

# Nonverbal Messages and Intercultural Communication

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## **Abstract**

Intercultural communication takes place when individuals influenced by different cultural communities negotiate shared meanings in interaction. As every country has its own cultural value system; consequently, nonverbal communication is different from country to country. Therefore, having knowledge about the similarities and differences of nonverbal communication in different cultures increases the possibility of being understood and reduces the risk of being misunderstood and misinterpreted by people from different cultural backgrounds. The current paper aims to investigate and compare the interpretations of nonverbal messages between the findings of Pease and Pease (2004), two prominent figures in the field of nonverbal communication in Western societies and the Iranian students of English and non-English major as an example of an Eastern society. In this study, 32 body gestures were selected from among 170 pictures used by Pease and Pease (2004) and the Iranian students' interpretations of those body gestures were investigated. The results showed that the interpretations were significantly different across Western and Iranian students; however, there was no significant difference between English and non-English major students' interpretations.

**Keywords:** Intercultural Communication, Nonverbal Messages, Body Language, Western and Iranian Nonverbal Interpretations

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Received: March 2012; Accepted: December 2012

## **1. Introduction**

The foundation of intercultural communication is based on the definition of culture. Culture is the “shared system of socially transmitted behavior that describes, defines, and guides people’s ways of life, communicated from one generation to the next” (Matsumoto, 2006, p. 220). From the viewpoint of some authors, intercultural communication is a phenomenon which refers to communication among people from different nationalities (Gudykunst, 2003; Pease & Pease, 2004); on the other hand, some other authors expand the concept of intercultural communication to inter-ethnic, inter-religions and even inter-regional communication as well as communication among individuals of different genders (Martin & Nakayama, 2007; Samovar & Porter, 2004).

Language is not the sole means by which humans exchange information. Message and its meaning are transferred through two channels of verbal and nonverbal communication. As Pease (1988) believes, most researchers generally agree that the verbal channel is used primarily for conveying information, while the nonverbal channel is used for negotiating interpersonal attitudes, and in certain cases, it is used as a substitute for verbal messages. Nonverbal communication includes “all communication other than language” (Andersen, 1999, p. 2). In conversation, we express our ideas and feelings not only by words but also through facial expressions, voice tones, and gestures. These non-verbal gestures, are also a part of our culture, the same way our verbal language is (Zhou & Zhang, 2008). Knapp and Hall (2006) discuss several ways that nonverbal messages function in conjunction with the verbal ones. A nonverbal behavior substitutes, complements, accents, regulates, and contradicts the spoken message. Body language is “an outward reflection of a person’s emotional condition” (Pease & Pease, 2004, p. 24). Each gesture or

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movement can be a valuable key to an emotion a person may be feeling at a certain time.

The main goal of this paper is to compare the interpretations of some nonverbal messages between the Iranian students of English and non-English major students with the findings of Pease and Pease (2004), two prominent researchers in nonverbal communication. The results of this research show the similarities and differences in interpreting nonverbal messages across Eastern and Western cultures and help individuals in better understanding different cultural backgrounds and decrease the risk of misunderstanding between individuals from different countries whose cultures may have little in common.

## **2. Literature Review**

As far as the technical study of body language is concerned, the most influential pre-twentieth-century work was Charles Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* published in 1872 (Pease & Pease, 2004). This spawned the study of facial expressions and body language. Many of Darwin's ideas and observations have since been validated by modern researchers around the world. Mehrabian (1981), for example, found that the total impact of a message is about 7 percent verbal (words only) and 38 percent vocal (including tone of voice, inflection and other sounds) and 55 percent nonverbal. Birdwhistell (1970) had also made some similar estimates of less than 35 percent of the verbal component of a face-to-face conversation and over 65 percent of the non-verbal one. He further estimated that the average person actually speaks words for a total of about ten or eleven minutes a day and that the average sentence takes only about 2.5 seconds.

Many researches are conducted and debates are posed on whether non-verbal signals are inborn, learned, genetically transferred or acquired in some

other ways. Evidence was collected from observation of blind and deaf people who could not have learned non-verbal signals through the auditory or visual channels, from observing the gestural behavior of many different cultures around the world and from studying the behavior of our nearest anthropological relatives, the apes and monkeys. The conclusions of these researches indicated that people have access to gestures differently. For example, all children are born with the immediate ability to suck, indicating that this is either inborn or genetic (Pease & Pease, 2004). Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1971) found that the smiling expressions of children born deaf and blind occur independently of learning or copying, which means that these must also be inborn gestures. Ekman, Sorenson, and Friesen (1972) supported some of Darwin's original beliefs about inborn gestures when they studied the facial expressions of people from five widely different cultures. They found that each culture used the same basic facial gestures to show emotion, which led them to the conclusion that these gestures must be inborn. Ekman and Friesen's (1975) findings demonstrated the existence of six universal expressions: anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise. James (2009) highlighted that "most of the body languages we use are learned behaviors but there are a lot of body languages which are more instinctive and part of our evolutionary process" (p. 20).

## **2.1. Body Language and Culture**

Darwin (1872, cited in Pease & Pease, 2004) claimed that all people, regardless of race or culture, possess the ability to express certain emotions in exactly the same ways through their faces. He concluded that the muscle actions are universal, and that their precursors can be seen in nonhuman primates and other mammals.

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Darwin's claims were revived by Tomkins (1963), who suggested that emotion was the basis of human motivation, and that the seat of emotion was in the face. Early research testing Darwin's ideas was inconclusive (Ekman et al., 1972), and for many years the dominant perspective in psychology was the opposite- that facial expressions were culture-specific, much the same way language is.

Other studies have documented cultural differences in other nonverbal behaviors as well, such as in the semantic meanings attributed to body postures (Kudoh & Matsumoto, 1985; Matsumoto & Kudoh, 1987), and vocal characteristics and hand and arm movements (Vrij & Winkel, 1992). Collectively, the evidence provides more than ample support for the contention that culture plays a key role in molding our nonverbal behaviors, which comprise an important part of the communication process.

Samovar and Porter (2004) believed "some nonverbal messages are varied according to the culture and they are learned during the years of early childhood" (p. 147). For example, touching one's ear is protection against the evil eye in Turkey denotes jeering at effeminacy in southern Italy and a sign of repentance or sincerity in India.

## **2.2. Functions and Interpretation of Body Language**

What we say verbally and what we show through our body language are interconnected and affect each other. Through our body language, we communicate a lot about what is actually going on through our heads. Hogan (2008, p. 9) stated that "body language can influence the communications in form of repeating, regulating, complementing, substituting, accenting/moderating, and conflicting."

Hogan (2008) highlighted that to understand the meaning of a particular body language “we should consider the context and culture in which that body language has occurred. Elements like social norms, life experience, individual personality, self-esteem, generational differences, and cultural differences influence body language in ways both obvious and subtle” (p. 60). He later added that how we perceive the context and environment results in what body language we use. The behavior we display in our home is different from the one we display in the office or a job interview. Depending on the context and environment, the same body language can have different meanings. Kinsey (2008) said that to improve our abilities to read other people’s body language we should filter our impressions through five C’s: “Context, clusters, congruence, consistency, and culture” (p. 12).

Because having knowledge of the similarities and differences of nonverbal communication in different societies and cultures increases the possibility of being understood and reduces the risk of being misinterpreted by people from different cultures, the present study sets out to compare the interpretations of some nonverbal messages by Iranian and Western people.

### **2.3. Research Questions**

This study intends to investigate the interpretations of nonverbal messages by Iranian students and compare them with the Western interpretations found by Pease and Pease (2004). In fact, the study purported to answer the following questions:

1. Is there a statistically significant difference in the interpretations of nonverbal messages between Iranian and Western students?

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2. Is there a statistically significant difference in the interpretations of nonverbal messages between Iranian English major and non-English major students?

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1. Participants**

As the first stage, 100 female MA students between the age of 21-28 in different majors including TEFL, Persian literature, Arabic literature, history, business management, and physics from a state university in Tehran were selected. They were required to write their interpretations for the given pictures. Then, 35 English and 35 non-English major students studying Persian literature, Arabic literature, history, business management, and physics, not included among those 100 but from the same university, participated in the next stage. As the second stage, they were supposed to select their interpretation from a multiple-choice test including three distracters which were selected from the previous stage plus the western interpretation.

### **3.2. Materials**

Pease and Pease (2004) have provided 170 pictures in their book *The Definitive Book of Body Language* with the explanation of what is emphasized in each picture. For example, there is picture of a man with a relevant description of “Double-Arm-Grip” or another picture with the explanation of “shrugging the shoulders” and then the interpretations of the Westerners about these pictures are provided. In this study, 32 pictures from 170 pictures (Appendix A), which seemed to be clearer in the matches between the picture and the relevant explanations were selected based on the judgment of two

English language University professors and the Iranian students were asked to write their interpretation about those pictures. Additionally, thirty-two English multiple choice questions were used for the recognition of the interpretations of the same number of pictures (Appendix B) in the next stage.

### **3.3. Procedure**

Thirty-two pictures of nonverbal messages, together with their written explanations in English selected from among 170 pictures in the book *The Definitive Book of Body Language* (Pease & Pease, 2004), were given to 100 Iranian graduate students from different majors in a state university in Tehran. They were asked to write their interpretations of those pictures in their native language (Persian). In the next stage, 32 multiple choice questions were prepared. From the four choices, one included the Western interpretation given by Pease and Pease (2004) and the other three were selected from among the interpretations provided by the Persian speakers with the highest frequencies in the previous stage. Thirty-five Iranian English and 35 non-English major learners, different from the previous 100 students, were provided with the 32 pictures and their responses in the form of multiple choice questions. It was taken for granted that a Western student would provide the correct interpretations to all 32 pictures based on Pease and Pease (2004), and then the Iranians' interpretations were compared to them. Additionally, as Iranian participants were 70, they were compared to the same number of Western participants. One point was given to each correct interpretation.

#### 4. Results

To answer the first research question, an independent samples t-test was conducted. The descriptive statistics of Western and Iranian students' interpretations are provided in Table 1.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Western and Iranian Interpretations**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Western	70	70.00	.000
Iranian	70	29.00	22.236
Valid N (Listwise)	70		

As seen in Table 1, the mean of the Western students' interpretations who are seemingly familiar with their nonverbal signs was 70, and that of Iranian students was 29, which shows the difference. Table 2 illustrates whether this difference is significant.

**Table 2. Independent Samples t-test of the Western and Iranian Students**

	Leven's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	1.493	.257	10.430	62	.000	41.000	3.931	33.142	48.858
Equal variances not assumed			10.430	31.000	.000	41.000	3.931	32.983	49.017

As Table 3 shows, based on Levene's test, equality of variances are assumed (F=1.493, p=.257) and the mean difference between the Western and the

Iranian groups' interpretations was significant ( $t_{(62)} = 10.430, p < .05$ ) at .05 level of significance. There is, in fact, a mean difference of 41.000 points between the means of the two groups.

To answer, the second research question, the descriptive statistics of the Iranian English major and non-English major students' interpretations are provided in Table 3.

**Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Iranian English and Non-English Major Interpretations**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
English major	35	16.19	12.017
Non-English major	35	12.78	10.385
Valid N (Listwise)	35		

As seen in Table 3, the mean of English major students' interpretations was 16.19, and that of the non-English major students was 12.78, which shows the difference of interpretations of the pictures between English and non-English major groups. To compare the degree of this mean score differences, an independent samples t-test was conducted.

**Table 4. Independent Samples t-test of Iranian English and Non-English Major Students**

	Leven's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	1.230	.450	1.213	62	.230	3.406	2.808	-2.206	9.019
Equal variances not assumed			1.213	60.70	.230	3.406	2.808	-2.209	9.021

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As Table 4 shows, based on Levene's test, equality of variances are assumed ( $F=1.230$ ,  $p=.450$ ) and the mean difference between English and non-English major students was not significant ( $t_{(62)}=1.213$ ,  $p=.230$ ). In other words, their interpretations of the pictures were not significantly different.

## **5. Discussion**

The findings of the study showed that there is a significant difference in interpretations between Iranian students and Western ones. Because every country has its own cultural value system, consequently nonverbal communication is different from country to country. The findings of this study are in line with Zhou and Zhang (2008) who found similarities and differences of nonverbal interpretations across different cultures. Furthermore, the findings confirmed the results of Matsumoto (2001) who concluded that a small set of facial expressions are universally recognized. The results of the first research question was also in line with those of Ekman and Heider (1988), who documented cultural differences in emblematic gestures between Japanese, Americans, and New Guineans. Morris, Collett, Marsh, and O'Shaughnessy (1980) have also well documented many cultural differences in gestures. The difference of interpretations was observed in the studies conducted by Samovar and Porter (2004), as well. Regarding the significant difference between two cultures, it should not be neglected that it was hypothesized that all the pictures were correctly interpreted and recognized by the Westerners. In other words, since in this study availability of the native speakers was not possible, it was taken for granted that all the Western native speakers would have replied correctly to the interpretations of the pictures. Of course, this hypothesis is not illogical, because the pictures were explained based on the Western culture. Another finding of the current study was that there were not significantly

different interpretations between English and non-English major students. It indicates that even though English major students had studied English for at least 4 years, they were either not affected by the English language culture or were not aware of the non-verbal messages in English. Since the multiple choice questions were in English and also the explanation under the pictures were in English, if the participants knew the interpretations in English, probably they would have selected the Western interpretations which was not the case. In other words, it could be argued that nonverbal communication is not focused on by English language teachers as an essential part of a language.

There are different kinds of nonverbal messages. Every part of the human body may convey a specific nonverbal messages and each part has its own gestures. This study was about just 32 selected body gestures from all parts of the body and it was restricted to students in a single university in Tehran. Future research may investigate other and more body gestures or particular body gestures among different countries, different age groups, or different social classes.

## **6. Conclusion**

Nonverbal communication as a major part of any language in general and English language learning in particular in Iran, as a foreign language, is not given the due attention. Nonverbal messages can be helpful for all those who use English as a foreign language in interacting with foreigners to avoid any cultural clashes. They are applicable for negotiators, sales people, sales managers and executives in the today's world of economic relations. Knowledge about nonverbal messages helps negotiators to assess the business situation and decide correctly when to offer a new deal or modify their requests. What is worth mentioning is that English language teachers and

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learners should notice that the study of body language should be complementary to the study of language. The understanding of non-verbal language can be helpful in the further understanding of the verbal one. These two are interdependent.

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## Appendix A

Pictures adapted from Pease and Pease (2004)



1) Shoulder shrug



2) Covering the mouth



3) Rubbing finger around mouth



4) Fists-Clenched-Arms-Crossed



5) Double-Arm-Grip



6) Thumbs-Up



7) Touching shirt cuff



8) Flower grasping



9) Closed arms



10) Open arms



11) Ring



12) Rubbing the palms together



13) Hands clenched in raised position



14) Steeple



15) Face platter

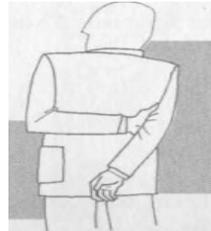


16) Palm-in-palm behind the back

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17) Hand-Gripping-Wrist



18) Upper arm grip



19) Waistcoat thruster



20) Thumb-pointing



21) Mouth cover



22) Nose touch



23) Neck scratch



24) Collar pull



25) Hand supporting the head



26) Closed hand on chin with index finger upwards



27) Chin stroking



28) Head supported by thumb and two other fingers



29) Head down



30) 'pain in the neck' gesture



31) Leg over the arm of chair



32) Smoke blown up

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## Appendix B

### Multiple-choice test of nonverbal message

1.a) not having knowledge	b)not knowing	c) telling a lie*	d)not being interested
2. a) surprising	b) submission*	c) frightening	d) sneezing
3.a)thinking	b)being surprising	c) telling a lie	d)having toothache
4.a)being polite	b)being sad	c) having anxiety	d)Hostility
5.a)feeling insecure*	b)sadness	c) calmness	d)dominance
6.a)happiness	b)defensiveness*	c) waiting	d)triumph
7.a) anxiety*	b)thinking	c) politeness	d)waiting
8.a)love	b)friendship	c) peace	d)Self-consciousness*
9.a) sadness	b) saying "no"*	c) anxiety	d)thinking
10.a)relaxing	b) calmness	c) open to your idea*	d)anxiety
11.a)triumph	b)satisfaction	c) Ok*	d)happiness
12.a)happiness	b)relaxing	c)having a good idea	d) showing positive expectancy*
13.a)frustration*	b)calmness	c)listening carefully	d)success
14.a) confidence*	b) happiness	c)thinking	d)suspicious
15.a)pride	b)hope	c) eagerness	d) wanting to be admired*
16.a)management	b)waiting	c)manhood	d)superiority*
17.a) angeriness	b) frustration*	c)waiting	d)management
18.a)waiting	b)more frustrated*	c)management	d)anxiety
19.a)calmness	b)politeness	c)superiority*	d)listening carefully
20.a)pointing to sth	b)confidence	c) backbiting	d) ridicule*
21.a)confused	b)thinking	c) listening carefully	d)to suppress deceitful words*
22.a)smelling	b)telling a lie*	c)surprising	d)having a cold
23.a)telling a lie	b)anxiety	c) confusedness	d)doubt*
24.a)having stress	b)shyness	c)warmness	d)telling a lie*
25.a)boredom*	b)sadness	c)thinking	d)listening carelessly
26.a)thinking	b) critical thought*	c)sadness	d)planning for future
27.a) making a decision*	b)concentration	c) feeling failure	d)boredom
28.a)thinking	b)angeriness	c)manhood	d)evaluation
29.a)submission*	b)shyness	c)politeness	d)sadness
30.a)boredom	b) anxiety	c) feeling angry*	d)thinking
31.a)calmness	b) informality*	c) satisfaction	d)manhood
32.a)indifference	b) enjoying	c) confidence*	d)wanting to be admired

The words with the stars above are the Western interpretations