

# The Body Language of Culture

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## Abstract

*Body language is an element of our lives that is inextricably incorporated into all spheres of human interactions and functioning. It may happen that the same gesture in diverse cultures may have a completely different meaning so researchers from all over the world are recommending to gain as much insight into the concept of nonverbal communication as possible so as not to miss out on certain critical elements that could expose a person to unwanted circumstances. The current article dwells on the importance of learning the essentials of body language and then switches to reviewing the key elements of nonverbal communication such as handshakes, hand gestures, eye contact, head movements, physical contact, and sitting position. After a thorough overview of the key elements of body language, the author discusses the most interesting ways of learning body language. The paper is closed by an in-depth conclusion reiterating the importance of nonverbal communication and its role for the development of human community.*

## Introduction

### Body Language

When it comes down to bodily movements displayed by humans, it is rather interesting to see how different people are using a variety of gestures and facial expressions to convey their messages either together with or completely without the words. This also makes us wonder what are the essentials of nonverbal communication and how one could interpret other people's body language better even if the latter did not say a single word (Lewis, 2010). The most exciting part about body language is that one can easily learn this talent and solve the majority of its riddles. Knowing how to read body language gives you an advantage because you start reading between the lines and can witness both the image you are projecting and how other people are trying to project themselves. In this case, one may easily detect a lie or display confidence by means of resorting to body language while also gaining more insight into people's emotional states based solely on their physicality (Birdwhistell, 2010). It is vital to learn more about body language and know how one's body is communicating when the person is not actually saying anything verbally.

This does not necessarily mean that one, for example, would always use their body language knowledge to find out whether a person is stressed or lies to everyone in order to cover up something important. Research in the area still proves that the majority of communication that humans convey is based on body language. Imagine a person telling lies: more than half of their messages (approximately 57% and this value can slightly vary from one individual to another) are coming through their body and not words (Bonvillain, 2019). Another important instrument that liars tend to use is the tone of their voice – approximately 34% of the liar's messages are communicated with varied intonations so as to confuse the

other person. Accordingly, there are only 9% left that are responsible for the actual words that the person is saying. This is why it is more than important to pay attention to inconsistencies between the verbal and nonverbal communication and make sure that every postural component has been read correctly (Mehrabian, 2017). Even if the verbal messages are trying to convince you to believe that a person is not mad at you, their limited body language might expose their real attitude on the spot. Nonetheless, even more body language differences may be found in people coming from diverse cultures so there may be a big number of reasons for learning body language as the lack of such knowledge could lead to adverse consequences and additional issues that would have never arose if the person knew the unspoken rules of body language.

### **Why Is It Important to Learn Body Language?**

The overall importance of learning body language consists in the fact that it may give individuals even more advantages than a mere ability to spot liars. From the perspective of interpersonal relationships, body language could be one of the most effective instruments allowing you to 'stimulate' someone's interest in you: based on whether the person is crossing their arms in front of you or has dilated pupils and a spark in their eyes, you will be able to find out what a person truly thinks about you rather quickly (Kuhnke, 2012). On a daily basis, a strong knowledge of body language will help you to communicate better and become more honest with your close ones. Telling when someone is angry, confused, or happy to see you is important but the significance of body language extends even further as a lot of individuals are using it to push their business careers forward. When going through a generic business scenario such as sales or even a job interview, a person could display their most confident body language in order to persuade others (Lewis, 2012). Coherent body language brings not only persuasion but also trustworthiness, which is just as much important as knowing how to use body language. When a person is calm and confident, we see them as authoritative because they are practically presenting the best version of themselves. Most importantly, choosing the right posture could also help a person boost their confidence even if they are diffident (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013). Therefore, body language is a vital instrument that we tend to use daily but seem not to realise the true power of this skill and how it could help us change our lives for the better.

### **Body Language in Different Cultures**

From the very childhood, human instincts are helping people to send messages to other people around them. Nonetheless, not at all times people from different areas or cultures can understand each other's gestures. For example, in one culture a gesture meaning "yes" can be perceived as a "no" in another one or a simple "come here" gesture could be translated as "goodbye" (Surkamp, 2014). These insights into body language are essential because the majority of differences stem from the cultural background and it may be interesting to see how the significance of body language contributes to the ability of people from all over the world to understand each other. Below, there will be several particular body language essentials reviewed in order to show how it contributes to diversity and, sometimes, potential misunderstanding among people.

## Handshakes

The first important element of human body language are handshakes – it is safe to say that even the simplest variations of it can be perceived differently across the world. Even though a handshake is a social norm, the firmness of a handshake has to be regulated based on the geographic location of where you are shaking hands with other people (Thomas & McDonagh, 2013). In Western culture, a strong handshake is synonymous with confidence and an ability to convince while the majority of Far Eastern people tend to see a firm handshake as an iteration of aggression. This is why the people from Far East bow to each other and do not shake hands. All across Europe, a handshake is also a norm but handshakes are different in a variety of regions: Northern Europe handshakes are quick and steady while Southern Europe handshakes are much longer and warmer, with both individuals having their left hand touching the other person's elbow or clasped hands. The same is also true for South and Central America but one should beware of the fact that in Turkey, a firm handshake is a direct sign of aggressiveness (Dingemanse & Floyd, 2014). This is why in Turkey and a lot of African countries a handshake should be as limp as possible. When speaking of the majority of Islamic countries, men never shake hands with those women who do not come from their family.

## Hand Gestures

Another important part of body language agenda is how people are using their hand gestures all over the world in order to illustrate their words and put emphasis on certain elements of their communication. It may be truly surprising how the 'OK' sign that is freely used across the United States, for example, is taken for 'a\*\*hole' in such countries as Brazil, Spain, and Greece (Ruthrof, 2015). If we move even further, Turkish people may use the 'OK' sign to insult homosexual people. Another perfect example of how hand gestures can significantly contribute to misunderstanding among people is the use of the 'thumbs up' sign which generally means "great job" in the United States and the majority of European cultures but in the Middle East and Greece, people see it as the 'up yours' sign (Martin & Nakayama, 2013). One more controversial gesture is the 'come here' – where you have the palm facing up and curl your index finger: in parts of Europe and across the United States, people use this gesture to signal someone to come closer but for Chinese, Malaysian, Singaporean, and Philippine people this is an outright rude gesture that should never be used with people – this is why in the majority of East Asian countries (and Asian countries in general), this gesture is used to beckon dogs (Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2013). Once you use this gesture in the Philippines, you may get arrested. There was also a case in 2005 when George W. Bush (during the Inauguration Day) raised his fist with the little and index fingers being extended up (Argyle, 2013). While this was a clear reference to the logo of the Texas Longhorn, a football team, mass media from all over the world immediately reacted to the gesture because numerous Latin and Mediterranean countries (Cuba, Italy, Argentina, Spain, Portugal, Colombia, and Brazil) got used to the fact that such gesture means that someone's spouse is cheating on them.

## Eye Contact

For the Western cultures, it is rather typical to believe that the presence of eye contact between people means concentration and self-assurance. Therefore, Western people often assume that when a person is looking away during a discussion it means that they are not interested in either what is being discussed or the person that they are talking to (Berger, 2016). When it comes to the Middle Eastern region countries, eye contact is much more sustained and forceful compared to the Western countries, especially when it comes to same-gender contacts. More to say, some of the countries in the Middle East believe that an eye contact between sexes that goes beyond a quick peek is an inappropriate gesture that may even be punished. Many African and Asian cultures see an unbreakable eye contact as a confrontational gesture that manifests aggressiveness and unfriendliness (Segerstrale & Molnar, 2018). These cultures are overly concerned with the concept of hierarchy and respect – when a person is trying to avoid eye contact with those who are higher on the hierarchy ladder, it basically means that they have respect for their elders or bosses. Therefore, it is quite normal for African or Asian children or employees not to look at their parents or bosses respectively when the latter are talking to them. If we outline the differences among the cultures in terms of the intensity of eye contact, there will be the following results:

- Middle Eastern, European, Mediterranean, and Latin American regions are using eye contact a lot;
- Across the Northern Europe and North American regions, eye contact is used not as much;
- People have to use eye contact carefully when they are in Africa or countries such as Thailand and Korea;
- Most careful use of eye contact should be exerted in the Far Eastern regions.

## Head Movements

When it comes to the head movements, it is interesting how in several regions of India, locals are merely tilting their head in order to either display their active participation in communication or confirm something that is being discussed. This gesture originated owing to the British occupation that had Indian people tilting their heads from side to side when British soldiers were talking to the locals and the latter were too afraid to display a gesture that could be perceived by the occupants as a ‘no’ (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018). Today, Indian head movements from side to side are generally perceived as a direct sign of the fact that the person tilting their head understands what they hear but there may be even more meanings assigned to the given gesture.

## Physical Contact

The ‘touch – do not touch’ part of the body language agenda also requires specific attention because there are critical differences between cultures across the world that have to be taken into consideration if the person wants to evade any issues with the locals. For example, the Far East and Northern Europe countries are known as the cultures where the presence of contact should be minimized to an extent where people would not touch each other in general (Huff, Song, & Gresch, 2014). In other words, if you do not know the person you are talking to well enough, you are not touching them. If you are walking down the street and accidentally touch someone, you will have to apologize for the inconvenience. One of the most

famous stories involving the cultural differences in terms of physical touch emerged in 2009, when the royal protocol has been broken and Michelle Obama hugged the Queen (Bond, 2012). This story practically became viral overnight because of the cultural clash and an ability to see how an innocent hug could lead to a controversy (even if there were no repercussions for both the Queen and Michelle Obama).

On the other hand, there are cultures where people are socializing through physical contact and are freely touching each other to communicate messages and build an emotional connection. Some of these cultures can be found in the southern parts of Europe and all across Latin America and Middle East (Ambady & Weisbuch, 2010). Throughout the majority of Arab cultures, men are kissing each other and holding hands when they greet each other, but they are not allowed to do the same with a female. On the other hand, there are much stricter physical contact “laws” in countries such as Laos and Thailand, where you are never allowed to touch anyone’s head. In South Korea, when elderly people are getting through the crowd, they are allowed to use their force but younger people are never allowed to do that (Fiske, 2010). Again, when it comes to physical contact, the rules are overly sophisticated and the majority of those rules depend on the status, gender, profession, and ethnicity of the individual. Below, there is a concise generalization of the types of contact and what cultures tend to use each of them:

- High concentration of physical contact: Latin America, Middle Eastern countries, Southern Europe. People in these countries tend to stand closer to each other when communicating and make physical contact habitually;
- Medium concentration of physical contact: North America, Northern Europe. These people only touch each other on certain occasions and tend to stand close to each other when communicating;
- Low concentration of physical contact: Far East. Physical contact is being avoided by any means and the distance between people during communication is much greater than in the first two cases.

### **Sitting Position**

Another part of body language that has to be carefully addressed by people from all over the world is their sitting position because the latter can seriously affect one’s well-being. For example, in Japan, if you are sitting cross-legged, you will be instantly labelled as disrespectful, especially when an older or more respected person is present near you (Ang & Van Dyne, 2015). In the Middle East and India, it is not recommended to show the soles of your feet or shoes because it is outright disrespectful and offends people. When visiting Iraq in 2008, George W. Bush found out that when a shoe is being thrown at someone it means a form of a direct protest intended to insult the person at whom the shoe is thrown (Gordon & Trainor, 2012; Jacobson, 2010). From one country to another, cultural differences are huge so it is critical to learn more about sitting positions as well if one does want to get themselves into an unapproachable situation.

### **Best Ways to Learn Body Language**

One of the best ways to find out more about the value of body language and its correct use may be to observe how individuals behave during TV shows and other on-screen activities. While the essential value of watching a movie in a different language consists in picking up the vocabulary and correct

pronunciation, it may be easy to learn the body language as well and see how one culture differs from another (Burgoon, Guerrero, & Floyd, 2016). For example, one may compare a Russian movie to an American movie and see that body movements, hand gestures and facial expressions are essentially different. There are similar behaviours and gestures, of course, but the differences will be evident at the first sight. Nonetheless, a real-life interaction with a representative of a different culture will be much more useful because of the authentic experience of talking to a person who comes from a different background (Penbek, Sahin, & Cerit, 2012). Native speakers may be a valuable source of information regarding body language and reactions to different gestures and words. Learning what and how to say is important because it gives people an opportunity to put emphasis on certain emotions and set up generic “scenarios” in order to help the interlocutor understand the real meaning behind what is being said (Schenker, 2012; Stacks & Salwen, 2014). Such knowledge could significantly benefit a person that is going to a different country and save them from embarrassment and misunderstanding: imagine a tourist showing the ‘OK’ sign to a Greek male or a male tourist trying to hug an Arab woman. This is why it is critical to pay attention to cultural differences and never miss out on what other cultures have to say to us if we want to remain respectful and full of appreciation.

### **The Bottom Line**

The importance of nonverbal communication cannot be undermined or overlooked because the image that we project to the ones around us can only be mitigated with the help of body language. Also, the latter can be used to decipher what others have to say even when they keep silent. As an essential part of human communication, body language is surprisingly ignored by a lot of people who believe that verbal communication is much more important and contributes to an effective information transmission. As long as we only judge by the words that are being said, we tend to limit ourselves in terms of what we can understand. There are numerous reasons to believe that body language is overly important and should be perceived together with the actual verbal message if a person is willing to understand the real message behind the words. Some of the generic gestures that are perceived identically in all cultures are shrugged shoulders (meaning that we do not know the answer to the question) and raised eyebrows (signalling surprise and admiration). Evidently, it is also important to pay attention to body language if we are looking forward to finding out if someone is not telling the truth – when there is no congruence between the words and gestures, it may be concluded that the person is lying.

And yet, people are often missing out on the idea that body language is different for a variety of cultures for a reason. This may be one of the most important ideas why one would like to learn more about nonverbal communication. Not only this could save a person from unnecessary trouble but also give them an opportunity to gain insight into other cultures and find out something new and useful. Being able to distinguish between location-specific meanings of different gestures should be seen as an advantage that will always protect the person from the locals’ aggression. Cultural differences contribute to the diversity of the world that we live in, but it should be understood that it may not be enough to realise that someone is, for example, lying to you when you cannot see the whole picture and have no idea regarding what the other person’s gestures mean if they are coming from a different culture. This article provided the readers

with the insights on the use of body language in different countries and outlined the most important instances of gestures that have diametrically opposite meanings across diverse cultures from all over the world.

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