

# A Brief Analysis on the Difference of Nonverbal Communication Between China and Western Countries as Well as Their Social Cultural Origins

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## ABSTRACT

In the recent years, Nonverbal communicative elements especially the differences of nonverbal communication between China and Western countries have become hot topics among the researchers and college English teachers. Starting with the illustration of the definition of nonverbal communication, this thesis mainly has made a detail analysis on the differences of nonverbal communicative elements from a few aspects such as environmental languages, objective languages, body languages and para-languages, then it points out the origins resulting in such differences from the two aspects, the cultural factors related to social status and the cultural elements relevant to the social relation. Finally the thesis has made some expectation on the research prospect, giving some suggestions which can be used as some references for other researchers in the future, pushing forward the research on nonverbal communication together with one another.

**Keywords:** *Nonverbal communications, Differences, China, Western countries.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

When it comes to nonverbal communication, it refers to the communication carried out by means of some nonverbal channels such as body languages, para-languages, time languages and spatial languages. Just like verbal communicative factors, nonverbal communicative factors also play important roles in the daily life. According to a statistics, verbal communication only occupies 30 percent of the whole daily communication while nonverbal communication takes up most of the total daily communication. And according to the research carried out by American scholars, in the whole inter-cultural communication, verbal communicative behaviour only takes up 7 percent and 93 percent of communicative behaviour has been accomplished by nonverbal communicative elements [2]. Consequently, making a research on the differences of nonverbal communication between China and Western countries will be favourable to increase or enhance the further understanding or exchange between the two cultures, which can help the persons from the two

different cultures make the communication smoothly and successfully.

## 2. THE DIFFERENCE OF NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATIONS BETWEEN CHINA AND WESTERN COUNTRIES

Now that nonverbal communication can be divided into four different forms which include environment languages, objectives languages, body languages and para-languages, the thesis will make a detail analysis on the difference of non-verbal communication between China and Western countries from the above four aspects.

### 2.1 Environment Languages

Environment languages are very important constituents of nonverbal communication, which refer to some environmental elements that can influence the communication in people's daily life, including time, space, architecture and some other elements. This thesis will involve time language and spatial language to illustrate the difference of

environment languages between China and Western countries.

## **2.2 Time Language**

As everyone knows, China belongs to the past-oriented culture. As a result, most Chinese persons tend to take great pride in the long history as well as the profound culture. In addition, the Chinese people usually lay emphasis on the experience instead of the developmental potential. In the daily life, it is common for Chinese persons prefer to go to see an old doctor rather than a young one, and most Chinese young mothers would like their children to be taught by the teachers with lots of teaching experiences. What's more, an experienced barber is more popular with most Chinese persons than the one without any experience, and most companies would like to recruit some employees with the abundant working experienced. In contrast, most Westerners tend to belong to the future-oriented culture; as far as they are concerned, tomorrow is the most important, and as long as they work hard, they are sure to achieve the final success in the end; most companies tend to focus on the developmental potential rather than the experience while recruiting the new employees [5]. When it comes to time system, most Western countries belong to the monochromatic time system. That is to say, time schedule takes up the most sacred status in the mind of Westerners; they tend to do only one thing at a time. After they have finished doing this thing, they will start to do another thing in order to ensure the working efficiency. As a result, punctuality and efficiency have become the most prominent characteristics of the Western time system. However, China belong to the polymorphic time system, as far as most Chinese persons are concerned, personal relation is more important than the working schedule, and they tend to do quite a few things at the same time[5]. Comparing to most Westerners, their attitudes towards the working schedule are more flexible or casual, keeping a good relationship with the people around is the most urgent thing in their opinion.

## **2.3 Spatial Language**

Generally speaking, most people tend to have the consciousness of territory. However, most Westerners tend to have much stronger awareness of the personal territory. The individual residence, the personal room and even the individual office space have become their private territories; without the hosts' permission, no one can enter or make use

of their personal territories. That is the reason why it is necessary to make an appointment before paying a visit to the westerners, and it is not difficult to understand why the Westerners' office area tend to be divided into one enclosed space after another so as to ensure their individual freedom of movement. In contrast, Chinese persons tend to invite their good friends or classmates to their house for a dinner from time to time to strengthen their friendship. And it is common for some friends to pay a sudden visit to make a pleasant surprise. Also, it is a natural thing for Chinese servants in the hotels to enter the guests' room for doing some cleaning, which usually makes the Westerners feel offended, for most Westerners, their own rooms belong to their important private territories, any one can't come in without their permissions. As for the spatial distance culture, Chinese people tend to keep a short distance while having a conversation to show their warmth or friendliness. And males tend to put their hands on the others' shoulders while females prefer to hold hands while walking in the street to demonstrate their intimate relationship. Conversely, in the Westerner countries, people tend to keep a long distance whether they are having a talk, a dinner or a walk in order to maintain the independence or freedom for themselves. Consequently, most Westerners tend to frown at or laugh at the males with their hands on the others' shoulders and the females hands in hands in the streets because only the homosexuals tend to do like these things while walking in the street. The final difference of the spatial language between China and Western countries lies in their respective attitudes towards the jam. It is a normal thing for Chinese persons to be in a crowded bus, subway or elevator. Therefore most Chinese persons usually take a tolerate attitude towards such different kinds of crowded situation. However, most Westerners tend to feel frightened or nervous in face of the crowded situation[7]. On a crowded bus and subway or in a crowded elevator, the Westerners can't help putting up their hands, shrugging their shoulders and holding their arms in order not to touch others' bodies, once they knock into others, they will make an apology right away.

## **3. OBJECTIVE LANGUAGES**

Objective languages are also important constituent parts of nonverbal communication including the following elements such as clothing, accessories, skin, smell, colour and the architecture structure, etc. which can reflect the cultural

characteristics of different nations. This thesis will make a detail explanation about the differences of objective languages between China and Western countries by centering around the following two aspects “clothing” and “colour”.

### **3.1 Clothing**

As an important expressive form of objective language, clothing can show the different cultural features between different countries. Both in China and in Western countries, it is necessary to follow the principle of TPO for dressing, which means all the people need to dress themselves according to different time, place or occasion. However when it comes to specific situation or occasion for dressing, there are some distinctions between China and Western countries. For example, while holding the wedding ceremony in China, both the bridegroom and the bride as well as other important guests tend to wear red clothes to establish a fervent and joyous atmosphere. When holding a funeral, all the children or some other juniors tend to wear the white clothes to show the sorrow for losing their parents or seniors. In contrast, in Western countries, the bridegroom tends to wear the formal tailcoat, and the bride tends to wear the white wedding dress in order to display the solemnity of the marriage and the purity of their love. While attending the funeral, the Westerners tend to wear the clothes with the dark colour to show the respect for the dead. As well, while paying a visit to the guest or the business partners for the first time especially having a dinner with them, Chinese persons usually wear the formal clothes to leave a good impression on the others as well as to show their courtesy. However, Westerners tend to wear the casual clothes to establish a relaxing atmosphere or lighten the nervousness of the guests.

### **3.2 Colour**

In terms of colour, there are some different understandings between Chinese culture and Western cultures. Taking the colour “red” for an example, in the Chinese traditional culture, red is a lucky or fortunate colour which is often used in a happy, jubilant and fervent situation. For examples, at the Chinese traditional wedding, red the dominating colour. Both the bridegroom and the bride wear the red marriage dress. And the bride used to be taken by the red sedan to the bridegroom house with her head covered by a red bridal veil. All the doors tend to be pasted by the big red couple “happiness” and the ground tend to be

covered by the red carpets to create a joyous and cheerful atmosphere. However, red is an unlucky or unfortunate colour in the Western countries, which means bloodiness, violence and danger. Therefore, most Westerners try their best to avoid the red color in their daily life. Yellow is a lucky colour in China, in Chinese traditional culture, yellow stand for the sovereign, the harvest and the wealth. Consequently, the colour “yellow” will remind us of the authority of the emperor in the ancient time, the harvest wheat or rice in the field and the yellow gold. Nevertheless, in the Western countries, yellow is just an alerting or warning colour. For example, when the yellow light is on, the drivers have to get ready to stop or go on; And on the football field, when the judge puts up a yellow card to a player, perhaps he or she will have to leave the field for breaking the match rule. White is the most unlucky or unfortunate colour in China. As a result, the family members in the funeral tend to wear the white dress to convey their filial piety to the dead person. White is also the colour for the person to bleed completely, which means being unhealthy or the ill omen.

Furthermore, white also stands for being corrupt, reactionary or backwardness. Finally, it is a symbol of being stupid and having no profit. Conversely, white is the color of the colour of new snow, fresh milk and lily, which symbolizes purity and elegance. That is the reason why the Western brides tend to wear the white wedding dress and the garden wedding site is always decorated with the white flowers.

## **4. BODY LANGUAGES**

It is well known that body languages are the most important parts of non-verbal communication. Body languages are made up of postures, gestures, eye contact, and facial expressions, all of which play a very important role in the daily non-verbal communication. This thesis will make a detail instruction about the difference of body languages between China and Western countries from the following aspects which includes postures, gestures and eye contacts in order to make a further understanding on the differences of the whole non-verbal communicative elements.

### **4.1 Postures**

Postures refer to the external characteristic for persons to make some actions or do some things. Here postures mainly involve different styles for

people to stand, take a seat and walk in their daily life. As a civilized country with the history of more than five thousand year, Chinese persons have paid great attention to the posture for sitting, standing and walking since the ancient time. There goes a saying that standing should be as straight as a pine and sitting should be as upright as a bell, which emphasizes the importance of keep the right posture. Therefore, it is very important to sit straightly by making two shoulders keep balance, with our eyes looking forward directly and our legs or feet keeping a proper distance naturally. However, In America, slouch is the most popular sitting posture because it makes most of Americans feel comfortable[6].Westerners emphasizes “ladies first”. Therefore, it is common to let the ladies take the seats at first in public place. In China, there is a tend to respect for seniority. In most cases, students can take a seat only after the elders or seniors be seated. In an American classroom, students may see the teacher sit on the desk with the feet on the chairs. However such a thing will never happen in a Chinese classroom. In china, the right sanding posture is just to stand uprightly with the two shoulders keeping balance and two heels closing naturally to show our good manner. While coming across or being introduced to the senior or the superior, people need to stand up to show their good manners and courtesy. However, in the Western countries, only the persons with the high position or the high social status can keep the standing posture to show their authority. In the company, when having a meeting, only the employer tend to stand for making a speech while all the employees have to sit for listening to the lecture. In the hospital, only the doctors have the right to stand in the public and all the nurses have to take a seat during the whole meeting. As for the walking style, since the ancient time, the Chinese people have paid great attention to the cultivation of the right walking style. Not only can it display a person's good manner and personal quality but also a good education he or she has received. Generally speaking, the natural and proper waking style is just to raise the head, lifting out and balancing the shoulders to display their optimism and self-confidence completely. In the western country, with the fast life rhythm, most people are accustomed to walk in a hurry and it is difficult to see the person who tends to walk very slowly in the street.

## **4.2 Gestures**

Gestures play a very important role in the daily communication, which can help convey what the

persons want to express by substituting the verbal language. Sometimes the similar gesture can stand for different meanings, and the same meaning can be shown by different gestures in different cultures. In Western countries, the gesture of “OK” means all right, however, in China and some others countries, such a gesture stands for “zero” or nothing[3]. For most Westerners, stretching the index finger and the middle finger of the right hand with the palm facing toward the others is a symbol to express the best wishes of the success or victory to the persons to be doing something; whereas, in china it is a sign of scissors or the number “two. In China, putting the right hand in front of the neck and moving from side to side is the symbol of killing someone, but in England, if the guest makes such a similar gesture towards the host, meaning that he or she is full. In Guangdong province China, when the hosts offer the tea, the guests tend to knock the table with the two fingers to show their gratitude [1]. However in Western countries or some other places, knocking the table with the two fingers is a sign of reminding some persons and showing the impatience. In China and some other countries, holding up the thumb usually expresses an admiration or approval, but in America it is a sign of taking a free riding [1]. In china, if a person wants another one to come over him or her, it is necessary to stretch out the right arm and move the hand up and down with the palm down. However in America and some other Western countries, the persons need to stretch out the right arm and wave the hand forward and backward with the palm up. But in China, the above similar gesture means calling little children or small animals to come over here. And in Western countries, if the persons want little children or small animals come over here, it is necessary for them to stretch out the right arm and move the hand up and down with the palm down [3].

## **4.3 Eye Contact**

As a very important channel to convey the meaning or information in nonverbal communication, eye contact also plays the vital role in the daily life. After all as the windows to open the soul of the human being, making use of eye contact can help the persons express themselves fully and achieve the best communicative effect. However, there are still some differences in making the use of eye contact between China and Western countries. For most Westerners, while making a communication or having a conversation with others, it is necessary to look at the eyes of the

opposite sides, which is usually regarded as a symbol of honesty, frankness, optimism and self-confidence. If a person is not afraid of looking at others' eyes directly, he or she will be thought to be untruthful, shameful or embarrassed [4]. And there goes a saying that never trust a person who can't look in your eye among most Westerners, which can reflect the importance of eye contact in the daily communication. In China, people also pay great attention to eye contact in the daily communication. In most cases, people tend to lay emphasis on the feeling at the first glimpse or the first impression. Therefore, making a direct eye contact is very vital to promote the mutual emotion and deepen the mutual relation. However, for most Chinese persons, it is not a good manner to stare at others directly for a long time during the communication or conversation. As a result, most of them try to avoid a long direct eye contact with others especially when having a conversation with the senior or the superior to show the respect, obedience or courtesy.

## 5. PARA-LANGUAGE

Para-language refers to the set of non-phonemic properties of speech tempo, vocal pitch, and intonational contours that can be used to show ones' communicative attitudes or other shades of meaning, which includes the following types such as vocal modulation, vocal pitch, speech tempo, functional voices (cough, sneeze, snuffle, clearing of the throat, hiccup, fart and coo), and silence. This thesis will talk about the differences of para-languages from the following three aspects including vocal pitch, speech tempo and silence.

### 5.1 Vocal Pitch and Speech Tempo

When it comes to vocal pitch, there is an obvious difference between China and Western countries. Chinese persons tend to speak or make a phone call loudly not only in the jubilant marriage or the crowded street market. Even on the bus or the subway, it is a natural thing for a few Chinese aunts to talk and laugh loudly. Also in the classroom, sometimes teachers tend to improve the vocal pitch in a sudden in order to strengthen some knowledge points or remind some students of listening carefully. Chinese mothers tend to say the full name of the children loudly in public when they are very angry or unsatisfied with their behaviors. However, most Westerners tend to speak or make a phone call with the lower voice or quietly especially in the public places such as in the high

way, airport or on the bus as well as the subway in case their talk or phone call will influence others nearby. As for speech tempo, Chinese people usually speak much more slowly than Westerners, especially when they speak to the old men or the children. And the teachers sometimes slow down their speech tempo deliberately so as to emphasize some main knowledge points or make a detail explanation in the classroom. Nevertheless, most Westerners tend to speak with others quickly or rapidly, especially when they broadcast the news or the sport game in the radio or on TV, just because most of them live in a society with the rapid pace of the life or work and almost all of them pay great attention to the working efficiency.

### 5.2 Silence

As one of the para-languages, silence plays an important role in the daily communication because of its many different kinds of meanings. As a result of the traditional cultural value, Chinese persons tend to keep silent much more frequently than Westerners. When people are not satisfied with others or get angry, they tend to keep silent. When the students don't understand what the teachers has taught in class, they just sit quietly without any words. When the people agree or disagree with someone, they don't also say one word in public. Therefore, in the daily communication, it is necessary to understand different implying meaning of keeping silent in different situations so as to get rid of some misunderstandings and reach a better communicative result. For most Westerners, generally speaking, they would not like any one to keep silent in the communication especially in the conversation. As far as they are concerned, keeping silent at a meeting or in the conversation stands for timidity, shyness, embarrassment or shortage of self-confidence, which means a failure in their daily communication[8]. As a result, Westerners tend to feel uncomfortable or unaccustomed in face of Chinese or some other Asians' attitude of keeping silent from time to time. They try their best to go on with the proceeding conversation or break the silence by means of bringing in some interesting topics constantly, which is usually called to be "breaking the solid ice" in the social communication.

## **6. THE SOCIAL CULTURAL ORIGINS OF THE DIFFERENCE OF NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION BETWEEN CHINA AND WESTERN COUNTRIES**

As everyone knows, different social cultural values have had a deep influence on the people's communicative behaviour. As a result, the differences of nonverbal communication between China and Western countries have much to do with their respective cultural values. This thesis will make a detail instruction about such influences of the following cultural values such as hierarchy, harmony, equality and independence on the behaviour of non-verbal communication in China and Western countries.

### ***6.1 The Cultural Values Related to the Social Status***

It is well known that China is an ancient civilized country with the long history of more than 5000 years. During the past thousands of years, Confucianism has taken up the dominating status in all the realm of the whole society. As a result, the sense of hierarchy has rooted in the mind of all the Chinese persons. Since the ancient time, there has been an obvious hierarchical distinction between the rulers and the ordinary masses [9]. Therefore, in the ancient China, the ordinary plain folks had no choice but to kneel down in front of the officials at all the levels, and they had to lower their head down when they knelt down on the ground. Only when the official told them to look up, could they raise their head and look at their local magistrate. That's to say, the ancient Chinese person had no right to look at the rulers directly as well as stand up or take a seat in front of the officials. As well, in a large feudal family with a rigorous hierarchical system, the servants had to stand on the side of the master with their head lower down, waiting for the order or instruction from all the masters at any time. And it was impossible for these servants to take a seat or make a direct eye contact with their masters. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand why most Chinese persons tend to stand up immediately when meeting the senior or the superior and why Chinese people usually lower their heads down instead of looking at their eyes directly when having a conversation with the persons with a higher social status[9]. In contrast, seeking the social equality is the dream or the life goal for most Westerners to

carry out in their lives. And the social status is equal between different members in the whole society even in one family in the eyes of most Westerners. Consequently, it is a normal thing for the employer and the employees to have a face to face conversation, listening to their opinions. And when the young meet the old persons on the bus or on the subway, it is not necessary for them to stand up and give their seat to the seniors. In addition, when the adults want to have a talk with the little children in the street or in the park, perhaps the grown-ups have to bend down or even crouch down to show a respect to them, which can be regarded as a sounding evidence for the Westerners to seek the equality in the social communication.

### ***6.2 The Cultural Values Relevant to Social Relations***

Just like what has been said in the previous part, Confucianism has had a deep influence on all the aspects of the whole society in China. According to Confucianism, it is necessary for the human being and the nature to keep a harmonious relationship with each other, after all the mankind is just one part of the whole nature. What's more, all the people in the whole society need to get along with each other harmoniously and friendly. Owing to such a cultural value, establishing and maintaining a good relationship with the classmates, friends and colleagues have become very important things. Thus it is common for the people to make a personal phone call or meet good friends in the working time, and going out for a dinner with good friends from time to time is a natural thing even in the workday, which is unimaginable in the eyes of most Westerners. After all, from the Westerners' point of view, work is the most important thing, and all other things can be done only after the work time; during the work time nobody and nothing can disturb them. As well, in China it is a normal thing for family members, good friends or classmates to share one seat on the bus or share one bed if there is no spare room for a rest at night. While walking in the street, boys prefer to put the hands on the others' shoulders and girls tend to hold one another by the hands just to show their intimate relationship[9]. While taking the bus, the subway or the elevator, it is a usual thing for people to huddle together with one another, and even it is difficult to make a breath sometimes. However, for most Westerners, seeking the personal independence and freedom is their essential requirement. Thus, all of them have a strong self-protecting consciousness or the strong sense of privacy. In their private time,

nobody can pay a visit to them casually, disturbing their normal work and life. If someone wants to pay a visit to their houses, he or she needs to make an appointment ahead of time. In one family, the children's room belongs to their own private space, even their parents have no right to enter it casually, moving their personal things without the permission. Most Westerners usually feel inconceivable to see the Chinese boys hanging their hands around the others' neck and the girls hands in hands in the street because these things will never happen in their lives, and they tend to feel very uncomfortable or unacceptable to be in a crowded space for a long time because the over-crowded room have infringed their personal independent space and influenced their freedom of movement greatly.

## 7. CONCLUSION

With the further development of the global economy and the increase of the international exchange, more and more intercultural experts have begun to pay great attention to the research on the difference of nonverbal communication between China and Western countries. However there will be a long way to go through before learning about the differences of nonverbal communication between China and Western countries clearly and finding out the solution to some relevant problems, which needs the common effort of all the teachers working on the research in the university. Only by doing this, can people push forward such a research constantly and help to get rid of the misunderstanding and conflict on account of the differences of nonverbal communication between China and Western countries, which is sure to be favourable to the establishment of the human community of the shared future as soon as possible.

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