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NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Objectives

At the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Describe the impact of non-verbal communication at the universal level and how it differs at the collective level.
- Given a cross-cultural incident, recognize the similarities and (potential) mismatch in non-verbal communication among the parties involved.
- Given a cross-cultural incident, analyze the similarities and (potential) mismatch at the correct level, i.e. the incident has something to do with the compatibility among individuals, co-cultures, or dominant cultures.

A new field of study

How the history of cross-cultural communication began

The story of cross-cultural communication (or “intercultural communication” as another widely used term) starts at the Foreign Service Institute of the United State in the 50s. After the Second World War, two major powers emerged as the Cold War began. However, on the diplomatic front, the American had an obvious shortcoming compared to the Russian. While 90 percent of all Russian diplomatic staff, including officials, secretaries, and chauffeurs, spoke the local language, the American diplomatic corps seldom learned the language or the culture of the country to which they were assigned. The process of appointing diplomats so blatantly ignored this essential competence that one insider had to admit that: “Selecting, training, and promoting Foreign Service officers on the basis of foreign language skill is a little like picking chorus girls for moles and dimples. From the balcony it doesn’t matter”¹.

And thus the U.S established the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) to provide training throughout the careers of Foreign Service officers with linguistic and cultural skills. Leading one of the training programs was Edward T. Hall, a professor in anthropology. His background was of important influence in his career at FSI since he spent his childhood in the culturally diverse New Mexico among the native American communities of the Hopi and Navajo. He later commanded an African American regiment in World War II.

Being an anthropologist, Hall has however applied a completely new approach at FSI. Traditionally, anthropologists only focus on a single-culture, investigating the economic, government, kinship, and religious systems of this single culture. Hall’s approach at FSI focused on the interactions between people of *different* cultures, laying roadmaps for a new field of cultural studies to emerge, one that does not go vertically along one culture but horizontally across many cultures. In 1959, he published an important book titled “The Silent Language”. This is regarded as the foundation document of cross-cultural communication. More than half a million copies were sold in the course of 8 years. Since then, this field has developed quickly into one of the most crucial studies of the modernity, a knowledge foundation of any international professions, and a fundamental study course at schools of all levels.

Beside anthropology, Hall’s work is strongly under the influences of three other fields: ethology, linguistic, and Freudian psychology. Respectively, his theory shows a close connection with animal behavior, with language as a driving force of human thought and meaning, and with the importance of unconscious communication. This “out of awareness” level of behavior, the unknowing and often uncontrolled dimension of interpersonal communication is underscored not only in his training at FSI but also in all of his writings. Understandably, Hall’s theory is the foundation in all studies of non-verbal communication.

Non-verbal communication according to the Inverted Pyramid model

Obviously, non-verbal communication belongs to the leaf-and-canopy layer of the Tree model. In a nut shell, non-verbal communication indicates all non-verbal stimuli that are both intentional and unintentional, and that have potential to convey a communication message.

Non-verbal communication at the Universal level

At the universal level of the Inverted Pyramid model, it is essential to emphasize that regardless of our diversity, non-verbal communication is the primary and the most basic means of expressing ourselves. People are one species, with shared and innate genetic inheritance of the most basic emotions. Since Darwin², many researchers have found that certain expressions are universally understood and thus biological in origin. They include those displaying anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, and surprise³. The list of non-verbal outward expressions that can be understood universally is great in number, and interestingly, these body languages can have an impact *eight times* more powerful than verbal messages do⁴. Consequently, when body language and actual words contradict each other, people are more likely to believe the non-verbal cues rather than the actual words⁵. Consider a situation when one announces: “We would like to welcome our new manager”. Regardless of what it is said, if her/his body language somehow sends a different message, i.e. the smile is not bright enough, the voice is not enthusiastic enough, the hands are not in the right place...etc., then the audience will surely take the non-verbal message for the truth. They would clap their hands, but their hearts would sink and their mind would think: “Oh dear! This new manager is going to be a disaster”.

Universally, non-verbal communication is essential in guiding our decisions. Some may call it “gut feeling”, some may call it “impression”. Whatever the term, it suggests that non-verbal messages influence the flow of the interaction *before* the verbal messages even have a chance to arrive. In job interviews, the first ten seconds decides mostly how the interviewer would feel about the person she/he is about to talk to⁶. These non-verbal cues include skin color, gender, facial expression, body movement, and dressing manners.

Non-verbal communication at the Collective level

While part of non-verbal communication consists of codes that can be universally understood and recognized, there is still a great deal of our non-verbal outward expressions that are influenced by collective cultures. At this level of the Inverted Pyramid model, we learn from our social surrounding how to convey, decode, and react to a certain non-verbal cue. For example, a firm handshake is appropriate in most Western societies, but can be perceived as aggressive in some Southeast Asian countries. The ankle-to-knee leg crossing is typical among many males in America, but can be mistaken for an insult in the Middle East if showing the soles of the shoes. Prolonged and direct eye contact is considered sincerity and honesty among the Arabs, but a taboo or offense in Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. The list goes on.

Non-verbal communication at the Individual level

At the individual level, each person is unique, and we can only make a guess that if she/he comes from a certain society, she/he *may* have similar collective outward expressions as the majority of the people living there. Thus, if your colleague comes from Saudi Arabia, you can only make a general prediction that she/he *may* dress up in loosely outfits according to the Islamic modesty rule of not revealing physical curves. However, this is never a sure thing since each person can either be a typical or non-typical case of her/his own collective culture, so be ready to encounter a Saudi with modern and progressive fashion style. Adding complexity to the issue, each person is also capable to have a typical or non-typical outward expression compared to her/his own normal behavior. Imagine a colleague who is usually on time but suddenly arriving late at an important meeting with the new CEO. Very likely, the CEO would decide that this is a somewhat unreliable employee, albeit

(wrongly) based on a non-typical action of this person.

The language of non-verbal communication: Context Dependence

Context Dependence according to the Inverted Pyramid model

As we have discussed earlier, culture is on its last stage of replacing genes to become the resource of life instructions for humans. While genes are fixed, culture is malleable, evolving, and constantly on a move (don't forget how different layers of our Tree are subjected to change). As a result, the instructions we receive from culture are not a fixed set of rules as what animals get from DNA, but situational, contextual, dependent on various settings and interactions. At the universal layer of our Inverted Pyramid model, culture is always encapsulated in a specific *context* in which whatever we think or do is decided by factors such as: who we communicate with, when, why, where, and how. A concern, a value, or an outward expression has very little meaning without a story behind it. Imagine a close-up photo capturing a couple kissing each other. We need a specific context to decide if a kiss is appropriate or not. For instance, many people may find a kiss in public improper, but the very same people may tolerate a kiss from a newly wedded couple in their wedding ceremony in front of many onlookers. Different contexts call for different rules. To compare, animals who take the rules of life from genes do not rely on cultural contexts to gauge their thinking and doing. They would be most likely to listen to their instinct, obeying their DNA's instruction and basically mate (or "kiss" for that matter) whenever their biological body feels ready for it.

Context to culture is like location to real estate properties. It does not matter what kind of house, it is all about location, location, and location.

While our concern for context and our dependence on context is the same for all human beings at the universal level, the importance we place on it and our dependence on it vary at the collective level of the Inverted Pyramid model. Hall coined this degree of divergence with the terms "low context" and "high context". To be consistent with our framework, we should understand these terms correctly as *low Context Dependence* and *high Context Dependence*. The former refers to those people who are less dependent on context while communicating (hence, "low"). The latter refers to those people who are more dependent on context in order to exchange their communication (hence, "high"). Some cultures lean more toward high context, some others towards low context. At the individual level, everyone can be typical or non-typical of the culture she/he comes from.

The typical outward expressions of low and high Context Dependence

In general, context covers a wide range of elements, both from what the body produces itself such as actual words, silence, tones, appearance, body movement, facial expression...etc., and from the setting such as time, space, and relationship of those involved.

In low Context Dependent communication, "the mass of the information is vested in the explicit codes"⁷. A great part of the message is spelt out with clear words, symbols and actions. The mode of communication is also direct and to-the-point, leaving little doubt and little need to rely on guesswork. When someone says: "Yes, we like your project very much!" low Context Dependent

people would be more likely to take the verbal message for the truth, thinking to themselves: “Our project is great”. There is a low level of importance people place on the context in which this statement is given.

In high Context Dependent communication, most of the information is “internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message”⁸. The mode of communication is indirect and implicit, asking communicators to read between lines and rely on the context to understand the real message. The same statement “Yes, we like your project very much!” should not always taken word-by-word for the true meaning, but the whole surrounding (context) of this statement should be taken into account: How is this statement spoken? What is the facial expression? How is the tone in which it is spoken? What is the posture of the body? How has the relationship been between two parties? Any ups and downs in the recent past? Is there any chance that the status of the speaker can influence the way she/he speaks? What is the personality of the spokesperson? Is she/he known for being direct or politically correct? Is there a third party present at that moment who may have influenced the context? Is it possible that this statement should be read as “We like your project, but we are not going to approve it” or even “We actually find it not interesting at all”? ...etc.

A context gives a big picture. High Context Dependent people take in all the hidden details in order to decode the true meaning of communication while low Context Dependent people focus on the explicit message that is clearly spelt out. When these two levels of Context Dependence collide, misunderstanding occurs, expectations mismatch, and cooperation derails, often with the confusion of the low context dependent people (why and where did it go wrong?) and the irritation of the high context dependent folks (why couldn't they just understand? It is *so* obvious!).

Low Context Dependence tends to be a prevalent form of communication in the US, western and northern Europe. For example, the low Context Dependent Dutch are often criticized for being too direct, rude, and upfront, sometimes insensitive of their comments and opinions. Situated at the high level of Context Dependence are the Asian. Those who are not aware of their high context mode of communication would wrongly blame their Asian counterparts for being inscrutable, mysterious, vague, and sometimes dishonest with their words and feelings. Squeezed in the middle of these two levels are islanders such as the English and southerner such as the Greeks, Italian and Spanish who are more likely to be positioned at an average point of Context Dependence. Watch a negotiation process among these groups of people, under the condition that they are all *typical* people of the cultures where they come from, it should not be a surprise to see the Dutch quickly approaching a point of talking about price, the English painstakingly and politely creating a whole story before getting down to the main issue of why they set such a price, and the Thai being not as expressive as their counterparts, giving polite, generic comments or meaningful facial expression of approval or disapproval that may go completely unnoticed by both other parties.

Within a dominant culture, members of any collective co-culture such as people from the same age, the same sexual orientation, the same ethnic background, or even a group of friends...etc. will be more likely to be high context dependent for the obvious reason that they are *insiders*. As part of the group, they know the ins and outs of the usual communication, and hence can decode the real message much quicker than outsiders. For instance, a professional culture such as those with

accounting background forms a high context community where members use their own terminologies, slangs, symbols, actions to reflect their particular values and concerns. Their codes of conducts are mutually understood and shared. Their information networks are liquid and easy to absorb so that without much being explicitly spelt out, they can understand each other and cooperate effectively. For outsiders as well as newcomers, the only way to get things done is to be part of this co-culture, and this means learning to look for the holistic picture, to recognize the hidden details of communication, to interpret the message correctly, and to react accordingly. This sure takes time, but for those who are open-minded, things can get faster.

In general, communication within high Context Dependence cultures is very efficient and fast, since its individuals know very well the cues, the signals, and the true meanings behind them. At the negotiation table, a brief exchange of eye contact among colleagues of the same team is enough for mutual understanding, or a careful choice of word is sufficient to convey a message without having to wait until another section of lengthy explanation to the details. This makes decision making process much more effective and time economic, especially if the team is working under pressure. However, to reach this point of “syncing”, time must have been devoted to build up mutual connection with each other in the past, effort must have been invested to understand each other long before the cooperation started, and relationship must have been established to the point that people are connected naturally without even having to utter a word.

Communication with low Context Dependence has different characteristics. The structure that reduces the importance of context has to be simple, systematic and clear. As a result, it is easy to change⁹ as long as the change is transparent at logistic nature. Eliminating context also leads to tendency to create systems that have high levels of replicability, and instruments that can be universally applied everywhere regardless of the local context.

While insiders of all Context Dependence cultures can work within their in-group at high level of productivity, the problems of course appears when they cross the boundaries and clash. At one point in our career, we must have seen a manager coming from a low context dependent society, and being a typical product of her/his culture, she/he may try to impose a new way of working, more or less ignoring or failing to acknowledge the unique context of the new working environment. Similarly, high context dependent managers may take too much time in understanding the new working environment, and may initially appear in the eyes of the low context dependent staff as indecisive or unorganized.

The following table presents key differences between low and high Context Dependence cultures. Again, it is crucial to bear in mind that firstly, all cultures rely on context, most cultures score somewhere in between, and each individual is different. Secondly, these observations are only the typical outward expressions of the Tree Model. In reality, it is not unusual to see numerous non-typical cases at both collective and individual levels: a quiet American, a blunt Cambodian, an ambiguous German, or a direct Burmese...etc. All these people are more often to be seen than not, either as non-typical individuals of their collective national/dominant culture, or non-typical individuals of their collective co-culture groups.

In the next sections, we will have in-depth discussion on non-verbal communication along two comprehensive context categories: those that deal with *setting* (time and space) and those that are

produced by the *body* (appearance, body movement, facial expression...etc.). It must be noted that although Hall coined the term “context”, his theory intensively focuses on the former and not the latter.

Table 1. Typical outward expressions in Low and High Context Dependence

<i>Low Context Dependence</i>	<i>High Context Dependence</i>
Communication is explicit, direct, and rational.	Communication is implicit, indirect, and intuitive.
Relies on words.	Relies on both words and non-verbal elements.
Starts with main points, ends with details.	Full of details, main points are implied.
Content-oriented.	Context-oriented.
Information should be abundant, detailed and specific.	Information is embedded in the surrounding.
Concerned with patterns of events, details of the picture.	Concerned with “shapes” of the events, holistic picture.

The language of time setting: Chronemics

Chronemics according to the Inverted Pyramid model

At the universal level, *time* has always been an indispensable dimension of human life and a fundamental concern in the course of survival. We have tried to measure days and nights, calculate the cycles of seasons and stars, predict the coming and going of natural phenomenon, organize our life activities in a way that would ensure our survival in the most effective way. We even think about time far beyond what we can possibly prove to be the fact, for instance a time machine, life after death, or how the universe looked like at the beginning of time. In an essence, time is a crucial dimension in shaping our life and existence.

Time is a special concept, since it can be both an instrument with which life is organized and the environment in which life occurs. As a consequence, time can be seen as more or less a structural framework of life (“Time is money”¹⁰), or as natural course of life (“There is a time for everything”¹¹). Hall coined this level of difference with the concept *Chronemics*, referring to a spectrum between Monochronic and Polychronic. The former indicates lineal and segmented time where it is seen as a “scarce resource which must be rationed and controlled through the use of schedules and appointment, and through aiming to do only one thing at any one time”¹². The latter indicates times as some sort of “support system”, meant to be “flexible in order that we do right by the various people to whom we have obligations”¹³.

The typical outward expressions of Monochronic and Polychronic Chronemics

Of course no cultures or people are exclusively Monochronic or Polychronic. All of us need both to survive. However, at the collective level, time is a language of its own, and different cultures may have its own language of time, differing from one another in seeing time as more at Monochronic or Polychronic level.

The most important characteristic of cultures and people who lean more towards Monochronic is *sequential approach*. This emphasizes punctuality, rigid step-wise organization and detailed structure. An appointment needs to be set up in advance, meetings start more or less on time, a daily agenda tells people what is important to do. In a way, time is a framework that controls people’s life. Different time sets tell people the next step in their living activities: the work agenda tells you it’s

time to run to the next meeting, the class bell tells you to leave for the next class, and the marks on the calendar tells you social gathering and appointments you should attend. It is not uncommon for two good friends to make a social appointment months in advance. Changes can be fine, but should be planned ahead. Spontaneous events are not always welcome by Monochronic people. Certain activities have certain timeslots designated for. For example, the best way to get someone's attention (your Monochronic manager for example) is more likely to schedule a meeting orderly instead of spontaneously knocking on her/his office. In doing business, "time is money", so people should minimize their small talks to get down to business as soon as possible.

For those who lean more towards Polychronic, the most obvious characteristic is *cyclical approach*. Polychronic people tend to do many things at the same time, constantly weighing what should be done *for the moment*, constantly adjusting to the circumstances, being very spontaneous to the current situation. For them, time is not a framework that controls people's life but an instrument to serve people's harmonious relationship. There is a Nigerian expression that says: "A watch did not invent the man". The emphasis on getting a certain thing done is not as important as maintaining a certain relationship well.

As a consequence, punctuality is not strongly emphasized as it is at Monochronic level. Many business people coming to Polychronic societies are often kept waiting, and hard as it seems, they'd better learn to see that less of an insult and somehow convince themselves that their counterparts are still interested despite the fact that they are kept waiting¹⁴. In Fiji for example, people speak of "Fiji time" to indicate a relaxed life style, what cannot be done today can be done tomorrow. In Vietnam and Indonesia, it is "rubber time" where social appointments can be stretched far beyond what seems to have been agreed upon. We also have "Latino time", "Hawaiian time", "BPT" (Black People's Time), or Samoan "coconut time", meaning that it is not necessary to pick coconuts because they will fall when the time is right¹⁵. We also have the famous Spanish phrase "Hasta mañana" (until tomorrow) which in most cases does not indicate at all that something will get done tomorrow. Many who are novice in doing business with the Arabs can have a hard time to get used to their constant expression "In sha'Allah" (if God wills) whenever a plan, a promise, or an appointment is set. Imagine this conversation: "Will you get this document sent next Monday?" – "If God wills, I will".

For some Polychronic people, guests being on time (thus Monochronic) can be problematic since the hosts may not be ready yet, assuming that all guests will not be on time anyway. In Chile, it is even considered rude to be on time to social events¹⁶. The author of this book at her young age in Vietnam was advised to arrive at her date at least fifteen minutes late, since a decent lady will not hurry to meet a boy and should not show obvious excitement to meet a boy by arriving at her date on time.

Polychronic people tend to incorporate many activities at the same time, something that may look unorganized and chaotic to those with Monochronic traits. A crowd at the payment counter, an office worker who signs the paper, consults with the clients, and picks up the phone simultaneously, a conversation being interrupted continuously, a social eating out but talking about business...etc. are all examples of Polychronic traits.

When collide, the two levels of chronemics cause failure in cooperation or confusion at best. While the Monochronic perceive others as lazy, chaotic, uninterested, unprofessional, or unreliable, the Polychronic may think of their counterparts as insincere, trying to cheat or take advantage, machine-

like, control freak, rude, and bossy.

At the collective level, national cultures that may lean towards Monochronic level include Germany, the Netherlands, the Scandinavians, and the US. Those that are situated more at Polychronic level are the African, the Asian, and also countries from the Middle East. Southern European countries may lie somewhere in between. Japan, however, has a mixture of both levels: they are more likely Monochronic with foreigners but Polychronic with their country fellows, probably for the sake of clarity since foreigners are not well enough integrated into the Japanese system to understand its high context culture and to do things in a more leisurely manner¹⁷. Similar situation can be said to apply for Singapore, Korea, and to a lesser extent, Vietnam.

Within a dominant culture, many co-cultures have their own traits, despite being part of the same culture. Hardly any of us has never experienced waiting for a long time at our GP's office. Doctors seem to be late very often, and the reason for being late is that they never know how long it will take to deal with a patient's problem. If she/he needs some more time, it is then ethical for doctors to do something about it, which is obviously a Polychronic trait to see people at the central of time arrangement. One can wonder: "How can they do this at the expense of other patients?" Here is the switch that many of us subconsciously turn on: When we step inside the waiting room of our GP, we also step in a Polychronic co-culture that emphasizes the well-being of other people, because each of us, in turn, will potentially be the patient that needs more time. Co-cultures such as this can be found everywhere: Super stars can arrive late but the warm-up bands should not; CEO and very important managers may arrive late but staffs not; Technical people, event and project managers can have their competitive edge at being Monochronic but not necessarily other professions...etc.

The following summarizes key features of Monochronic and Polychronic time arrangement. However, it is extremely important to firstly remember that all cultures have Monochronic and Polychronic traits, most cultures have a mixture of different levels, and each individual is different. Secondly, these observations are only the typical outward expressions of the Tree Model. In reality, we are more likely to encounter many non-typical cases, especially in international working environment. We can "Plan local" by preparing ourselves for the typical characteristics of the country or region, but we must be ready to "Act individual" since each person is unique, and more often than not, the person is a non-typical case of her/his (co)culture(s).

Table 2. Typical outward expressions in Monochronic and Polychronic time setting

<i>Monochronic</i>	<i>Polychronic</i>
Time is money	Time is servant for people
Time is a commodity and can be gained or lost	Time is not a commodity, there is always more time
Structure and order are central	Relationship and people are central
Strict schedules and plans	Flexible schedules and plans
One task at a time, linear order, no interruptions	Multi-tasking, cyclical order, priority adjustable
Emphasize on punctuality, task-orientation	Emphasize on the harmonious relationship

The language of space setting: Proxemics

Proxemics according to the Inverted Pyramid model

It is common knowledge that many animals are territorial. Some mark their home range visually like

the ring-tail lemurs with their tails raised high in the air to warn those who want to approach. Some use auditory signals like birds and frogs. Some mark their territory with urine or faeces. At the universal level, human beings are territorial too. We use furniture, walls, fences...etc. for the same purpose. Next to these visible borders, we also maintain our personal territories with *invisible borders*. These invisible lines indicate who can come close to us, how close, and what should we do when these lines are violated. Distance is a critical factor. For animals, they “fight” or “flight” when their space is invaded. For human beings, we may “fight” or “flight” as well when there is invasion to our personal *space*, but mostly, we would feel awkward, embarrassed, or angry, either consciously or subconsciously. Have you ever wondered why we often have this uncomfortable silence in a crowded lift, and that our eyes seem forcedly fixed on the indicator lights to see which floor we are at? It is because our personal space is violated by those who are instinctively not supposed to be allowed to stand next to us that close.

According to Hall, distance can be categorized into four groups: *intimate* (up to 45cm or 18 inches), *personal* (up to 1,2m or 4 feet), *social* (up to 3m or 10 feet), and *public* (larger than 3m). At the collective level, each culture differ in terms of who can enter these zones. For example, many Arabs find it very natural to be in the intimate zone with same-sex friends and colleagues while in Northern Europe, friends and colleagues are normally kept within the personal or social zone. This is also the reason why we should not mistake the fact that the frequent sight of men and men holding hands in some Middle Eastern countries indicates homosexuality.

It is important to emphasize that we should not be fixed at the thinking that the world is divided into those who prefer close Proxemics and those who not. At the individual level, non-typical people compared to their own collective cultures are abundant. There are also people who follow a mix of space rules, that they can be very particular in how each situation is handled. More often than not, we meet people that we cannot neatly categorize at all.

The typical outward expressions of Proxemics

This story illustrates various concepts of Proxemics vividly:

It is the beginning of a negotiation process in Saudi Arabia and this is the first time you meet your counterpart Josef. After the first five minutes, you know it's going to be a long day.

Josef comes on way too strong. He stands so close that his face is only a foot away from yours. There's no letup in his penetrating gaze, and his voice is too loud. The smell of his breath is even more disconcerting, and you shudder at the feel of his hand on your arm. He strikes you suddenly as a pushy rug merchant. As for Josef, he sees you as devious and aloof because you avert your eyes, deny him your breath, and cover up your natural body scent. Despite his overtures of friend-ship, you coldly back away and hold him at an arm's length. He begins to picture you as an Ugly American. He thinks it'll be a long day too¹⁸.

The first aspect of Proxemics is of course how different levels of space are seen as appropriate. Both the advancing Arab and the retreating American in this story are typical of their collective dominant cultures. However, they differ in terms of adopting the appropriate zone for their current relationship.

In a conversation, we can observe that those whose space is being intruded may withdraw physically by stepping back, standing behind a desk or a chair, sub-consciously using different objects on the table to create barrier, tucking in their chins toward their chest in an instinctive move of protection, or even rubbing their neck so that their elbow protrudes sharply toward the “invader”¹⁹. These non-verbal body movements are mostly sub-conscious, but they show how important that is for us to correctly read the unspoken message: “You are violating my space. I am uncomfortable and I may not

want to do anything with you”.

The second aspect of Proxemics is the inherent meaning of how a person positions her/himself among others. In some Asian cultures, subordinates keep a distance from authorities out of respect. Very frequently, seating positions at the head of the table may indicate leaders, and the most senior person may sit on the right. In Japan, the most senior also often sit in the middle and those nearest in rank to the left and right of this senior position²⁰. While many cultures emphasize sitting positions and hierarchical arrangement to enhance or indicate status and power, while many others choose a more neutral approach, for example, using a round table. Similarly, managers who want to send out a message of equality and openness will not speak to clients, customers or employees from behind their desk but instead come around and sit next to them. It is also suggested that arranging two parties on the same side of the table can foster cooperation better than having each party on each side of the table²¹. A great deal of meetings in Asia occur with colleagues, partners, or friends sitting next to each other, sending a message of “I’m working together *with* you”.

The third aspect of Proxemics can be seen quite clearly in how certain space is designed to accommodate people. Take the office layout for example, corner offices, windowless rooms, frosted glass partitions, transparent glass wall, or cubical desks ...etc. can all be indications of a company’s collective culture. In some cultures, the most important offices are on the upper or top floor. In France, the supervisors will ordinarily be found in the middle of his subordinates where he can control them²². In Germany, offices are often compartmentalized and sealed off from interference. In Japan, where group participation is encouraged and learning process is conducted through observing, many desks are arranged hierarchically in the center of a large, common room absent of walls or partitions²³. In the US, managers often isolate themselves in a private office.

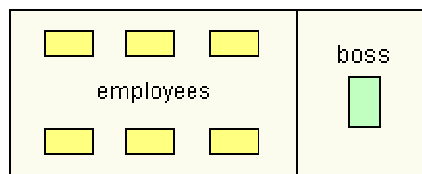
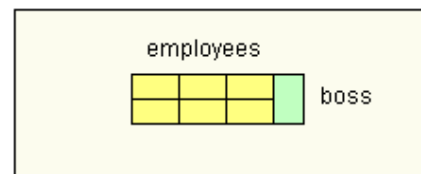


Fig 1. Typical North American Office



Typical Japanese Office

A case in point where office design can send a powerful message and even help build work force is at Caterpillar’s European headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. Here, a central communal square was created in the top floor cafeteria with walls painted in village theme where villagers portrayed in the panoramas were actual employees. It quickly became a centre of culture and casual business, helping to create a positive spirit and common sense of purpose²⁴.

The language of the body

In the previous two sections, we have discussed the importance of context in terms of what produced by the setting (time and space). In this section, we will delve into the messages that our own body produces: silence, eye contact, touch, gesture...etc. This list of non-verbal elements is extensive, however, their characteristics can be grouped between two levels of outward expression: Neutral and Affective.

The authors who coined these two concepts of Neutral and Affective are Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner. In an essence, people who lean towards Neutral extreme tend to hold their emotion and control their body movements. Those who lean towards Affective tend to find an outlet for their feeling, and their body language is also more animated. In the following sections, we will look deep into some of the communicative outlets produced by the body, and discuss how people converge and differ.

Silence

The value of silence is universally credited. Similar proverbs can be found in many cultures: “Silence is gold”; “Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise” (Bible 17:28); “The tree of silence bears the fruits of peace” (Arab proverb); “The closed mouth swallows no flies” (Spanish proverb)... While all cultures acknowledge the crucial role of silence at the universal level, the meaning of silence and the level of importance each culture places on silence differ from one to another.

First of all, silence should not be interpreted similarly across cultures. In response to the question: “Will you marry me?” silence in English would be uncertainty, in Japanese would be acceptance. In Igbo, silence is denial if the woman continues to stand there, and an acceptance if she runs away²⁵. As the consequence, silence in business setting is also influenced by culture and it is quite possible that one party wants to convey a message of “consideration” while the other perceives it as “lack of attention”, “not interested” or downright “rejection”. For many Scandinavian cultures, silence can be an indication to the other person that you want them to continue talking²⁶. The true meaning of silence can be hard to know in high Context Dependence cultures where people really have to read between lines, to rely on the surrounding and the history of the situation that stretches backward and forward in order to understand what silence really means in each particular case.

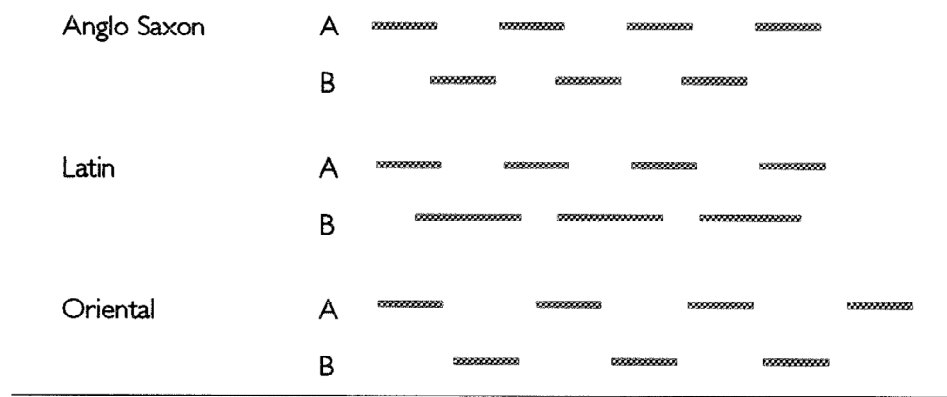


Fig 2. Conversation pattern in different cultures

Second of all, not every culture puts silence on the same level of importance. Silence is more meaningful for Neutral cultures. In general, North American and some Southern Western cultures are more likely to score lower than Asian cultures on this scale. While pauses can be seen as empty messages for the former, the latter may use this duration of time to seek answers, to interpret what other people say, or to think of new topics...etc., so they are occupied with certain activities and not

just waiting awkwardly during an empty message²⁷. In negotiation, the urge to keep a conversation going on and to avoid silence can bring disadvantage since one may unwittingly disclose unnecessary information. The pauses employed among people with Neutral communication can be in stark contrast with the intensity of those who are Affective. One only has to watch a typical Arab or Italian talk show to recognize the busy speaking pattern that makes it completely normal for participants to talk over each other.

Eye Contact

Universally, eye contacts have been evolved as humans' survival skills. Children with more acute ability to attract and maintain eye contact with mothers can increase their chance of attention and care, hence, better chance to survive.

The eyes have been described as “gateway to the soul”. They convey more messages and feelings than any other part of the body. Generally speaking, lack of eye contact indicates lack of interest, honesty, or the person is discussing something intimate or difficult. Waiters and waitresses who squat down next to the table to bring their eye level on par with the customers' receive more tips²⁸. Generally speaking, prolonged staring can be considered rude or threatening, darting eyes can be linked with deceptions or insecurity, and wild eyes signal approval or pleased surprise. The pupil size also tells us more than we think. Under the same light condition, they unconsciously dilate when the eyes see something pleasant, exciting or arousing, thus the pupils widen to allow us to see more (also if we are in a dimly lit environment). On the contrary, pupil contraction signals resistance, anger, or negativity²⁹. Females are normally judged to be more attractive if their pupils are wide open, and that how Revlon increased its lipstick sale by 45% using the technique of enlarging the pupil size of their models³⁰. Further, a lowered gaze is generally a sign of submission. Looking up in combination with lowered head mimics the upward gaze of little children, and therefore can touch a parental instinct in the audience, attracting sympathy and affection³¹.



Fig 3. Princess Diana earned her nick name Shy Di partly because she was often photographed using this gesture, which also triggered people's compassion and support.

Eye movements are closely linked to brain activities too. According to neuro-linguistic programming theories, most right-handed people, so most of us, when visualizing a “remembered” memory, look up to the left (“That market exhibition was really interesting!”). When we are “creating” an image, we often look up to the right (“I wonder how our product stall would look like!”). Gazing also indicates

the spirit of the conversation. When you mean business and want to do business, employ the “business gaze” which focuses on the triangle connecting the forehead and the eyes. If your eyes drop a notch down to the “social gaze”, which is the triangle connecting the eyes and the mouth, then the relationship has shifted. Take extra care when your eyes venture within the “intimate gaze”, which forms a triangle from the eyes to both sides of the chest or breasts. Successful salespeople, negotiators, and gamblers alike have been relying on monitoring and reading pupil dilation and eye contacts to gauge their partners’ and competitors’ emotion and feeling.

At the collective level, different societies may attach different levels of importance on eye contacts, as well as different meanings to eye gazes and movements. High Context Dependence and Neutral cultures are more likely to embed messages in eyes exchange. Koreans even have a specific term for it: *nunchi* means communicating with the eyes. Low Context Dependent Germans and Affective Arabs tend to engage in prolonged eye contacts since it shows sincerity and honesty. This can be so intense that many other people from Western cultures may find disconcerting³². In some Asian and African cultures, direct eye contact, especially when used in the conversation with senior and elderly people can be considered as rude or lack of respect. While Arabs are known for extended gaze exchanges, direct eye contact between men and women should be avoided out of modesty and religious morals.

Touch

Of all the senses, touch is the first to develop in the unborn babies. It becomes the most primitive and essential form of non-verbal communication. Newborns need to be in constant skin to skin contact with their care takers, so much that premature babies who are stroked grow up to 47% faster than those who do not receive the same amount of touching³³. A touch is the quickest way to build up personal rapport and human bond since we have evolved to feel more attached with those we have exchanged physical contacts. A study shows that waitresses who casually touched their customers on their shoulders at the end of the meal received 14% more tips than those who did not. In many commercial settings, casually touching customers can increase their time spending in a store, the amounts they purchase, and favorable evaluation of their shopping experience³⁴.

At the collective level, touching is of course cultural bound. Some societies such as Southern European, Latin America and Middle Eastern countries are more Affective, employing touching as part of their communication style, hence using greater frequency of touch cues than Northern European, Northern American and Asian countries which are more Neutral in communication. We can clearly see this touching mismatch in our previous case of the American businessman and his Saudi counterpart named Josef, just how the touch of Josef on the arm can create such a great confusion and annoyance while it is meant to be a gesture of trust, interest, and approval.

Similar pattern can be accounted for a very common business touch: the handshake. Universally, humans have been using different forms of hand gestures as a way of greeting as far back as the 5th century BC. Originally, extending an empty hand was more than a friendly gesture, it was an indication that a person wasn’t holding any weapons. Today, physical touch and warmth are established through the handshaking tradition, creating a lasting and positive impression. A study by the Income Center for Trade Shows reports that people are two times more likely to remember you if you shake hands with them³⁵.

At the collective level, even this seemingly simple handshake has its cultural nuances. Some Western

cultures prefer a strong grip while in some other Asian and Latin American cultures, a light, soft, lingering handshake is more common. Further, using the left hand can be seen as an insult for the Arabs and Indian since this hand was used for personal hygiene. In much of Europe and the Middle East, together with the handshake, people also add a cheek kiss to the greeting. The total number of kisses really depends on the specific culture, and giving one kiss more or one kiss less can easily cause certain awkwardness or embarrassment. The author of this book, for those year living in The Netherlands, has seen more than once that a Dutch person reached out for a triple kiss, and on the third count accidentally kissed on the lips of the business partner. Because this person was from France and was accustomed only for a double kiss, so she did not turn her cheek for that one last kiss.

In some Affective cultures, handshakes go along with not just many kisses but hugs, embraces, enthusiastic pats on the backs, and also same-sex touching on the shoulders, arms, and legs. More Neutral societies such as some Southeast Asian countries would avoid this all together, especially between men and women. The Japanese don't even have their own word for kissing. They borrow from the English and make it *kisu*.

Hierarchy often plays a critical role in greetings and touching. In India and Turkey, a junior person may kiss the senior's hand and press it to her/his forehead to show respect. In Sri Lanka, it is not uncommon to see students and their parents lining up, one by one, waiting for their turn to touch and kiss the feet of the teacher – an act of showing gratitude and respect. Touching a person of special status often follows some ritual or formal rules, and should be done with care. For example, there are only five people known to have broken the rule of not touching Queen Elizabeth II and all of them, including two Australian Prime Ministers, received harsh critics from media.

Body movement (kinesics)

Body movement is one of the first modes of communication between babies and their parents. Scholars consider body gestures to be a more fundamental and universal mode of communication than vocal languages³⁶, since many of us can manage to talk with our hands in foreign countries with frequently successful attempts to convey a message. It is, however, pointless to categorize body movement, since there can be as many as 700.000 distinct physical signs, of which 1.000 are different bodily postures, 5.000 are hand gestures and 250.000 are facial expression³⁷. While a great part of these movements can be understood universally, significant amount of them are culture bound and should be interpreted from cultural point of view. The study of body movement is called *kinesics*, a term coined by Ray Birdwhistell who was in the same team with Edward T. Hall at the American Foreign Service Institutes.

One obvious example of how body movements are culturally specific symbols can be observed in gestures. Nodding the head up and down usually means “yes” and shaking it from side to side usually means “no”, but for Indians and many of the Balkans the opposite is true. In Bosnia and Croatia, head tossing with a tongue click also signal a negative answer, but for some others, this gesture can be interpreted as extremely arrogant and lazy. In the US, to signal a person to come near you hold the palm up and move the fingers towards your body. In Vietnam, you should flip your palm and make it face down since the same motion is only used to call a dog.



Fig 4. The sign conveys different messages in different cultures: US (Ok); Japan and Korea (Money); Arabs + a baring of teeth (hostile); Tunisia (I will kill you); Latino (Obscene)

Similarly, sitting position is often a reflection of cultural characteristics. Many people have accidentally insulted their counterparts from the Middle East or Southeast Asia by adopting the usual ankle-to-knee leg crossing, showing the bottom of their feet – which are considered the lowest part of the body and should never be pointed in the direction of another person. The feet-on-desk pose may lead to greater feelings of power for Americans, but can be seen as a sign of rudeness for Asians³⁸. For most Westerners, squatting position is difficult and foreign, but it is very common in other parts of the world and said to be connected closely with health benefit.

While we are on the subject of sitting posture, it is interesting to know that body positions can influence our behavior. A study shows that interacting with devices of different sizes (smartphone, tablet, laptop, and big desk computer) has an impact on subsequent power-related attitude. Those who hunch over a smartphone to perform tasks were reported to be less assertive than those who used a full-sized computer. The study suggests us ditch the tiny smartphone before entering a meeting³⁹.

Generally speaking, Affective people employ a great deal of body movements while communicating with others. They use heated, vital, and very animated expressions with extensive amount of hand gestures, facial expressions and body postures. Neutral people tend to dam up their emotions and often try to look calm or stiff. The Affectives may perceive their counterparts as uninterested, lack of commitment while the Neutrals see their counterparts as irrational and loss of control.

Paralanguage

Another colleague of Edward T. Hall by the name of George L. Trager pioneered the study of tone and voice as means of communication. When we speak, the words we stress can change the underlying meaning significantly. Let's take a look at this sentence: "I don't think he should get that job". You can read each sentence aloud and give a strong stress to the word in **bold**:

I don't think he should get that job (Someone else thinks he should get the job).

I **don't** think he should get that job (I definitively oppose to the idea).

I don't **think** he should get that job (I'm not sure he'll get that job).

I don't think **he** should get that job (Someone else should get the job).

I don't think he **should** get that job (It's wrong that he will get that job).

I don't think he should **get** that job (He got that job too easily. He should have earned it).

I don't think he should get **that** job (He should get another kind of job).

I don't think he should get that **job** (Maybe he should get something else, not a job).

Paralinguistic cues such as stress, rate, and pitch contour contribute significantly to the meaning of the speech. That is why many of us can make quite some decent guesswork when watching a foreign movie without even knowing the language.

At the collective level, vocal qualities and characteristics are culturally specific. The Arabs, the African, the Italian and the Latinos are likely to be Affective people, hence favoring loud conversation, perceiving it to be enthusiastic, sincere, and involvement. Their tones are usually very expressive with emotion. For people with Neutral communication patterns such as the Thais or the English, the same level of volume perceived as normal for the Latinos will probably be considered impolite, aggressive, or loss of control.

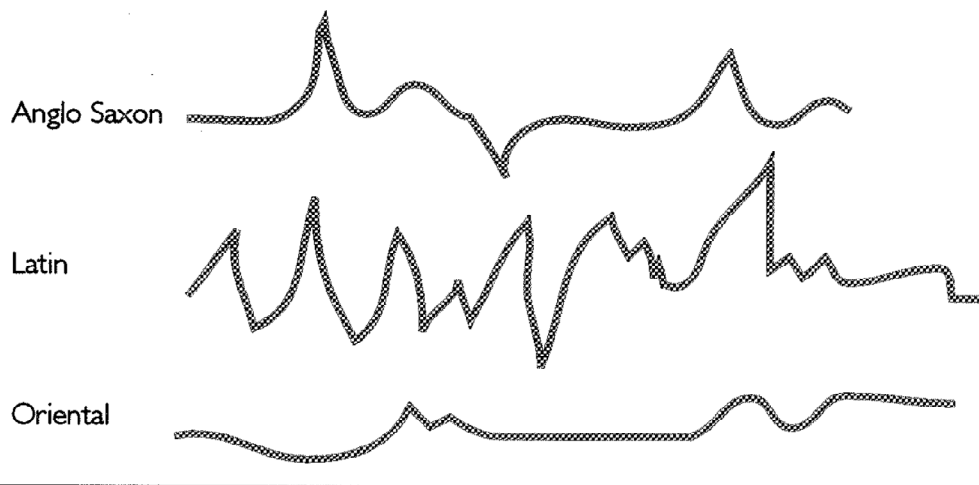


Fig 5. Tone of voice in different cultures.

The limitations of non-verbal communication and its theories

Ambiguity

Since non-verbal communication is both intentional and *unintentional*, it is very fairly easy to misinterpret a cue, even when cultural consideration has been applied. One can never be sure and everything is squarely a guess. The second reason why non-verbal communication is ambiguous is because it is always *based on a specific context*. The language of non-verbal communication is context, and virtually nobody can have 100% of all the related information regarding a specific situation, including the insiders. Special context can make people react differently compared to their normal collective or individual outward expressions. If we happen to deal with a very loud and emotional client – is that because this person has a very Affective character, or is because she/he is having a tough day? All in all, it is fair to remember that “meanings and interpretations of non-verbal behaviors often are on very shaky ground”⁴⁰.

The binary construct of culture

To project theories of non-verbal communication onto our models, firstly, it must be noted that since many of the scholars in this field rooted their work in animal behaviors, they also cover a great deal of fundamental concerns on the Tree model. However, these theories have a shortcoming of focusing

on differences, taking on a bi-polar system of comparison with dimensions pointing towards two extremes, for example Monochronic and Polychronic. This dichotomy approach pleases the simplicity of our mindset, creating a false illusion that the world is divided into two exclusive groups with nothing in common: Monochronic people and Polychronic people. In another word, this binary structure makes us stray away from the fact that we all, first and foremost, rise from the same fundamental platform of culture as a survival mechanism. All of us start our existence with similar needs and purposes, relying on fundamental cultural structures such as education, religions, politics, and art...etc., to survive and thrive. In an essence, we are first and foremost similar in kind, we *all* are Monochronic and Polychronic. From this point of view, high and low Context Dependence is a much better terminology since it signals convergence (we all Depend on the Context) and divergence (we differ in terms of levels: High or Low). The same counts for Proxemics and its four different levels: intimate, personal, social, and public.

It is in this sense that the bi-polar thinking style undermines our potential and credibility to live, work, and cooperate with each other. The Inverted Pyramid model suggests that we should shift towards a ground-rooted mode of framing, basing our starting point at the fundamental level of culture, recognizing that we are similar in the first place, and moving on to explore the varying ways that we may *differ* from each other, not *different* from each other. Our concerns, values and outward expressions are *not the opposite* of each other as suggested in the bi-polar system, just “more” or “less” compared to each other.

Not always a value indication

On the Tree model, most theories categorize a great deal of outward expressions (words and action/behavior) and provides some limited discussion of values that are deferred from these behaviors. However, it is absolutely false to take every outward expression of non-verbal communication as in indication to values. Not only that the same action indicates different values in different cultures, but also the same action does not indicate the same value in the same culture. That’s why it is called “outward”, and that’s why we also have the term “non-typical”. We try not to judge a book by its cover, a person by his certain behaviors, and a culture by some random incident. For this reason, we categorize these theories as *communicative* dimensions (focus on non-verbal communicative outward expressions) and not *value* dimensions (focus on deep-rooted values, assumptions and judgments).

Not accountable for individuals and not specific for co-cultures

On the Inverted Pyramid model, these theories do not deal with the individual level. This is understandable since we of course tend to solve problems of differences at the collective level, and at the same time, unable to cover the myriad differences at the individual level. Knowing this limitation of our capacity, we should therefore make extra effort to keep the big picture in mind, constantly remind ourselves that just because we focus on “differences of collective groups” does not mean that differences among individuals are less important or similarities do not exist. Again, we are not different in kind, only in level.

Finally, these theories do not specify the level of collective cultures. The cultures of discussions can be either a dominant culture or a co-culture. In fact, most authors often give a mixture of both national culture (the Japanese, the American...etc.) and ethnic cultures (the Navajo, the Arab...etc.) while ignoring many other co-cultures such as religious, gender, profession, age, and lifestyle.

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