

Language Variation and Cross-Cultural Communication: Nonverbal Behaviour and Social Networks

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Abstract

Language and cross-cultural communication are fields that study the effect of cultural communication on language and how the differences in languages are based on the differences in people's cultures. The paper explores two significant topics related to language and cross-cultural communication. The first topic is nonverbal communication as a way of communicating and how it is different from one region to another. Two codes (proxemics and kinesics) are thought to be the most significant components of nonverbal behaviour. The second topic is the social network, i.e., the relationship of people with each other and how it can affect their language.

Keywords: social network, nonverbal behaviour, cross-cultural communication, proxemic, kinesics.

Introduction

Languages spoken by people from different parts of the world are distinct from one another because of the cultural differences that exist between them. Individuals need to study and learn the nonverbal behaviour of others to communicate with and effectively interact with them. Nonverbal communication is a type of communication that varies from culture to culture. Studying and gaining knowledge about social networks is essential to gaining an understanding of the relationships that people have with one another and how these relationships can affect the language that people use. This paper focuses on two important issues concerning language and cross-cultural communication. The first topic is nonverbal communication as a mode of communication and how it varies by region. Two codes, proxemics, and kinesics, are regarded as the most important aspects of nonverbal behavior and are employed by the author. The second topic is the social network, or how people's relationships with one another affect their language.

1. Nonverbal behaviour

During the interaction, verbal language is not the only method of communication people use; they also use and depend on nonverbal methods of communication. Cultures may differ in their nonverbal behaviour just as they differ in their language. Two aspects of codes of nonverbal behaviour are discussed: proxemic and kinesic.

Some researchers, like Harrison (1974), limit nonverbal behaviour to non-linguistic signs only, while expanding it to be associated with almost any kind of communication. For example, Anderson (1997) describes nonverbal behaviour as a subtle, non-linguistic, multidimensional, spontaneous, and unconscious process of communication.

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Roughly, there are three views on nonverbal behaviour. Anthropology considers nonverbal behaviour as the product of society and the evolution of culture. Psychologists view nonverbal behaviour as individual behaviour that individuals learn, similar to language. In between, sociolinguistics and social psychology consider it the product of both the individual and his society and culture (Harrison, 1974).

Each nonverbal behaviour can have two meanings: denotative, which refers to the direct meaning of the behaviour, and connotative, which refers to an implied meaning and message. Some cultures perceive using the index finger to refer to an adult as an insult because it is typically used to refer to inferiors or children. Here, the denotative meaning is 'calling' while the connotative is to insult or disgrace.

The difficulty in understanding nonverbal behaviour is because it is an unconscious phenomenon and because we are not aware of our nonverbal behaviour (Anderson, 1997). The nonverbal behaviour codes are many and various, and it is hard to cover all of them in one paper, so the author adopts two codes that are considered the most important aspects of nonverbal behaviour. Moreover, they have been mentioned in the book by Bonvillian (2003), "Language, Culture, and Communication: The Meaning of Messages." These codes are proxemic and kinesic.

1.1. Proxemic

Hall (1966) defined proxemic as the study of the human use of space and distance among people and how a culture differs from another in identifying the personal distance of the space between people. According to this definition, one can identify different zones for personal space distances.

First, intimate space usually happens between the husband and wife or the mother and her children. This type of space often occurs in most cultures around the world. Second, there are social spaces that usually happen between students inside the classroom or people in shopping centers. In such places, people sometimes need to be a little closer to each other to share different ideas or negotiate different items. Third, public spaces usually happen when instructors present most university lectures publicly, ensuring there is enough space between them and the students.

To explain how cultures differ in the distance individuals keep during different kinds of interaction, Hall (1996) also states that contact cultures, like those in South America and Southern Europe, keep a close distance, or eye contact, and louder voices during interaction, whereas non-contact cultures, like those in Northern Europe, East Asia, and the US, maintain a certain distance and a lower voice. In terms of personal distance, Australian culture is considered moderate. Also, other factors like gender, ethnicity, interaction context, and discussion topic influence personal space.

1.2. Kinesics

Kinesics refers to facial expressions, body movements, and gestures. These kinds of nonverbal behaviors are different from one culture to another. For example, Indian people move their heads to the right and to the left when they agree or accept something.

Different people may have different meanings for the same gestures and behaviors. In Saudi Arabia, for example, people greet each other with a kiss and shake hands unless they are close friends. They greet each other differently in the south of the country. Instead of kissing each other on the cheek and shaking hands, as in other parts of the country, they touch each other with their noses.

We have seen how different cultures use the same facial expression to display the same emotion, like happiness or sadness. Smiling may seem polite for some cultures, like the Japanese, and may be crusty for others, like the Americans. Despite the differences in gestures, people from different cultures can still understand each other. Morris (1977)

says that if a Norwegian and a Korean met in a deserted place, they would easily communicate their moods and intentions.

Touch differences in method, location, type, and intended display (public or private) significantly contribute to the variation in tactile communication, or haptics, in international and intercultural contexts. In most Arab countries, people see holding hands as a sign of friendship, while in other cultures, like the United States, it is also embraced by the LGBTQ+ community (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender).

2. Social Network

Language variation in communities is based on many factors, such as age, class, and gender. Sociolinguistics has carried out many studies regarding social networks and language change. According to Borgatti et al. (2002), a social network consists of ties that connect actors of the same type, such as kinship, teachers at a school, and employees at a factory.

From the perspective of sociolinguistics, social networks refer to the variety and frequency of contact among people in society and are considered the principal agents of language change (Paolillo, 1999). People who communicate and make contact with each other can acquire the same linguistic systems by borrowing and exchanging words, while the language of individuals who do not regularly communicate with each other remains unchanged.

The strongest side of the social network is its distinction from social class. Bovillian (2003) has mentioned in her book “Language, Culture, and Communication: The Meaning of Meaning” that Milroy, who studies language change and language and communities in Belfast, believes that the social network is based on the relationship between actors and their linguistic conformity, whereas social class is based on division, inequality, conflict, and linguistic variation. Moreover, the social network is based on an assumption of the importance of relationships among interacting units. (Wasserman and Faust, 1994). Even though my neighbour is very rich, his dialect is similar to ours because he is from the same network.

Network-based language teaching (NBLT) relates to teaching and learning English through a different kind of network. Kern & Warschauer (2000) have mentioned in their book “Introduction: Theory and Practice of Network-Based Language Teaching” that NBLT does not represent a particular technique, method, or approach. It is a way in which students communicate via computer networks and interpret and construct online texts and multimedia documents.

Conclusion

The differences in people’s languages around the world are based on the differences in their cultures. Nonverbal communication is a type of communication that differs from one culture to another, so people should study and learn the nonverbal behavior of others generally to communicate and interact with them effectively. Studying and learning about social networks is important to understand the relationships people have with each other and how they can influence their language.

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