Nonverbal Behavior as a Communication Barrier

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ABSTRACT
Speakers of a particular community, usually, have at their disposal during the process of communication "entirety of communication skills". These communication skills comprise two kinds of repertoires "Verbal"; i.e. linguistic signs, and "Nonverbal"; i.e. non linguistic signs. In any communicative situation the linguistic and non linguistic signs may interweave and influence each other. In face to face interaction, the nonverbal behavior is one of the crucial communicative strategies as it may either facilitate or constitute a major barrier in cross-culture communication when the nonverbal signs are misinterpreted. Thus, this research aims to break the rigid barriers and surmount the hurdles that impede successful cross-culture communication by focusing on two main objectives: (a) eliciting the significance of what may seem a random unstructured behavior and (b) presenting a case study of nonverbal language as one of the communication barriers impeding cross-culture communication between Arabs, particularly Egyptians, and Americans or vice versa.

INTRODUCTION
By any estimate, a basic functional component of the total process of communication is nonverbal. Birdwhistle estimates that no more than 30 to 35% of the social meaning of a conversation or an interaction "is carried by words" (Birdwhistle 2011:158). In fact our body movements are learned, like language, within a particular culture, and the rules governing these movements are bound by that specific culture, hence the bodylanguage will possibly be conveyed differently in different societies and not necessarily understood by others. These differences constitute cross-culture communication barriers. In other words, intercommunication is not only a matter of understanding words, but also understanding nonverbal signs such as gestures, space and touch relations. Ignoring nonverbal behavior can cause us to miss valuable information about other cultures. In short, it should be noted that "Verbal encoding is, at least, not dissociable from gesticulation and body movement" (Feldman & Rime 1991:241), or in other words "Nonverbal communication should not be studied as an isolated phenomenon but as an inseparable part of the total communication process" (Knapp 2013:28).

The present paper is based on the assumption that body language, like human language, is not random but well-structured learned phenomenon governed by rules and constraints. Thus, the researcher hopes to shed some light on some aspects of Egyptian and American nonverbal behavior with the ultimate aim of crossing the rigid barriers that stand in the way of achieving better cross-culture communications. Viewed from a sociolinguistics perspective, nonverbal language should be studied in the light of a number of sociolinguistic variables such as setting, participants, age, gender, status and power, etc.

This study will mainly focus on the investigation of emblems which can be defined as intentional, conscious behaviors that have direct verbal counterpart or dictionary definition. However, surprisingly they are frequently and widely used by interlocutors without their conscious awareness of doing so. They differ from illustrators (i.e. gestures that help explaining what is being said but have no meaning of their own), adaptors (i.e. behaviors satisfying certain physical needs like scratching), affect-displays (i.e. behaviors that reveal emotion like smiling and they have to do mainly with facial expressions) and regulators (i.e. behaviors that control the flow or content of an interaction as approving nodding or encouraging smiles). They take place of words and they are engaged in consciously. They differ from emblems which can be defined as intentional, conscious behaviors that have direct verbal counterpart or dictionary definition. However, surprisingly they are frequently and widely used by interlocutors without their conscious awareness of doing so. They differ from illustrators (i.e. gestures that help explaining what is being said but have no meaning of their own), adaptors (i.e. behaviors satisfying certain physical needs like scratching), affect-displays (i.e. behaviors that reveal emotion like smiling and they have to do mainly with facial expressions) and regulators (i.e. behaviors that control the flow or content of an interaction as approving nodding or encouraging smiles). They are unique to one culture or the other.

To proceed with our analysis of the communicative role and function of emblems in both the Egyptian and American cultures, light must be shed on one of the basic differences between both cultures.

Egyptians, in terms of their nonverbal expression, belong to "High Context" societies (Hall 1976:91) and so most of the information is either in the physical context, or internalized in the person with very little in the coded explicit transmitted linguistic part of the message. They greatly depend on the group, specially the family; i.e. family oriented, intuitive, creative and artistic. They have little need for privacy and imprecision. They are nonverbal (Hall 1976:150) very responsive, emotional, highly involved with people and "polychronic"; i.e. they can engage in several activities with several people at the same time. In addition, they are, on the whole demonstrative, often boisterous, and between individuals of the same sex, there is much physical contact. Greetings are apt to be effusive, with patting, hugging and kissing going on.

On the other hand, the Americans belong to the "Low Context" societies (Hall 1976:91) and so the mass of information is found in the explicit code; i.e. language. In the American culture, people are verbal, emotionally controlled, task oriented, analytic, precise, and specific. They are more individually oriented and less involved in others. They have a greater need for privacy and are logical and linear in their thinking. They address themselves only to one thing at a time; i.e. they are "monochronic". In the Egyptian culture, there is an extensive and vivid repertoire of gestures and nonverbal expressions...
that can be perplexing or maybe even alarming to the foreigner, especially those which are uniquely Egyptian. Egyptians are constantly using nonverbal cues as part and parcel of daily communication. They make constant use of their fingers, hands, arms shoulders, heads, eyes, eyebrows and mouth to transmit meanings. Within the Egyptian context, many emblems are class-bound, and liable to be used by one social class rather than another. In general, people belonging to the privileged classes or westernized groups gesticulate less than members of lower classes. They will, usually, avoid in public the use of certain gestures associated with lower class or lack of education. However, most of the Egyptians understand these gestures, though they may not use them. Egyptian emblems are sex-bound, as well. Using gesture reversed for the other sex might indicate that the individuals are homosexual, or in the case of females, that they are tough and domineering. Some gestures and movements are characteristically masculine while others feminine. Since culture traits move across frontiers, some of the Egyptian emblems will look familiar to the foreigner and some will not.

**ANALYSIS**

The purpose of this analysis is to describe, illustrate and compare some commonly used emblems in both the Egyptian and American cultures to point out the cross-culture differences that may benefit a foreign visitor and help him/her in avoiding cross-culture miscommunication in face-to-face interaction. The present analysis is predominantly descriptive and the data used in this study has been gathered principally either through observation of numerous and varied spontaneous behaviors in natural situation or by asking friends, associates and acquaintances to explain the intended meaning of a certain emblem, particularly in the case of American culture. In this research an analogy is made between human language and nonverbal language to pinpoint the resemblance between both of them in the light of the variables that govern them, as well as, their communicative roles. Each emblem is described in terms of the physical movements involved, and when necessary the general context of the emblem is given, i.e. information concerning the user, including sex and age, and social background. If the emblem is accompanied by a verbal utterance, that utterance is given and translated in case of the Egyptian culture. The emblems are classified according to their communicative function and in terms of the part of the body performing the movement or the gesture. The reason for this is that many emblems are performed by more than one part of the body simultaneously, and it becomes difficult to classify them under one discrete category, as is generally done in the literature. In addition, the emblems to be investigated in this study, especially those related to Egyptian culture, are part and parcel of the Egyptian repertoires, whether they have originated in Egypt or have been borrowed at some time in history from other cultures as the "ok" gesture for approval and agreement, the "V" gesture for peace, or the "T" gesture meaning time out in sports.

This study will reflect the cultural differences in the use of emblems in both Egyptian and American cultures. It will attempt to describe emblems in terms of their types, communicative function in verbal interaction, and the parts of the body used in their production. The main types of emblems in the light of their communicative role in the verbal interaction are: time, pointing, counting, thanking, ‘yes’ and “no”, instructions and request, qualifying people or things, queries and answers to queries, state of being, threatening, greetings, flirting, and ritual gestures. As for the parts of the body used in the production of emblems and due to the limitation of this study, they will be confined to the hands and fingers.

**Hands**

Hands, in fact, are powerful communicators. Of all the body parts, the hands are probably used most for sending nonverbal signals. There are countless silent messages that hands can easily convey. Hands play a crucial part in any face-to-face interaction.

**Handshake:** It is one form of customary greeting that is almost used everywhere but differ in the degree of firmness or gentleness. By form, this gesture is performed by one hand gripping, firmly or gently, the other hand. Functionally and semantically it may indicate, on the scale of warmth, several degrees of closeness and implied unity.

**USA:** The handshake is usually firm and usually accompanied by eye contact. Handshakes are exchanged when both meeting and departing people. Handshakes between male and female friends may be accompanied by a brushing ‘cheek kiss’. Handshakes between females may be accompanied by a contrived kiss to both cheeks accompanied by a kissing sound. Hugging and patting are unaccepted in the United States between males except if they are close friends and have not seen one another for a long time. However, females may express their appreciation to males by holding their arms and they express their congratulations by patting the knees of males. This is completely unacceptable in Egyptian culture.

**EGYPT:** Like Americans, Egyptians exchange handshakes on both meeting and departing. Unlike the American culture, handshakes in Egypt should not be more than a gentle grip that can be accompanied by eye contact only between members of the same sex. Firm handshakes can be misinterpreted as it can suggest aggression. Handshakes between intimate friends can be accompanied by a heartily patting or a gentle touching or slapping on the back. Sometimes, this warm handshake may be accompanied by cheeks kissing which is usually followed by a bear hug. Handshakes accompanied by patting do not only signify warmth but it might be an expression of sympathy and condolences.

In fact, hugging or cheeks kissing that may accompany handshakes between males in Egypt, is unacceptable in the United States because the conventional way of greeting is the handshake and the response to hugging to strangers of the same sex might be a stepping backward and this can be misinterpreted by an Egyptian as a rude behavior. As for male patting that may accompany handshakes, it is only accepted in the United States as a gesture of appreciation or encouragement. In Egypt, a woman will often offer her hand if she wishes to shake hand. It should be with light pressure and briefly. However, if it is not just a gentle pressure and is prolonged and accompanied by eye contact, it may be misinterpreted and even be so offending. Instead of handshaking, many females in Egypt uses a nod accompanied with or without a smile. Conservative Muslim women usually avoid handshakes with men. Similarly, if conservative Muslim men are obliged to have a handshake with someone of the opposite sex, they do this by extending only the tips of the fingers to be gently grasped.

Handshake in Egypt is of various kinds. It ranges from gentle grip to a sweeping slapping handshake. A strong slapping or amplified handshake may take place between males only in an informal setting, but in a formal one it is considered
uncultured. It is also inappropriate with females. The same applies to the light slap of each other’s palm followed by cupping and a grasping of fingers.

As long as handshakes can be accompanied by touching, we should elaborate here on the role of touching in both the American and Egyptian cultures. It is believed that the Americans are not touch-oriented people. Regardless of sex, with good friends, Americans may occasionally touch a forearm, or an elbow, or a hand, and with very good friends, they may go so far as placing an arm around a shoulder. But hugging is never done between casual acquaintances or even close friends of the same sex, especially males. On the other hand, in the Egyptian culture, there is hardly an Egyptian greeting without some touching and patting. Nevertheless, touching and patting between individuals of opposite sexes is strongly discouraged among Egyptians, at least in public, and unless they are close relatives, married, children, or adults interacting with children

**Hand salute:** It is unique to the Egyptian culture as it has no equivalence in the American culture. Hand salute is an informal way of saluting and can convey several meanings. It can be said that it is similar to a military salute but with slight difference. By form, it is performed by bringing tip of hand close to the temple and then moving it in a sweeping motion from head and outward. Functionally and semantically, it stands for greeting and means ‘hi’ or ‘hello’. It may be or may not be accompanied by the interjection "As-salamu Alikum" (Muslim way of greeting). It is also a means of conveying thanks, usually accompanied by a slight bowing. If this gesture is accompanied by putting the hand flat on one’s chest and patting it several times, this is a clear evidence that the person’s gesticulating has a rural upbringing. It is usually done by the lower-power or lower-status people when interacting with higher-power or higher-status people. The hand salute is sex-bound as it is only used by males.

**Hand holding:** It is performed by holding with one hand the hand of another participant or by cradling an arm or an arm in the other participant’s arm. Semantically, it signifies friendship between members of the same sex and love between members of the opposite sex.

**Hand purse:** This gesture is performed by tightly or lightly gripping the thumb, index, and the middle finger, and the other two fingers are cupped inward. The hand moves quickly or slowly up and down from elbow. Functionally and semantically, this gesture may signify two different meanings depending on the strength of the gripping and the speed of the hand moving. If the grip is tight and the moving is quickly, it means ‘be patient’, but if the grip is light and the movement is slow, then it means ‘wait’.

**Hand push:** This gesture is performed by extending the hand away from the body outward; fingers are spread, then moving the hand in a pushing-like motion. Functionally and semantically, this gesture denotes one meaning in the American culture and two meanings in the Egyptian culture.

**Hand suicide gesture:** There is more than one gesture denoting committing suicide. The first is pointing a forefinger to the temple, thumb pointing upward to resemble a pistol. The second is performed by holding thumb upward and cupping the remaining fingers inward as if holding a knife then moving the hand in a stabbing motion. The third, is done by putting one’s hand to the throat in a chocking motion. The fourth is performed by moving the arm at the elbow with the open, downward palm of the right hand from left to right; i.e. a ‘throat cutting’ gesture.

**Handclapping:** It is almost a universal way for audience to express praise, appreciation, enjoyment, or approval. However, it may indicate different meanings in different cultures.
USA: In American culture, handclapping is used to express praise and appreciation. But slow rhythmic clapping signals impatience.

EGYPT: Similar to what takes place in the United States, in Egypt, applause is used to express praise and appreciation. However, handclapping in Egyptian culture may signify different meanings that are culture-specific. Interrupted clapping is widely used and denotes two different meanings. (A) It is performed by lightly slapping one hand down into and on top of the other hand’s palm in an interrupted way (once, twice or three times). Functionally and semantically, this gesture is used for beckoning a waiter in a café or a coffee shop in a lower-middle-class area. It is considered rude and impolite and even unacceptable when used in higher class establishments. It is only used by males in an informal setting. (B) This interrupted clapping is used by some people when standing by an ajar door in rural or lower-middle-class areas. This gesture is basically meant to draw the attention of the people inside the house that there is someone standing by the door either waiting for permission to come in or wanting someone to come out to talk to him. It is mainly used by males.

“Don’t Fool Me” Hand Gesture: This gesture is culture-specific and has no significance or equivalence in the American culture. It is performed in two different ways. One way is by stroking with the hand the back of the neck. It is only used by males. The other way is by tapping the temple with the index and middle finger and then moving them outward as if an imaginary tattooed bird has flown away. It is interesting to note here that in old times some people, especially in rural areas, used to have a bird tattoo on one or both temples and for some time this has been interpreted as a sign of naivety.

Ritual Gestures

Hands in Praying Position: This gesture is performed in different ways and there is a difference between Muslims and Christians in this respect.

USA: Hands in a praying position are widely used in American culture. For Christians, it is performed by closing the palms together in a praying position in front of the lower part of the face. It is used as a praying gesture or asking someone to do you a favor.

EGYPT: For Muslims, the gesture of supplication to Allah is performed by stretching both arms as high as the chest and opening both hands with palms upward either with or without eyes looking towards heaven.

Thanks to God: The gestures involved here are culture-specific and have no significance in the American culture. There are two gestures denoting that thanks should be to God: (a) bringing hand to lips and kissing fingertips or palm first on the inside of the hand and then on the outside. The implication here is gratitude for what one has received from God. This gesture is often accompanied with the verbal utterance “ilhamdullillah” (Praise be to God); (b) kissing fingertips and then touching center of the forehead. This gesture is still performed by old people when they receive money, for example, or food. However this gesture is rapidly disappearing.

Ending a Prayer Gesture: This gesture is culture-specific and is insignificant in the American culture. It is performed at the end of prayers or when finishing the recitation of the Holy Qur’an. It is done by passing both hands down over the face, as though washing the face.

Figurative burning incense: This gesture is culturally bound and so it has no significance in the American culture. It is usually done by uneducated females. It is performed by circling hand over head, as though holding an imaginary burner, mimicking the gestures they make to burn real incense to circle burner over the head seven times.

Fingers

Fingers are used extensively in our daily nonverbal communication. Our thumb is very specific digit because it communicates so many varied messages.

Rubbing the Thumb and Forefinger: This gesture is performed by rubbing the thumb and forefinger together back and forth to mimic the gesture of counting or folding bank-notes. It is the most common gesture for money in different cultures.

USA: The very same gesture is found in the American culture and it is used not only for money but to denote that something is expensive.

EGYPT: In addition to the two above mentioned meanings, this gesture in Egypt is culture-specific as it denotes the meaning of bribery. The bribee can use this gesture to inform the other participant that he has to pay bribery for the service he is seeking.

The Ok Sign: Thumb and forefinger simply form a circle like an ‘O’ letter and the other 3 fingers outstretched and slightly cupped.

USA: In American culture, this gesture signals that “Everything is ok” or “Fine”.

EGYPT: It is a borrowed gesture and is widely used with a similar meaning. However, if this gesture is accompanied with a knitted eyebrows and an angry eye look, it means a completely different thing. It is a threatening signal denoting that punishment is awaiting the person who has done something wrong. Sometimes this gesture, as in case of warning or threatening, is accompanied with the arm moving from the elbow up and down.

Tapping or Hooking Two Fingers: Hooking the middle finger and the forefinger together and the elbow held to the side denotes ‘close friendship’.

USA: This is the typical meaning of this gesture in the American culture.

EGYPT: The same very gesture has no significance in the Egyptian culture, but its meaning is denoted in a completely different way. Tapping the two forefingers of both hands together and side by side or rubbing them gently back and forth with the palm downwards signifies ‘close friendship’.
Crossing fingers: This gesture is performed by placing the top part of the middle finger over the top part of the forefinger. It stands for a cross sign.

USA: In the American culture this gesture is culture-specific and has no significance in the Egyptian culture. This gesture has two different meanings: (a) crossing fingers can be used as an expression of ‘Good Luck’; (b) it can also render any oath made while fingers are crossed invalid and it is commonly done behind one’s back. This gesture is widely used by children and teenagers.

Flicking the Thumbnail: This gesture is performed by making a fist, placing the thumbnail against the teeth, and then flicking it outward. It denotes that someone is a miser.

USA: This gesture is meaningless and insignificant because it is culture-specific.

EGYPT: In Egypt, this gesture is culture-specific and a functional unit in any interaction. However, it is impolite to use it in public but can be used between friends and acquaintance.

Pointing with the Forefinger: In fact, a wide range of meanings can be conveyed when pointing with the forefinger. This actually depends on the part of body to which forefinger points.

USA: It is very rude to point at someone. It can denote accusation when used by a very angry person.

EGYPT: In Egyptian culture the index is widely used in pointing to signify several meanings most of which are culture-specific gestures. (A) Pointing the index at the other participant and moving it up and down several times in a stabbing motion, stands for threatening someone that he is going to be punished. It is usually rude if used between adults but acceptable with children. (B) Pointing the forefinger of the right hand under the left eye, then moving it to a position below the right eye indicates that someone will surely carry out a promise. It literary means “I will do you the favor you have asked for.” (C) Pointing the forefinger towards the chest or towards the other participant refers to the participant who is meant to be addressed.

Forefinger Wagging: It is performed by raising the forefinger and waggling or moving it right and left several times at the elbow. It means ‘No’ or ‘Don’t do that’. In both cultures, the American and the Egyptian, the very same gesture conveys the very same meaning and it can be accompanied by shaking the head from side to side and uttering a clicking sound. However, the only difference between both cultures is that the clicking sound in the Egyptian culture can stand by itself as an emblem. It can signify refusal, negation, or disapproval. But clicking, as an emblem, is insignificant and meaningless in the American culture.

Forefinger Rotation: This gesture is performed by rotating the forefinger in a circular motion. This gesture can convey different meanings depending on the placement of the forefinger.

USA: If the finger rotates in a circular motion beside or near the temple, then it means that someone is crazy.

EGYPT: In Egyptian culture this gesture has no significance. However, if the forefinger is rotating in this circular motion beside or near the ear, it means that someone is going to call you’ or ‘you are asking someone to call you’.

Miscommunication can arise here because the difference between the two meanings depends solely on the position of the forefinger and so if it is misplaced, then the silent message will be completely misinterpreted. Nevertheless, it is important to note herethat the Egyptian gesture signifying that someone is a nut or crazy is done either by raising the open palm and just three half cupped fingers; i.e. thumb, forefinger and middle finger, near the temple and simulating the rotary motion of unscrewing a nut.

CONCLUSION

Last to be said and not least is that we hope that our new knowledge about nonverbal communication would help us establish more meaningful relationships; encourage maintaining relationships that are healthy, stimulating, and significant; contribute productively to relationships that are creative and rewarding; and finally change and manage the communication situations of our daily life. In other words, knowledge about nonverbal communication may make us more efficientand more effective in overcoming the rigid culture barriers that usually lead to miscommunication.

REFERENCES


