foreigners, and both sides accept this way.

1.1 Definition of Body Language

Body language, as an auxiliary tool, refers to the changes of the body to transmit information, exchange ideas and feelings in communication. It mainly includes some congenital and spontaneous behaviors, such as facial expressions, gestures, body postures, and distance of body, etc.

1.2 Characteristics and Functions of Body Language

Body language has many characteristics and several functions. These characteristics and functions can help people communicate with others frequently. So, body language is a skill that is very significant for people, it's necessary for people to grasp the characteristics and functions of body language. Differences in body language may lead to misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication. Body language reflects people's mental outlook and mind from another perspective, and all kinds of mental activities could be presented by body language^[3]. In cross-cultural communication, body language can convey a lot of information. Body language is also an important part of national culture for the process of formation, so different groups of people have different body

language.

1.2.1 Characteristics of Body Language

First of all, sometimes body language can replace verbal language in cross-cultural communication or daily communication, but body language also strongly depends on the various social environments. That is to say, people have different understandings of body language in different situations. People need to use body language in harmony with the verbal language and in accordance with the specific situation of verbal language expression. Otherwise, not only can we express the meaning exactly, body language will also give people a sense of fun. When the same verbal language is expressed with different body language, its expressing effect may be different.

Then, body language can strengthen the expressive effect of verbal language. To complete effective communication, what we need is not only speech and tone, body language is also important. For example, when you talk about happy things, you will smile and when you talk about sad things, you will cry. Although body language is auxiliary, its function is irreplaceable.

Moreover, the information conveyed by body language is often more authentic than those expressed by verbal language, because body language can reflect people's inner thoughts. For instance, when a woman receives a gift from her friend, she says to her friend that she likes it very much, but she expresses her satisfaction with a frown. It seems that what she said is not true.

Next, body language is influenced by certain social factors in cross-cultural communication, and its forms and contents are varied. Social factors determine the different forms and contents of body language in different national cultures. For example, as to greeting, Chinese people choose to shake hands and say hello, while the people of Laos and Thailand put their hands together, nod and bend. Taking the body language "nodding" and "shaking head" as an example. Most people in the world use "nodding" to express agreement and use "shaking head" to express negation, but these behaviors are not true of Bulgarians, for whom "nodding head" means negation and for whom "shaking head" means agreement. Therefore, when we use body language, we should pay attention to cultural differences and use consistent communication skills. When we understand the differences and meanings of body language, we can overcome the obstacles in cross-cultural communication or daily communication.

Last but not least, body language makes the abstract things visualized and also deepens people's understanding of the process of communication. The characters of people can be easily understood through facial expressions, gestures and body postures, etc. In a few words, body language can show the inner thoughts of people naturally without speaking.

1.2.2 Functions of Body Language

In our daily life, body language is naturally combined with verbal language. It plays different roles in different situations. In other words, body language has the functions of supplement, negation, repetition, adjustment, substitution or emphasis. For example, we welcome guests at the airport in Beijing, we say "Welcome to Beijing!" while shaking hands with the guests warmly. The handshaking is a complement to what we say. Sometimes, we use gestures to express the same meaning as we speak. For instance, a boy says that he wants two bottles of water and holds out two fingers to repeat the message that has been sent out. When people talk to each other, they often use eye-contacting and changes of intonation for turn-talking. By the time we cannot use verbal language to fulfill information exchange, it is necessary to use body language, such as in the case of traffic police conduct the vehicles.

Although body language is a kind of silent language, it has the function of conveying information and exchanging emotions the same as verbal language^[4]. First of all, body language and verbal language always appear at the same time. Body language emphasizes the information transmitted by verbal language. When people say "Very Good!" with a smile, the facial expression of smile represents satisfaction and encouragement. Therefore, the facial expression of a smile is the repetition and emphasis of the information transmitted by "Very Good!". Secondly, the information transmitted by body language should be taken seriously. For a successful speaker, not only his speech attracts the audience, but also his facial expressions and postures in front of the audience are also very important. His facial expressions and postures can radiate strong attraction and increase the magic of the speech. Finally, the body language shows the information that cannot be transmitted by verbal language. Body language can reflect people's inner thoughts and these thoughts are authentic. Take lying for example, when people lie, they will show some behaviors such as blushing face and wandering eyes, these behaviors can reflect their real thoughts and tell the truth. Therefore, body language can help us

understand a person's inner thoughts and get information that cannot be transmitted by verbal language.

In our daily life, some behaviors such as shaking hands, nodding, smiling and bowing can replace verbal language to convey communicating information. When people don't know how to express their feelings in words, they can use body language. For example, Chinese people often like to express their ideas indirectly in daily communication, their inner thoughts need to be inferred through body language so as to take corresponding measures to ensure the fluency of communication. Body language can not only express the intention of the speaker, it also conveys the ideas of the listener. The speaker can get feedback from the listener's body language, for example, whether he is interested in this topic.

We know that dynamic pictures are more interesting than static images because dynamic pictures stimulate the brain to ensure people not get tired easily. Therefore, body language can arouse the listener's interest and make the expressive meaning more clear and comprehensible than verbal language.

2. Classifications of Body Language

At present, although many countries are committed to the study of body language, it has not entered a mature period. There are different opinions on the classifications of body language. There are several common body language in cross-cultural communication, including expression language, movements language and posture language. Body language can be divided into facial expression, gesture, body posture and spatial distance of body according to specific behaviors.

2.1 Facial Expression

The facial expression is one of the most basic forms of body language, it is mainly reflected in the eyes, smiles and facial features. Facial expression refers to the expressions through the changes of eye muscles, facial muscles and mouth muscles. The facial expression has two characters, including positivity and negativity. People with different cultural backgrounds tend to choose different facial expressions, so they also reveal different emotional states.

For example, eyes can convey emotions and exchange ideas, a smile may have various meanings in different situations. Facial expression is a very important part of body language. The changes in facial expression can help people understand other's inner thoughts. For instance, artists often depict human portrait's facial expressions to show their inner state.

2.2 Gesture

The behaviors of the hand are usually called gesture, which refers to the specific movements and postures when people use their hands and arms. The gesture is a form of expression to convey information and emotions in a specific cultural background. It is also an important supplement to verbal language. The same part of gesture is the product of communication between many countries, while the difference is the essence of every country's culture. Gesture varies from culture to culture, and there are some similarities between different countries. So, some gestures can be commonly used by people from different cultural backgrounds. In cross-cultural communication, people often use different gestures to convey communicating information. It is one of the earliest and still widely used tools in communication. In general, gestures are both dynamic and static. Even in daily communication, gesture has been given some specific meanings. One of the characteristics of gestures is that it does not completely follow the rules of spoken language, and it does not have a strict order in the process of expression. It has become an important way of human behaviors which occupies an irreplaceable position in body language. For instance, we know that the gesture of curling the thumb and the index finger and stretching out other fingers in America means "OK!".

Hence, in order to make cross-cultural communication frequently, people should understand communicating ways and expressive habits of other countries, so as to improve their ability in cross-cultural communication.

2.3 Body Posture

Today is the information age, people know the culture of the Western countries more or less through various information. If people want to deeply understand the cultural connotation of western countries,

they need to start from their words and actions. People know about different body postures express different meanings. Some scholars have suggested that a person's body can send out about 500000 body signals to express his or her feelings. The meanings of body postures have many differences due to different countries and regions, even in the same country, some meanings of body postures are dissimilar. The range and speed of body postures can reflect different cultural backgrounds and mindsets. These subtle differences in body postures often lead to misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication. All kinds of body postures can express certain meanings, such as standing upright, leaning against the door, sitting upright, which can be understood as embarrassment, freedom or indifference according to different situations. Therefore, only through understanding the meanings of body postures, people can avoid making trouble in cross-cultural communication.

2.4 Spatial Distance of Body

Everyone has their personal space, the personal space sends a speechless message. The so-called personal space refers to the distance between one person and another person. Body distance mainly refers to the body distance between communicators. Through the position of the communicators, people can guess the relationship between them. The spatial distance of body often can be analyzed from gender, age, closeness, social role and other factors.

First of all, gender is an important factor that affecting body distance. In Western countries, people keep an intimate distance from the opposite sex was considered a normal phenomenon. On the contrary, someone of the same gender keeps a close distance was considered an abnormal phenomenon, that is to say, these people would be considered gay. In China, that is contrary to the Western countries. Chinese always have a close distance between friends of the same gender, but they can't have too intimate distance with the opposite sex, even lovers or couples. Because other people will think that they are very flighty. In a word, in China and Western countries, these are different situations.

Then, age also plays a significant role in the differences of body distance. In a general way, the relationship between age and body distance is directly proportional, in other words, the body distance will gradually expand with increasing age. For instance, the body distance of children is larger than adults.

Finally, closeness is also important for body distance. As we all know, the closeness is higher while the body distance is smaller. For example, people tend to keep a further distance when they talk with strangers, while when talking with acquaintances, people usually keep a close distance.

Thus it can be seen that the body distance of Chinese people is closer than Westerners. There are two main causes, namely, values and the mode of thinking. These factors are the important reasons that lead to the differences of body distance between Chinese and Westerners.

In the first place, in the process of history about human social development, due to the different geographical environment and historical context, China and the West countries also have dissimilar development trends of cultures. This not only displays the differences of body distance, it is also reflected in other aspects of body language. The differences of values between Chinese and Westerners mainly show the different conceptions.

Besides, the mode of thinking is also an important section of that. Integrity is the main characteristic of Chinese ideology and culture. Chinese people always consider problems from a comprehensive perspective, but Westerners only view individual problems.

3. Differences in Meaning of Body Language

As an auxiliary means in cross-cultural communication, body language plays a very important role^[5]. For example, when Chinese and Westerners talk about something, they often have different feelings because of the different body distance. Westerners like to watch others when taking conversations, but Chinese people do not. Therefore, body language is endowed with different meanings due to many social factors. Specifically, the same facial expression, gesture, body posture and body distance maybe represent different meanings in different cultural backgrounds. Body language has positive meanings in some countries, but it may have negative meanings in other countries. Therefore, we should try our best to understand the cultural differences of the body language, so as to take full use of our own advantages in cross-cultural communication.

3.1 The Differences in Meaning of Facial Expression

Facial expression is a vitally important way in cross-cultural communication, and it is also one of the important parts of body language. For example, a smile means a happy mood, which is common to human beings. Americans think that laughter always conveys the feeling of happiness, high mood, or something that is funny. Japanese women smile when they are flustered or embarrassed, which may not be understood by the American. Lucy, an Australian novelist, writes a humorous story to describe an interesting phenomenon, that is, every time when Lucy asks Chinese people some questions, Chinese people always respond to these questions after a burst of laughter. Actually, Lucy said she did not understand the true meaning of laughter. Although this facial expression does not present an obstacle to communication, it should be made a profound study^[6].

It is accepted that westerners have rich facial expressions, while Asians always express themselves indirectly. Facial expressions vary from different races and nations. Chinese people think that it is impolite to look at each other directly while talking with others. Young people are expected to look down to show respect while talking with their elders. In daily communication, Chinese people seldom look at each other for a long time, especially confronting the opposite sex. If women stare at men, it will be considered extremely inappropriate. However, in western culture, direct eye-contacting is the embodiment of respect when taking a conversation. In addition, when Chinese people express grief, they always choose to cry loudly to express their sad feelings, while westerners often hold back their tears when they feel sad, because bawling is a sign of weakness.

Even in China, there are still differences in facial expression, and the most obvious is the differences between men and women. Some psychologists have researched the expressions of men and women. The method is to show the reaction of these subjects when they see some different pictures, some pictures are uncomfortable, like traffic accidents, others are pleasant, for example, blooming flowers or wedding ceremony and several are abnormal pictures. Their facial expressions are recorded on camera. Psychologists have found that it's easier to distinguish what kind of pictures they're looking at from their expressions. This also shows that men tend to hide their feelings, while women are more exposed.

3.2 The Differences in Meaning of Gesture

Many gestures have the same meanings in the different countries, that is to say, they are shared by different countries. For example, when the thumb is upright and the other four fingers are curled up, it means greatness. When the middle finger is upright and the other four fingers are curled up, it means discrimination and insult. When the index and middle fingers are slightly open and upright, it means victory.

Gestures are used to express certain meanings, but the same gestures have different meanings in different countries. For example, putting the palm flat under the neck means to kill the person in Chinese culture, but in some western countries it means stuffed.

Some gestures are unique in some cultures^[7]. For example, the gesture of standing on the side of the road and stretch out thumb up in America means that people hope to get a free ride. The gesture of putting the middle finger on the index finger in British means people want to do something successfully. It means that "Let's keep our fingers crossed." The gesture of extending the index finger and middle finger for V-shape in western means victory. In addition, the gesture of spreading out hands and shrugging shoulders in America means "I don't know." or "There's no way." The gesture of putting hands behind ears in America means that can't hear something clearly. And the gesture of putting out hand and spreading fingers slightly in America means waiting. The gesture of letting other people go near to oneself of Westerners countered to Chinese people, which means provocation for Chinese people^[8].

Even in our own country, the same gesture may have different meanings due to different regional customs. For example, in Guangdong, when the host pours wine for the guests, the guests gently tap the table with their index finger and middle finger to show their gratitude. While northern China, this behavior means impatience. Besides, there are also some gestures be used worldwide. For instance, the gesture of putting thumb and index finger together and rubbing gently means the money in America and China.

Finally, pointing at others with index finger has the opposite meanings in Chinese and Westerners when they taking a conversation. When Chinese people talk to others, they get annoyed that someone

pointing at them, they think this is an unfriendly behavior. But Westerners do not. They think this behavior can transmit communicating information so as to emphasize their points.

3.3 The Differences in Meaning of Body Posture

Generally speaking, Chinese culture is very different from western countries in thought and behavior. Therefore, as an auxiliary tool of communication, body posture plays a more and more important role in cross-cultural communication or daily communication.

People in southern Europe and Latin countries have more body movements with a larger range. People in northern Europe, Britain and the United States have fewer body movements with a smaller range. Chinese, Japanese and Korean people also belong to the latter. Some people even joke that if Italians had upper limb amputation, they would be speechless. People from different countries also have some different reactions to the behavior of greeting. For instance, Japanese and Korean are used to bowing while Chinese and Westerners are used to shaking hands.

We know that in the streets of big cities in western countries, pedestrians always walk very fast, and it is difficult to see people walking slowly in the streets, which reflects different speeds of life and cultural traditions. When the Chinese first came to the place, they cannot accept this way of walking. They would only get used to it after a long time.

For another example, the standing and sitting postures of American teachers and students are quite different from Chinese teachers and students, from whom American class is too casual. On the contrary, teachers and students in the United States think that teachers in our country are too rigid and students have no freedom. This involves the problem of educational concept related to the cultural background. Chinese educational philosophy emphasizes organization, discipline and cooperation, while British and American countries emphasize individualism, freedom and self-development. In the classroom of university, American teachers often like to sit down with students and discuss with students, so as to create a free atmosphere which is not a common phenomenon in China. But now, with the development of educational concept, universities in China are gradually adopting this kind of teaching method.

The performance of body posture has a certain relationship with the level of status, which is common in most countries around the world. Generally speaking, people with high status are more casual than people with low status. A study once showed that in American hospitals, doctors can sit down casually in staff meetings, lean their legs over nurses' tables and talk with them. Nurses and other workers with low status must pay attention to their proper behaviors. In China, the same situation exists, too. People with low status are usually standing straight, showing respect for others and feel restrained. In addition, there is a close relationship between body posture and gender, which is the same in most countries in the world. A study in the United States shows that we can judge a person whether is a man or a woman by body posture. When women walking, the upper arm is often close to the body, but the upper arms of men swing larger. In social situations, men tend to stand or sit more relaxed than women. Women are not allowed to cross their legs or lift their feet to a high place when sitting, but men can do that. It's necessary for people to know about these differences and take compensatory measures to understand each other in cross-cultural communication or daily communication.

3.4 The Differences in Meaning of Spatial Distance of Body

Everyone has invisible personal space. There are many factors affecting personal space, such as age, gender, cultural background and so on. Psychologist Hall divides personal distance into four categories: intimate distance, personal distance, social distance and public distance. And every country has its unique problems of body distance. Some scholars believe that the body distance of the Chinese is smaller than the British. This is relevant to the ideology and cultural background of Chinese people. Chinese people have a close body distance when they taking a conversation while the British keep a farther body distance. For Chinese people, a close body distance will give them a sense of comfort, but the British cannot accept that.

The British are always reluctant to walk through the crowd. Only in cases of emergency, they will stretch out their arms so that they can walk through the crowd. When they come to China, they are at a loss to the phenomenon of jumping the queue in public. But Chinese people do not. They do not reject the busy scene because of their cultural tradition. Another important reason is the different density of population between China and Britain, the density of British is smaller than Chinese.

4. Conclusion

Through the study of the definition, characteristics, functions and classifications of body language, this paper discusses body language differences in meaning in cross-cultural communication, and it also stresses the importance of knowing the specific meanings and differences of facial expressions, gestures, body postures and spatial distance of body language in cross-cultural communication. In the process of cross-cultural communication, people should behave in proper ways. First, people should respect the other's cultural backgrounds, and it's important to know differences in meaning in other countries. Then, people need to choose the right spoken language and use appropriate body language to communicate with others. Moreover, it seems that body language is influenced by many social factors according to the findings and discussions in the present study. Some factors such as social environments, cultural conventions and racial attitudes all affect body language differences in meaning in cross-cultural communication.

With the development of research on cross-cultural communication, scholars become more and more interested in the studies of body language. The author thinks that an in-depth understanding of body language difference in meaning in cross-cultural communication is indispensable. As noted above, body language, as an important part of nonverbal communication, it is also a crucial way to improve the ability in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, people need to develop the sensitivity to body language, try their best to understand the body language differences in meaning in cross-cultural communication so as to achieve better communication results.

According to the current situation, because of the author's humble knowledge and limited experience, this paper is based on insufficient reading references, so it still has many shortcomings. After this, the author will still go on with this research persistently.

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