The Cultural Differences Regarding Emblematic Gestures





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Introduction

Every culture has its own worldview and it is unique. According to the cultural relativism approach people need to understand and accept other cultures without judging or comparing them based on their own culture (Seungbae, 2014). Nowadays, the perceptual gap that derives from the different cultural backgrounds creates problems and misunderstandings between communicators (Adler & Proctor, 2019, p. 115). The range of cultural differences is extensive, and it is important for people to understand and acknowledge these differences. Cultures assign meaning to gestures differently. Emblematic gestures can create misunderstandings and affect interpersonal communication. This paper aims to explore how emblematic gestures function, how they are interpreted in different cultures and the problems they create, and how this miscommunication can be minimized.

Function of Gestures

Gestures are an important type of nonverbal communication and they are described as the movements of the arms and hands (Adler & Proctor, 2019). According to Matsumoto and Hwang (2013) there are two types of gestures a) gestures accompanied by speech, and b) gestures who are independent of speech. Emblems are types of gestures that belong to the second category and they are described as "deliberate nonverbal behaviors that have a precise meaning and are known to virtually everyone within a cultural group" (Adler & Proctor, 2019, p.226). According to Breckinridge, Wagner, and Spencer (2017) gestures are multifunctional which means they depend on the occasion, and they work as a two-way communication that shapes language and thinking for both communicators. Also, gestures and speech are processed by the same neural system in the brain, suggesting that gestures are as important as verbal messages (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013).

Even though gestures are as important as speech, there is limited research regarding the cultural differences of emblematic gestures. Gestures are spontaneous, unplanned, and unconscious actions that people use to communicate, even when they are speaking on the phone (Cipolla & Pentland, 1998). They play an important role in everyday communication and help people to communicate from distance or when talking is undesired (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013, p.2). However, as it stated in the article "The Eye Effect in Request and Emblematic Hand Gestures*"* there is limited research regarding the representation of subcategories of gestures such as emblems in different cultures (Ferri et al., 2014). Despite its significance in businesses, the fact that there is limited research regarding emblematic gestures and their interpretation in different cultures shows that this issue is underestimated.

Interpretations of Gestures in Different Cultures

Research says that the same emblematic gesture can have a completely different meaning depending on the cultural group. For example, the emblem of bringing both hands right next to the head can be interpreted as "angry," "horny," or the "devil" in different cultures (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013). Another example is the "ring" sign in which the "thumb and the index finger create a circle and the other three fingers are open" (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013, p.8). In the States this emblem is interpreted as "ok," whereas in Japan it means "money" (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013; Reuters, 1996). Moreover, in the United States the "V for victory" emblem is interpreted as "win or victory" and it can be "made either with the palm or back of the hand towards the listener" (Cipolla & Pentland, 1998, p.194). Whereas in Britain if the same gesture is made while the back of the hand is facing the listener then it is considered a great offense (Cipolla & Pentland, 1998).

This is what happens when a culture, such us Italy, uses gestures as an important part of their daily communication. It is estimated that Italians use approximately 250

gestures per day to express themselves (Donadio, 2013). As stated to the article “When Italians chat, hands and fingers do the talking” (2013), gestures in Italy have a rich history. There is a theory that suggests that Italians used gestures as a way of communicating when they were under foreign occupation between the 14th century throughout the 19th century (Donadio, 2013). They used gestures as a way of communicating that was only known among the Italians. Additionally, Italians use gestures naturally and sometimes it can create problems. In 2012 Italy’s highest court ruled a man who recklessly hit an old lady while gesturing (Donadio, 2013). The judge stated that the man was responsible for civil damages and that the “The habit of accompanying a conversation with gestures, while certainly licit, becomes illicit” (as cited in Donadio, 2013, para.8). This is a great example that shows that there are cultures, such Italy, where gesturing is an “unconscious” habit which is deeply imbedded in their identity.

If misunderstanding of emblematic gestures can create problems in daily life it also creates problems in politics. According to Reuters (1996) the “thumbs up” emblem has different meanings in different cultures. During the opening of the new Bangladesh's Parliament, the Shipping Minister A.S.M. Abdur Rab used the “thumps up” an international gesture for expressing non-verbally his positive feelings regarding the opening of the parliament. This small emblem created chaos since “thumps up” in Bangladesh, Australia, and Islamic countries is an offensive gesture, whereas in the States it means “all right” or “good going” (Reuters, 1996). Even though the Minister of Shipping was from Bangladesh he used this gesture unconsciously and this created a great conflict (Reuters, 1996). The leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Badruddoza Chowdhury, stated that "This is a dishonour not only to Parliament but to the nation," and asked the minister to publicly apologize for his behaviour (as cited in Reuters, 1996, pp.3). Another example of a politician who irresponsible used the “ring” gesture was the President Richard

M. Nixon when he visited the southern border in the 1950's (Reuters, 1996). After the president landed in the airport he greeted his audience with the "ring" gesture, with both of his hands (Reuters, 1996). In Latin American countries this gesture is considered an offense. The misinterpretation of a gesture creates problems or conflict with other communicators. If people lack understanding for such issues then interpersonal communication can be affected, and people start becoming disrespectful toward other cultures.

Solution

People can maximize their relationships and become better competent communicators by understanding and accepting diversity among cultures. The individualistic beliefs, characteristics, social roles, rules, religion, and culture can create great problems between communicators. As stated by Triandafyllidou, Modood, and Meer (2012) diversity in society is something that many cultures have struggled to deal with. If there is no understanding in a world where people come from different backgrounds, then bonding among relationships is weak. It is very important for communicators to acknowledge and understand these differences so that can become better competent communicators.

The problems that are created through emblematic gestures can be resolved if people practice and become better competent communicators. Communication competence is "achieving one's goal in a manner, that in most cases, maintains or enhances the relationship in which it occurs (Alder & Proctor, 2019, p.20). Competent communicators can choose the behaviour that is appropriate for the situation, they can show empathy towards others, be open-minded, and be self-monitoring (Alder & Proctor, 2019). Moreover, competent communicators have cognitive complexity which is the

"ability to construct a variety of frameworks for viewing a situation" (Alder & Proctor, 2019, p. 24). This is really important because it helps communicators to view an issue from different perspectives. Therefore, people who become better competent communicators can have more meaningful and effective relationships with communicators from different backgrounds.

People can use the perception checking model to resolve problems that arise from gestures. The perception checking model is a tool that can improve and enhance interpersonal relationships and assist communicators to better handle interpretations with other people (Alder & Proctor, 2019). This tool has three parts a) the communicator has to describe the behavior that they noticed, b) give two interpretations of the behaviour that they noticed, and c) finally ask for clarification (Alder & Proctor, 2019). Even though this tool is used for understanding other people's perspective, I believe that it may be proven to be really useful for solving problems that derive from the misinterpretation of emblematic gestures among cultures. When communicators notice a gesture that might have a different interpretation in their culture, they can use the perception checking model to ask for an explanation. This will help communicators to resolve or avoid any misunderstandings that can originate from misinterpreting an emblem and minimize defensiveness.

Conclusion

Emblematic gestures are as important as language, and they can be interpreted completely different depending on the culture. This can affect interpersonal relationships between communicators. It is vital for people to accept diversity in societies and always keep an open mind in their relationships. The problems that can be created from emblematic gestures can be minimized only when people become better competent

communicators. This can be achieved through the use of the perception checking model that aims to minimize conflict and help people understand others accurately.

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