

Nonverbal Communication and Culture

“Nonverbal communication is considered to be all aspects of communication other than the words themselves.” Just like verbal symbols are culturally determined, so are nonverbal symbols. There are several categories of nonverbal communication. Here we will examine the relationship between culture and body movements, which is known as Kinetics. Because body movements are culturally specific, an innocent gesture in one culture can be interpreted as an insult in another culture. For reference, the U.S. American “OK” symbol when it is inverted is seen as an obscene gesture in Brazil. So imagine how Richard Nixon felt when he got off a plane in Brazil and when asked by a reporter about his trip he signaled, “OK.” In Japan, this symbol has yet another meaning, money.

Emblems are gestures that have a direct verbal counterpart. You occasionally use these types of gestures in public speaking to quiet an audience. When you place your index finger to your lips, it means shhhh. You could use the same gesture to quiet an audience of Ethiopians but only if the audience was comprised of children. You see, in Ethiopia, to motion silence to adults, one would use four fingers to the lips. Emblems can also be used upward with a clenched fist is a peace sign in the United States. In Great Britain, Winston Churchill used this sign to represent victory at the end of World War II.

Illustrators, on the other hand, are nonverbal behaviors that are only understood by the context of the verbal message. Unlike emblems, they do not have a meaning apart from the verbal message. If someone were to ask you if you speak Spanish and you reply “un poquito” while displaying with your thumb and index finger the distance of about an inch that “inch” has no meaning (in U.S. American culture) when it is not accompanied by the verbal message. However, that is not to say that illustrators cannot have meaning in another culture. Remember, body movements have meaning that are culturally specific.

Lastly, there are adapters. Adapters are personal body movements that occur as a reaction to your physical or psychological state. In public speaking, we call it fidgeting. Adapters are usually performed unintentionally, yet it is possible to convey meaning through your nervous fidgeting and this can have dramatic effects. Imagine a nervous speaker who places an index finger to his lips and then rubs it over their eyebrow. In the United States, one would probably think the speaker is very nervous. In Japan, the speaker just accused someone of being a liar. When giving a speech, you are sending a message. It is important to understand that you may be sending a message, you do not wish to send, with one of your gestures.

By Birdwhistell. (1970) Kinesics and Context: Essays on Body Motion Communication. (p.34).
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.