

KINESICS

Kinesics is the non-verbal behaviour related to movement, either of any part of the body, or the body as a whole. In short all communicative body movements are generally classified as kinesic.

Kinesic communication is probably one of the most talked about, and most obvious non-verbal communication form. Unfortunately, it is also one of the most confusing areas of non-verbal communication behaviour as the various meanings communicated through body movements seem endless across cultures. Often, body movements that are clearly understandable in one culture make no sense in another. Yet often enough, frequently used kinesic movements in one culture may be highly offensive in another culture. Ekman and Friesen (1969) in their seminal work on kinesics classify kinesics into five categories: emblems, illustrators, affect displays, regulators and adapters.

Emblems are non-verbal messages that have a verbal counterpart. For example, the British sign for Victory (forefinger and middle finger erect) symbolises the letter V, a sign for victory often seen painted onto house walls during WWII. However, the same movement may symbolise the number two in the US and may be seen as insulting in Australia.

Other examples include the OK-sign, symbolising the O. However, this may be misunderstood as symbolising the number zero, and as such suggesting that the person the kinesic movement is aimed at is in fact "zero", or worthless. It may also be seen as symbol of the female genitalia, and as such understood to be obscene.

Illustrators on the other side are less clearly linked to specific sayings or words being used. Illustrators are used more consistently to illustrate what is being said. Again, the usage and the amount of illustrators used is different from culture to culture. For example Latin cultures in general make more use of illustrators than Anglo-Saxon cultures. And again, Anglo-Saxon cultures make more use of illustrators than many Asian cultures.

In terms of influence on business communication the importance of illustrators usage is quite significant. Especially as these are more continuous as well as more subconsciously interpreted than emblematic kinesic movements. For example in some Asian cultures extensive use of illustrators are often interpreted as a lack of intelligence, whereas in Latin cultures the absence of illustrators is easily construed as a lack of interest.

Affective Displays are body, or more frequently facial, movements that display a certain affective state, i.e. emotions. Affective displays are often less conscious than illustrators, but also occur less frequently. As argued before, the basic affective displays are often understood without much problem, as they convey universal emotional feelings. However, the degree and frequency with which affective displays are used across cultures is much less universal.

A lack of such affective displays may well be understood as a lack of emotion, which in turn is probably wrong. There has been a long standing stereotype of 'hot-tempered' and 'cold' cultures, much of which can be attributed to the extent to which emotions are expressed, especially by using affective displays. An Italian, for example, who makes extensive use of affective displays to express his anger at a certain situation, may well have the same degree of anger as a Japanese person. Yet, a Japanese person in this situation would be expected to show significantly fewer affective display movements than his Italian counterpart. This, however, does not suggest that the Japanese person is less angry than his Italian counterpart.

The subconscious nature of affective displays, and the varying degrees of their usage make the interpretation of affective displays frequently quite bewildering across cultures. For example the frequent and extensive subconscious usage of affective display movements by an Italian can be understood as threatening or imposing in a culture in which affective display movements are more restraint. I.e. the Italian person seems to 'blow up in one's face', although that is probably not what he intended at all.

Regulators are non-verbal signs that regulate, modulate and maintain the flow of speech during a conversation. These can be both kinesic, such as the nodding of a head, as well as nonkinesic, such as eye movements. Fatt (1998) suggests, that these are one of the most culturally determined kinesic signs.

As regulators moderate the flow of information, and are frequently used as a feedback of whether or not the other person has understood the message they can be highly confusing. Vargas (1986) notes, that

black students in the US felt insulted, because they perceived that they were being talked down to by their white educators. She concluded that black students made different use of regulators and that therefore the white educators were under the impression that the black student did not understand what was being said to them. Whereas the white students would nod an murmur "uh-huh", black students in the research appeared to nod less perceptibly and use "mhm" as a regulator utterance.

Regulators are vital to the flow of information. Therefore a misinterpreted regulatory non-verbal sign may be highly confusing in international business communication, and lead to serious problems, such as the problem illustrated above.

Adaptors include postural changes and other movements at a low level of awareness, frequently made to feel more comfortable or to perform a specific physical function. Because adaptors are usually carried out at a low level of awareness, they have been hailed as the secret to understanding what your conversation partner really thinks. During the 1970's a number of books, such as Nirenberg and Calero's 'How to Read a Person Like a Book' popularised adaptors as the keys to 'unlocking others secret thoughts'. Even today, adaptors are frequently seen as the 'secret weapon' of the HR executive (cf. Arthur, 1991). The importance given to adaptors seems however overstated, as well as oversimplified. Many adaptor movements, such as moving in a chair, may be employed more frequently to resolve a specific physical situation, rather than being an indicator of 'secret thoughts'.

Adaptors as such may not carry any significant meaning, neither in their own culture nor across cultural boundaries. However, adaptors may easily be read as emblems across cultural borders, even if not intended. As adaptors are usually performed with a low level of awareness, such a misinterpretation can be highly significant precisely because the person performing the adaptor movement may not be aware that he is performing any precise movement (as would be the case when he would make a movement understood by him as an emblem). For example, the showing of the soles of the feet or shoe may be a result of taking up a more relaxed seating position. However, in many Arabic countries this gesture may be understood as an offensive emblem.

Kinesics are an important part of non-verbal communication behaviour. The movement of the body, or parts thereof, conveys many specific meanings, and many interpretations are culture bound. As many movements are carried out at a subconscious or at least low-awareness level, kinesic movements carry a significant risk of being misinterpreted in an intercultural communication situation.

Unfortunately, the sheer variety and complexity of kinesics makes it impossible to find an easy solution. Quaint "Do's and Don'ts" can never capture the variety of emblems, illustrators, affective displays and other kinesic movements. However, awareness may reduce the amount of misinterpretation arising from the usage, or in fact lack of usage, of certain kinesic movements.

OCCULESICS

The way eyes are used during a communication exchange is described as occulesics. This may include eye contact for example, or the avoidance of eye contact, but it may also include all other eye movements, such as looking onto other body parts of the other person, etc. Occulesic movements are also frequently associated to kinesic movements. For example regulators often rely on both a kinesic component, such as raising of an eyebrow, and an occulesic component, such as looking into the eye of the other person, to get a message across.

Ling (1997) points out, that for example people from some cultures may lower their gaze to convey respect, whereas this may be understood as evading or even insulting in other cultures. Yet direct and direct eye contact may be seen as insulting in some cultures, whereas it conveys attention in others. Eye contact and the amount and length of eye contact can be deeply confusing. For example Vargas (1986) reports, that many US American women feel insulted and embarrassed at being looked at for, in their view, prolonged by Italian and French men. Conversely, Italian and French females may perceive US American males as cold because of their relatively short eye contact with females.

HAPTICS

Haptics refers to touching behaviour. Although most frequent during greetings and departures, touching can occur in a variety of circumstances also during a conversation. Some cultures place great emphasis on physical contact between people during a conversation, and the people involved in a conversation may at regular intervals touch the other person. This behaviour on the other side may make people from societies in which touching is limited to for example greeting and departure feel extremely uncomfortable.

While haptics can be hostile (kicking), more often haptic behaviour is used to indicate the degree of intimacy. Heslin (1974), categorised haptic behaviour into the following degrees of intimacy:

1. functional/professional
2. social/polite
3. friendship/warmth
4. love/intimacy

The boundaries between the different levels of intimacy are however somewhat fuzzy even in one culture. However, across cultures there boundaries may be completely different, and what is intended as a level 2 touching behaviour may be interpreted as a level 4 haptic behaviour. Where different haptic standards are used, touching behaviour can frequently cause irritation and misinterpretation of what is intended with the touch. It may also cause severe discomfort.

For example, the most widespread haptic symbol is the hand shake. The handshake differs in degrees, length and strength between the various levels of intimacy. It also differs considerably across cultures. For example in societies where other people are touched more frequently and openly, such as many Latin cultures, a social handshake (level 2) can be expected to be experienced as a higher level handshake by someone from another, less touching culture.

However, haptic behaviour is not limited to shaking hands. For example in many Arab countries men frequently touch each other in public, or walk arm in arm down the street. Such a behaviour could easily imply an intimate sexual relationship between those two men in other cultures. Remland and Jones (1995) recorded the touching behaviour of a number of different groups of people while communicating. They found that in England (8%), France (5%) and the Netherlands (4%) touching was relatively rare compared to their Italian (14%) and Greek (12.5%) sample.

PROXEMICS

The way personal space is structured is referred to as proxemics. Personal space, or distance from other persons is a powerful concept, and research suggests it directly relates to our interpretation of the meaning of messages conveyed by the other person. For example, a person expressing anger is perceived as less threatening the further away that person is. However, if the person is close, the expression of anger becomes more threatening. In fact physical closeness can itself be used to threaten the other person. Of course the same is equally true for expressions of love and intimacy.

The important aspect of proxemics is that areas very close to our body is usually reserved for people we are intimate with, whereas space further away from our body is open to persons one is less intimate with. This principle is generally universal.

However differences can be observed in the distance that is acceptable to be 'penetrated' by the other person across cultures. Some cultures, generally also those cultures that use a high level of haptic behaviour, structure their personal space closest. For example in general terms persons from Latin cultures sit closer to each other as are people from Northern European cultures. Remland and Jones (1995) reported that in their sample of seven nations, the English sample showed on average the greatest distance during conversation (15.40 in), whereas the Irish sample showed the lowest distance (10.34 in). Southern European countries, such as Greece (13.86 in) and Italy (14.18 in) showed generally a closer distance than for example England or France (14.73 in).

The importance of proxemics in business communication is important for a number of reasons: Through the distance that is chosen when communicating to one another, people express their degree of intimacy and trust towards that person. Therefore, for a person from a culture where the personal distance is generally close, a person from a culture where personal distance is generally greater may appear as evading and possibly mistrusting. Whereas the person from the culture where personal distance is generally greater may feel threatened by the 'intrusion' into his personal space.