

# INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

WEEK 7: NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION ACROSS CULTURES

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# Lesson Objectives

By the end of the lesson, students should be able to:

- ▶ Define **Nonverbal Communication** and explain its importance in intercultural communication.
- ▶ Describe key forms of nonverbal communication, including **Kinesics, Proxemics, Paralanguage, Symbolism and Silence**.
- ▶ Explain how nonverbal meanings differ across cultures.
- ▶ Identify examples of intercultural misunderstandings caused by nonverbal communication.
- ▶ Suggest ways of improving intercultural competence through sensitivity to nonverbal cues.

# What is Nonverbal Communication?

**Nonverbal Communication** refers to the process of sending and receiving messages without using spoken or written words.

We are familiar with statements like:

- ▶ Actions speak louder than words
- ▶ A picture speaks a thousand words, etc

Also known as the language of silence or body language

- ▶ In intercultural communication, people from different cultures may interpret the same nonverbal messages differently.
- ▶ A behaviour that is polite in one culture may be rude, strange, or confusing in another.
- ▶ Understanding nonverbal communication across cultures helps people avoid misunderstanding and communicate more respectfully.

# Nonverbal Language includes

- ▶ Facial expressions, such as smiling or frowning
- ▶ Gestures, such as waving or pointing
- ▶ Body posture and movement
- ▶ Eye contact
- ▶ Physical distance between people
- ▶ Tone of voice, volume and pace of speaking
- ▶ Silence
- ▶ Dressing, colours, symbols and appearance

# Importance of Nonverbal Communication

1. Supports (Oral) spoken words
2. Expresses emotions and feelings
3. Replaces words when speaking is not necessary
4. Regulates conversation and turn-taking
5. Shows attitudes and relationships
6. Builds trust and credibility
7. Reveals hidden or real feelings
8. Prevents misunderstandings
9. Communicates confidence or nervousness
10. Strengthens relationships
11. Helps listeners show active listening
12. Communicates identity, status, and culture
13. Makes communication more effective and meaningful

# Categories of Nonverbal Communication

- ▶ In intercultural communication, nonverbal communication is very important because different cultures may attach different meanings to the same behaviour.
- ▶ We look at different categories to understand the different ways through which individuals from different cultures communicate nonverbally.

# 1. Kinesics

- ▶ **Kinesics** refers to communication through **body movements**.
- ▶ It includes gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, posture, and body movement.

# a) Facial Expressions

- ▶ Facial expressions communicate emotions such as happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, confusion and embarrassment.

For example, A smile may mean happiness, friendliness, politeness, nervousness or even embarrassment, depending on the culture and situation.

- ▶ In some cultures, people smile openly to show warmth.
- ▶ In others, people may control facial expressions in public to show maturity, seriousness or respect.

## b) Gestures

- ▶ Gestures are movements of the hands, arms, head or body that communicate meaning.

Examples include:

- ▶ waving to greet someone
- ▶ nodding to show agreement
- ▶ pointing to show direction
- ▶ raising a hand to ask a question
- ▶ thumbs-up to show approval
- ▶ However, gestures can be dangerous in intercultural communication because the same gesture can have different meanings in different cultures.
- ▶ A gesture that is positive in one culture may be rude or offensive in another.

## c) Eye Contact

- ▶ Eye contact is the way people use their eyes during communication.
- ▶ In some cultures, direct eye contact shows confidence, honesty, and attention. In other cultures, especially when speaking to elders, parents, teachers, or authority figures, avoiding direct eye contact may show respect.
- ▶ For example, a student who avoids eye contact with a lecturer may not be rude or dishonest. They may simply be showing respect according to their cultural background.

## d) Posture

- ▶ Posture refers to how a person sits, stands or carries their body.

For example:

- ▶ Sitting upright may show attention and respect
- ▶ Slouching may suggest boredom or tiredness
- ▶ Crossing arms may suggest defensiveness, discomfort, or simply relaxation
- ▶ Leaning forward may show interest
- ▶ Posture is also culturally interpreted
- ▶ What one culture sees as relaxed, another may see as disrespectful.

# Examples in Different Cultures

## Example: Eye contact in Kenya

- ▶ A student who does not look directly at the lecturer may not be rude or dishonest. They may be communicating respect.

## Example: Eye contact in China

- ▶ In Chinese communication, direct eye contact may be seen as polite.
- ▶ A person may lower their gaze when speaking to someone older or more senior as a sign of respect.
- ▶ Misunderstanding: A Western lecturer or employer may think the person lacks confidence, while the Chinese communicator may be showing humility and respect.

# Examples

## Example: Eye contact in Saudi Arabia

- ▶ In Saudi Arabian communication, direct eye contact between people of the same age, gender, or status can indicate sincerity and trust.

### Example:

- ▶ **Expressive gestures in Italy**
- ▶ Italians are often expressive in tone of voice, facial expression, and body language. Hand movements are commonly used to emphasise meaning during conversation.

## 2. Proxemics

- ▶ **Proxemics** refers to the use of **space and physical distance** in communication.
- ▶ People communicate meaning through how close or far they stand or sit from others. This space depends on relationship, culture, gender, age, status and situation.
- ▶ Different cultures have different expectations about personal space.
- ▶ Proxemics can be divided into Territoriality and Personal Space

# Types of Personal Space

## a) Intimate Distance

- ▶ This is a very close physical distance, usually reserved for people with close relationships.

In many cultures, entering someone's intimate space without permission may be seen as disrespectful or threatening.

## b) Personal Distance

- ▶ This is the distance used when communicating with friends, classmates, colleagues, or people one knows well.
- ▶ It allows closeness but still maintains some personal space.

# Types of Distance

## c) Social Distance

- ▶ This is used in formal or professional communication.

Examples include: lecturer and student

## d) Public Distance

- ▶ This is used in public speaking or large group communication.
- ▶ Examples include: A lecturer addressing a class

# Examples of Cultural Differences in Proxemics

- ▶ Some cultures are comfortable with close physical distance during communication. Others prefer more space.
- ▶ For example, a person from a culture where people stand close while speaking may be seen as too forward or intrusive by someone from a culture that values more personal space. On the other hand, someone who keeps a distance may be seen as cold, proud, or unfriendly.

# Cultural Differences in Proxemics

- ▶ Some cultures are comfortable with close physical distance during conversation. Others prefer more personal space.
- ▶ For example, people from some Latin American, African, Middle Eastern, or Mediterranean cultures may stand closer when speaking, while people from some Northern European or North American cultures may prefer more distance.

# Examples from the Cultural Atlas

## Example: Personal space in Mexico

- ▶ In Mexican culture, people often stand quite close to one another while talking. Keeping too much distance may be interpreted as unfriendly or standoffish.

## Example: Personal space in Argentina

- ▶ In Argentina, personal space during conversation may be limited, and people may stand less than an arm's length apart. Moving away while someone is speaking can be interpreted as rude.

## Example: Personal space in China

- ▶ Chinese communicators may be comfortable standing just over an arm's length from each other, but they usually keep more distance when interacting with strangers.

# 3. Paralanguage

**Paralanguage** refers to the vocal features that accompany speech. It is not about the words themselves, but **how the words are spoken**.

Paralanguage includes:

- ▶ tone of voice
- ▶ pitch
- ▶ volume
- ▶ speed
- ▶ pauses
- ▶ laughter
- ▶ sighs
- ▶ emphasis
- ▶ hesitation

# Paralanguage Categories

## a) Tone of Voice

- ▶ Tone can change the meaning of a message.

For example, the sentence “I am fine” can mean different things depending on tone:

- ▶ cheerful tone: the person is truly okay
- ▶ angry tone: the person may be upset
- ▶ low tone: the person may be sad
- ▶ hesitant tone: the person may be uncertain

## b) Volume

- ▶ Volume refers to how loudly or softly a person speaks.
- ▶ In some cultures, speaking loudly may show confidence, enthusiasm, or honesty. In others, it may be interpreted as aggression, anger, or lack of manners.

# Paralanguage Categories

## c) Speed of Speech (rate)

- ▶ Some people speak quickly, while others speak slowly.
- ▶ Fast speech may suggest excitement, confidence, or urgency. However, it may also be interpreted as impatience or disrespect.

## d) Pauses

- ▶ Pauses are moments of silence during speech.
- ▶ In some cultures, pauses show careful thought and wisdom. In others, long pauses may create discomfort or suggest that the speaker is unsure.

# Examples of paralanguage

## Example: Italy

- ▶ Italian communication is often expressive, using tone of voice, facial expressions and gestures together to strengthen meaning.

## Example:

An Italian speaker may raise their voice and use hand gestures during a friendly discussion.

A person from a quieter communication culture may wrongly think there is conflict.

## Example: Greece

- ▶ Greek communication may be expressive, emotional and intense, with speakers sometimes using elaborate language and showing emotion openly in speech.

# 4. Haptics

**Haptics** refers to communication through **touch**.

- ▶ Touch can communicate affection, support, greeting, comfort, power, control, or respect.
- ▶ Examples of haptics include:
  - ▶ handshakes
  - ▶ hugs
  - ▶ pats on the back
  - ▶ holding hands
  - ▶ touching someone's shoulder
  - ▶ kisses on the cheek
  - ▶ high-fives

# Cultural Differences in Touch

- ▶ Some cultures are high-contact cultures. In these cultures, touch is common in greetings, friendship and family relationships.
- ▶ Touch may also be influenced by gender, religion, age, and social status. For example, in some cultures, touching someone of the opposite sex may be inappropriate. In others, hugging or cheek-kissing may be normal.
- ▶ Because touch is sensitive, people should be careful when interacting across cultures.

# 5. Chronemics

- ▶ **Chronemics** refers to the use and interpretation of **time** in communication.
- ▶ Time communicates attitudes, respect, seriousness, power, and cultural values.
- ▶ **Examples of Chronemics**

Chronemics includes:

- ▶ punctuality
- ▶ waiting time
- ▶ deadlines
- ▶ response time
- ▶ length of meetings
- ▶ how quickly people reply to messages
- ▶ whether people do one thing at a time or many things at once

# Cultural Views of Time

- ▶ Some cultures are very time-conscious. They value punctuality, schedules, deadlines, and planning. Being late may be seen as disrespectful or irresponsible.
- ▶ Other cultures treat time more flexibly. Relationships, emergencies, social obligations, or context may take precedence over strict schedules.
- ▶ Chronemics is especially important in workplaces, universities, interviews, and international meetings.

## 6. Appearance and Dressing

- ▶ Appearance is a powerful form of nonverbal communication. People often make judgments based on how others look, dress, and present themselves.
- ▶ Appearance includes:
  - ▶ clothing
  - ▶ hairstyle
  - ▶ jewellery
  - ▶ makeup
  - ▶ cleanliness
  - ▶ uniforms
  - ▶ body art
  - ▶ grooming
  - ▶ professional dress

# What Appearance Communicates

- ▶ Appearance may communicate:
- ▶ identity
- ▶ social status
- ▶ religion
- ▶ profession
- ▶ gender expectations
- ▶ age
- ▶ personality
- ▶ seriousness
- ▶ respect
- ▶ group belonging

# Examples

- ▶ A police uniform communicates authority.  
A graduation gown communicates academic achievement.  
Traditional dress may communicate cultural identity.  
Religious dress may communicate faith and modesty.  
Formal clothing may communicate professionalism
- ▶ **Cultural Differences**
- ▶ Different cultures have different expectations about modesty, formality, colour, hairstyle and acceptable dressing.
- ▶ In intercultural communication, it is important to understand dress expectations, especially in formal events, religious settings, workplaces and ceremonies

# 7. Symbolism

- ▶ **Symbolism** refers to the use of objects, colours, signs, images, or actions to communicate meaning.
- ▶ Symbols are culturally learned. A symbol may have deep meaning in one culture but little or a different meaning in another.
- ▶ **Examples of Symbols**
- ▶ Symbols include:
  - ▶ colours
  - ▶ flags
  - ▶ religious signs
  - ▶ national anthems
  - ▶ traditional objects
  - ▶ cultural dress

# Colour Symbolism

- ▶ Colours can communicate different meanings across cultures.
- ▶ Religious symbols such as crosses, prayer beads, veils, turbans, or sacred objects carry strong meaning. Misusing them can offend people
- ▶ National symbols such as flags and anthems communicate identity, pride, history, and belonging
- ▶ Gifts may symbolize respect, friendship, gratitude, obligation, or celebration. However, gift-giving practices differ across cultures

# 8. Silence

- ▶ **Silence** is the absence of speech, but it can still communicate meaning. Silence is one of the most misunderstood forms of nonverbal communication.

## Meanings of Silence

Silence may communicate:

- ▶ respect
- ▶ agreement
- ▶ disagreement
- ▶ wisdom
- ▶ careful thinking
- ▶ anger
- ▶ sadness
- ▶ fear

▶

# Cultural Differences in Silence

- ▶ In some cultures, silence is valued. It may show respect, maturity, self-control, or deep thought.
- ▶ In other cultures, silence may be uncomfortable. People may interpret silence as a lack of knowledge, a lack of participation, disinterest, or disagreement.

## Example in Class

- ▶ If a lecturer asks a question and students remain silent, it does not always mean they do not know the answer. They may be thinking, shy, respectful, afraid of making mistakes, or waiting for someone older or more senior to speak.

# 9. Environment

Environment refers to how physical surroundings communicate meaning.

- ▶ The arrangement of space, furniture, lighting, decoration and seating can send nonverbal messages.

## Examples of Environmental Communication

- ▶ Environment includes: office arrangement, classroom seating, lighting, wall decorations, size of rooms, furniture, cleanliness, privacy, temperature and seating position

# What Environment Communicates

- ▶ A large office may communicate power or status.  
A round-table arrangement may communicate equality and participation.  
A classroom with fixed seats facing the lecturer may communicate authority and formality.  
Bright lighting may communicate openness and energy.  
Dim lighting may communicate privacy, relaxation, or seriousness.

## Cultural Relevance

- ▶ Different cultures organize physical environments differently. Some value privacy and individual space, while others value communal and shared spaces.

# 10. Oculesics

**Oculesics** refers specifically to communication through the eyes.

- ▶ Although it is often discussed under kinesics, it can also be treated as a separate category.
- ▶ It includes: eye contact, gaze, staring, blinking, looking away, direction of gaze

## **Cultural Differences**

- ▶ In some cultures, direct eye contact means confidence and honesty. In others, direct eye contact with elders, teachers, parents, or leaders may be considered rude.

# 11. Olfactics

**Olfactics** refers to communication through smell.

- ▶ Smell can communicate cleanliness, attractiveness, social status, cultural identity, food practices, or religious practices.

Examples include:

- ▶ Perfume, body odour, smell of food, incense, smoke, workplace scent, religious scents
- ▶ Different cultures have different attitudes toward smell. Some cultures value strong perfumes, while others prefer mild or no scent.
- ▶ Some smells may be pleasant in one culture but unpleasant in another.

# 12. Artefactics

- ▶ **Artefactics** refers to communication through objects and personal possessions.
- ▶ Artefacts are items people use to communicate identity, status, taste, beliefs, or belonging.

Examples include: phones, cars, jewellery, bags, watches, books, religious objects, cultural items, certificates, decorations, etc

For example, wearing a wedding ring may communicate marital status. Carrying certain books may communicate academic identity. Displaying certificates in an office may communicate achievement and authority.

# Nonverbal Communication and Culture

- ▶ Culture teaches people how to use and interpret nonverbal signs.
- ▶ This means that nonverbal communication is not universally meaningful, even when it appears natural.

For example:

- ▶ A smile.
- ▶ Eye contact
- ▶ Silence
- ▶ Touch
- ▶ Personal space
- ▶ Therefore, intercultural communicators should avoid assuming that their own cultural meaning is the correct or universal meaning.

# Common Areas of Intercultural Misunderstanding

- ▶ 1. Greetings
- ▶ 2. Eye Contact
- ▶ 3. Touch
- ▶ 4. Personal Space
- ▶ 5. Gestures
- ▶ 6. Silence

# Nonverbal Communication in Online Intercultural Classes

- ▶ Camera use
  - ▶ Facial expressions
  - ▶ Paralanguage
  - ▶ Silence.
  - ▶ Chat messages and emojis
  - ▶ Background and appearance
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- ▶ Lecturers and students should be careful not to judge online behaviour too quickly.

# Principles for Effective Nonverbal Communication Across Cultures

- ▶ To communicate effectively across cultures, one should:
- ▶ **Observe carefully**
- ▶ **Avoid quick judgement**
- ▶ **Ask respectfully**
- ▶ **Learn cultural norms**
- ▶ **Be flexible**
- ▶ **Be aware of your own culture**
- ▶ **Use verbal clarification**
- ▶ **Respect boundaries**

# Summary and Conclusion

- ▶ Nonverbal communication is culturally shaped.
- ▶ To communicate effectively across cultures, people must observe, ask, adapt, and avoid judging others based solely on their own cultural standards.
- ▶ To conclude, you need to ask yourself the following questions every time you are using nonverbal communication in an intercultural setting:
  - ▶ What does it mean in your culture?
  - ▶ Could it mean something different in another culture?
  - ▶ How could misunderstanding arise?
  - ▶ How can communicators avoid that misunderstanding?

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Thank You

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