

The Nonverbal Language in Cross-Cultural Communication and Its Application in International Business Negotiation

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Abstract

Nonverbal communication is an essential and inseparable part of human communication. Due to limited knowledge of nonverbal language in cross-cultural communication, misunderstanding and abuse of nonverbal language exists in international business negotiation. Hence it is of great significance to have an intensive study of the application of nonverbal language in international business negotiation so as to promote the efficiency and validity of business negotiation. This paper firstly introduced the definition, classification and impact factors of nonverbal language and then mainly discusses the application strategies of nonverbal language in international business.

Key words: Nonverbal language; Cross-cultural communication; International business negotiation

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INTRODUCTION

With the development of economic globalization, cross-cultural communication plays a more and more important role in international business activities. During international business negotiation which serves as the key to the success of business, it is crucial to have proper communication skills which are conveyed not only in language ability but also in nonverbal language. Nonverbal communication, like verbal communication, is an essential

and inseparable part of human communication. In cross-cultural communication, nonverbal communication usually contain a good many implicit rules to specify what acceptable or unacceptable behavior in the culture is. Consciously and unconsciously, intentionally and unintentionally, people make important judgments and decisions about others based on their nonverbal behaviors other than words. In international business negotiation, a typical face to face communication, nonverbal behavior delivers huge number of message. Due to limited knowledge of nonverbal language in cross-cultural communication, misunderstanding and abuse of nonverbal language exists in international business negotiation. Hence it is of great significance to have an intensive study of the application of nonverbal language in international business negotiation so as to promote the efficiency and validity of business negotiation.

The nonverbal language is the process of communication between people and environmental factors involving, including all the external environmental factors and body movements as well as paralanguage. There are huge differences and diversities of nonverbal language among different cultures, races and regions. The earliest scientific research on nonverbal communication behavior could be traced back to Charles Darwin (1872) in his *The Expression of the Emotion in Man and Animals*, presenting the effects and expressions of unspoken communication and behavior in man and animals. Nonverbal communication became a systematic research since 1940s to 1950s and was developed in full swing in 1970s. Birdwhistell (1970) studied the kinesics and context of nonverbal communication. L. Brosnahan (1980) made a contrastive study of Chinese and English gestures, which helps to better understand nonverbal communication between Chinese and westerners for the first time and promote the study of nonverbal communication in global context since then. Nonverbal communication, as an important part of cross cultural

communication, is attracting more and more scholars. Many scholars, like Malandro and Barker (1989), Knapp (1997), Saine (1978) and Barnlund (1968) had made in-depth studies of the definition and functions of nonverbal language. Samovar and Porter (1995) held that nonverbal communication involves in all the potential stimulations existing in communicational environment and has potential informative value to the receivers. Knapp (1978), He Daokuan (1988) and Bi Jiwan (1999) suggested different classifications of nonverbal language. Yangping (1994) developed the contents of nonverbal language into three minor concepts: (1) proxemics, the study of spatial distances between individuals in different cultures and situations; (2) kinesiology, the chief part of nonverbal communication, studying the mechanics and anatomy in relation to human movement; (3) paralanguage, involving nonverbal elements in speech, such as intonation, that may affect the meaning of an utterance. Yi Lili and Xujun (2012) claimed that nonverbal communication can help to strengthen, substitute, control, regulate, contradict and even deny the verbal messages. Some other scholars have studied the cultural backgrounds and influential factors on the nonverbal languages, but the discussion on the proper use of nonverbal language in international business negotiation still leaves much to be desired.

1. INTRODUCTION TO NONVERBAL LANGUAGE

There have been various definitions for nonverbal communication. Knapp (1997) simply defined nonverbal communication as communication effect other than words. According to Mark and Stacks (1985), nonverbal communication includes all the messages other than words that people exchange in interactive contexts consciously or unconsciously. The widely accepted definition was made by Samovar: nonverbal communication involves all those nonverbal stimuli in a communication setting that are generated by both the source and his or her use of the environment and that have potential message value for the source and the receiver (Samovar et al, 2000, p.149).

From the above definitions, nonverbal language contains the following characteristics and implications: (1) The universality of nonverbal behavior. Generally speaking, nonverbal language is restrained in a certain collection of social groups. Beyond this particular group, nonverbal language will become the barriers for communication. But non-verbal behavior can be also universal to all natural people groups beyond different cultures. When the language and non-verbal language is in conflict, people often choose to believe in nonverbal behavior. (2) The uncontrollability of non-verbal language. Compared to verbal language which could always be effectively controlled, the nonverbal behavior contains both controllability and uncontrollability. Some

unconscious nonverbal behavior is very hard to control such as eye movement and facial expression. (3) The sociality of nonverbal language. Nonverbal behavior is always subject to a certain social group and have certain cultural norms generated by social groups. So people from different culture adopt different nonverbal behavior to convey information and may have different interpretation of nonverbal behavior which looks like.

2. THE APPLICATION STRATEGIES OF NONVERBAL LANGUAGE IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS NEGOTIATION

There are different arguments as for the classification of nonverbal language. Based on the researches and founding by other scholars, this paper summarizes that nonverbal language is a complex system consisting three main categories: (1) Kinesiology, refers to all the action and movement of the parts of human body, including facial expressions, gestures, body posture, eyes and other non-language code. (2) Paralanguage, refers to some additional features beyond the linguistic features, such as silence, turn-taking, tone, volume, non-semantic sounds (nonverbal sounds and unvoiced nonverbal sounds) and hesitation. (3) Environmental language refers to the specific context of communication, such as time, social distance, spatial information, lighting, color, architectural design and other interior decoration.

A negotiation is a process of communication between parties to manage disagreement or conflicts in order to come to an agreement. The purpose of business negotiation is to achieve a win-win situation based on both party's mutual understanding and sincere cooperation. In order to build win-win relationship and to seek for mutual benefits, negotiators should take full considerations of both party's interests and carefully weigh the language as well as nonverbal language. The manners and all the gesture, pause, facial expressions and postures contribute to the context of business negotiation in which implicit information could be revealed thus has great effect on the negotiation.

Therefore, how to understand the counter party's nonverbal language and how to adopt proper nonverbal language in business negotiation is a big concern. This paper tries to offer some suggestions for the application of nonverbal language in international business negotiation as follows:

2.1 Full Preparation Before the Negotiation

Cultural background has huge effect on the nonverbal communication. People from different culture have different understanding towards the same gestures. On the other hand, as for the same stimuli, people from different cultures may have different response and thus result

in different nonverbal behavior. So the most important thing before the negotiation is to have a thorough and in-depth study of the counter party's culture background, especially of the business taboos betrayed by improper use of nonverbal language. There are quite a lot elements contribute to the cultural impact to the nonverbal behavior, such as religion, region, races, tradition, economic status, etc.. The significant factor distinguishing Chinese negotiators and most western negotiators is Chinese and most Asian negotiators tend to attach to high-context culture while most western negotiators belong to low-context culture.

Chinese negotiators belongs to the high-context culture that emphasizes the context, either the actual physical environment of communication or an internalized social context or both, which expresses the most meanings of message. So High-context culture is much spelled out implicitly or communicated in indirect ways. This kind of communication style can be viewed as indirect style. That is to say, the meaning of someone's words and actions is derived or contextualized from the specific context. For example, the postures or body movement of Chinese negotiators tend to be modest and restraining.

The low-context cultures tend to put emphasis on the content of a communication rather than the way in which messages are conveyed. American and some other nations belong to this culture. In low-context cultures, the majority of the information is made explicitly. Low-context cultures emphasize a straight and to-the-point communication style so as to avoid vagueness and uncertainty in communication. So this kind of communication style can be regarded as a direct style, that means, American tend to speak and behave directly, openly, and freely and their body language tend to have larger range of motion which is completely different from Chinese.

Rich knowledge and skills on cross-cultural communication and nonverbal language are the footstone to the success of international business negotiation. Negotiators should develop cross-culture awareness and make full preparation for the culture background of the counterpart.

2.2 Observe Without Judgement Through Negotiation

Business negotiation is a special communication process based on mutual benefits and mutual understanding. This social activity is made not only across borders but also across cultures. Respect and understanding are the key words to cross-culture communication. Conflicts exists and disagreement occurs in the process of negotiation. Under such circumstances, negotiators need to be patient and open-minded to learn to observe the nonverbal behaviors without any hush judgement and then try to analyze the implied information or hint betrayed from nonverbal codes.

2.3 Try to Control the Nonverbal Behaviors

Compared with oral and written language, nonverbal behaviors are much more difficult to control. People sometimes make some nonverbal behaviors unconsciously and spontaneously under a certain circumstance, especially when confronting difficulties, conflicts or pressure which frequently occurs during negotiation. Some unconscious nonverbal codes without taking counter party's culture into consideration would arouse misunderstanding and even offend others. So in business negotiation, any trivial move need to be cautious and be controlled intentionally. Never abuse nonverbal codes.

2.4 Be Alert and Never Offend Others

In international business negotiation, quite a lot should be taken into consideration apart from business items, such as time arrange, social distance, special arrangement, handshaking, exchange of name cards, gift sending, eye contacting, seating arrangement, gesture, choice of tone etc.. The basic principle for these is to be cautious and never offend others. What you utter and act should make the counterpart feel to be honored and respected.

2.5 Be Flexible for Culture And Nonverbal Codes Are Not Static

Different cultures have different norms for nonverbal behaviors. In international business negotiation, it's better to behave in a way mostly culturally appropriate. With the development of globalization, it is hard to distinguish one culture from another and nowadays there is a new trend to establish an international norm system widely accepted by most nations. What's more, the norm of nonverbal language in different culture is not static but dynamic and changing in different situations. So the negotiators need to be flexible to do the adjustment accordingly. One should be cautious in making static generalization on social behavior of a collection of people of a particular culture. Any stereotypes or prejudices against a particular culture does not help much to the success of negotiation.

CONCLUSION

In summary, nonverbal communication plays an important role in international business negotiation and the proper application of nonverbal language is one of the keys to the successful business negotiation. Nonverbal communication is closely connected with culture. To be an effective business negotiator, one should have full knowledge of nonverbal language in different culture so as to act and respond in a proper way.

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