

# An analysis of body language in communication between china and america

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**Abstract:** Body language plays a very important role in both communication of daily lives and intercultural communication. However, in the past time, the attention paid to body language is not enough. Due to the cultural differences between China and America, differences in the meaning of body language exist. In this paper, the importance of body language is reviewed and stressed, the features of body language in Sino-America cultural communication are analyzed, and some advices for body language using in intercultural communication is provided. Key words: intercultural communication, body language, china and America.

**Background** With the rapid growth of economy, science, technology and the expanding trend of globalization, more and more opportunities of communicating with others from different countries and nations are put forward for us. American is the largest trading partner of China; therefore it is crucial for us to learn intercultural communication between the two countries. Intercultural communication, also can be called cross-culture communication, refers to the communication among people from different culture background. In a wide sense, intercultural communication includes not only communications among different countries, but also among different races and nations, even among different groups from the same culture background. With the Chinese-western cultural communication become wider and wider, deeper and deeper, cross-culture communication attracts more and more attention.

Communication can be classified into two means: verbal communication and nonverbal communication. A lot of people prefer put emphasis on mastering <https://assignbuster.com/an-analysis-of-body-language-in-communication-between-china-and-america/>

verbal communication skills and just ignore the significance of nonverbal communication. However, in daily lives we notice others' behaviors, including eye movements, facial expressions, and body orientations to judge about their characteristics and mental states. Meanwhile, we use it to express ourselves and show our attitude as well as create impression. Nonverbal communication has very important portion in the human communication.

According to the research, more than 93% information was conveyed by the mean of nonverbal communication. Body language, as a major branch of nonverbal communication, is always mixed up with nonverbal communication and ignored. As students majored in English, we are always emphasized to learn the language which should be regarded as verbal communication well. However, body language expresses the majority information during communication. Thus, facing increasing cross-culture communications, it turns out to be a severe problem how you can participate intercultural communications with high proficiency.

1. 2 The aim of the paper Language differs from country to country, from culture to culture. As a symbol of culture, body language has different meanings in different culture. Besides, to express the same meaning, different body languages are used in different cultures. In any case, to expect the nonverbal behaviors of other cultures to match our own is unrealistic.

Therefore, to have a good understanding of body language in intercultural communication is helpful to avoid culture conflicts and culture shocks. This

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study will focus on: 1, the definition and the importance of body language; 2, the differences of body language between China and America. It aims at not only making people have a better understanding of body language, but also a better understanding of body language in Sino-America cultural

communication. 1. 3 The organization of this paperThe paper is composed of the following four chapters: Chapter one states the introduction, it focus on the background and the purpose of this study; Chapter two gives a literature review; including the definition of body language; the importance of body language; Chapter three presents the main characteristics discovered while comparing body languages in China and America; Chapter four provides the advices for using body language during Sino-America cultural communication according the features in chapter three; Chapter five is the conclusion.

Chapter 2 Literature reviewIn this chapter, a brief review of studies related to body language will be given so as to offer a better understanding of body language.

2. 1 The definition of body language In the intercultural communication, the most common way to classify the body language is by the movement of human body. Samovar used the term “ body behavior”, and classified it into appearance, body movement, facial expression, eye management, touching, sub- language, olfactory behavior, and so on. The classification by Knapp is gesture, body movement, extremities movement, hand movement, head movement, facial expression, eye management, posture, and so on.

Brosnahan use gestures to refer to touching, space, appearance posture, body behavior, arm movement, leg movement, hand movement, head

movement, facial expression, eye management, noisy and silent decorations, the environment, and so on (Hu Wenzhong, 1994).

From all these ways of classification, we can know that body language mainly includes the movement of every part of a man's body, not just limits to the body movement. According to Ray L. Birdwhistell (1970), we get the definition of body language: Body language, nonverbal communication by means of facial expressions, eye behavior, gestures, posture, and the like. Body language expresses emotions, feelings, and attitudes, sometimes even contradicting the messages conveyed by spoken language. Some nonverbal expressions are understood by people in all cultures; other expressions are particular to specific cultures.

Nonverbal communication, involves three branches: (1) proxemics, which was came up with by Hall 1969, focus on the information conveyed by the distance between persons who are communicating with each other; (2) Kinesics, this term was brought out by Birdwhistell in 1970. Usually we call it body language or body semantics. It mainly study the meaning people try to express while in a communication they use different kinds of gestures, postures, facial expressions, and so on. (3) Paralanguage, which is the study of characteristics in speaking, for instance, the vocal qualities, the pitch of voice, the volume, the pause and so on. However, body language is the most significant aspect in the study of nonverbal communication.

(Yang Ping, 1994) After making the definition of body language and the content of nonverbal communication clear, we can get the relationship between body language and nonverbal communication. However, in some

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former studies, many researchers mixed up the term “ body language” and “ nonverbal communication”, they simply use two terms to replace each other in their papers. While doing research, it is necessary for researchers to be strict. Therefore, when we do researches or studies related to body language or nonverbal communication, we should use the correct term. 2. 2 The importance of body language PaulWatzlawick, author of Pragmatics of Human Communication, point out”...no matter how hard one tries, one cannot not communicate.

” Even though one does not say a word, his facial expression and posture also convey some information. Jing Hua, 2009) Abereomile says: “ We speak with our vocal organs, but weConversewith our whole body” (Bi Jiewan, 1995, p. 72) Bi Jiewan also said “ the information provided by one’s appearance and behaviors is rather much more that that by one’s words in communication” (Bi Jiewan. 1995).

Birdwhistll, an expert of body language research in the western world, considered that more than 65 percent of the expression of emotions is finished by postures, gesture, facial expressions, eye management and other kind of body language (Birdwhistll, 1970). Albert Mehrabian finds that only 7 percent of a message is conveyed through explicit verbal information. According to researches, our vocal cues such as volume, pitch, and intensity carry 38%while our face carry 55%of the information. In a word, about 93% of the emotional message is conveyed by nonverbal communication, which serves an example of nonverbal communication has the potential power. All

their studies show that body language plays an important role in communication. ([http://en.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Mehrabian)

[wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert\\_Mehrabian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Mehrabian)) 2. 2. Body language is widely used in daily life In daily lives, we use body language frequently. We smile; shrug our shoulders, hug, clench our fists, shake and nod our heads, and express a wealth of feeling and ideas without the use of spoken language.

Birdwhistell pointed out that man could make out about 250, 000 kinds of expressions on his face (Birdwhistell, 1970). Mr. Yang Xiaoli, after the analysis of the Chinese idioms, indicated that nearly 160 of them are made to express the body movement (Wang Sha, 2010) As long as we live in the world, we would use body language. Usually we just take the body language for granted, because body language has become a necessary part of our lives. We are not aware of that we are using body language, for example, while one is smiling, he or she doesn't know the behavior belongs to body language.

However, indeed we use body language anytime and anywhere. 2. 2. 2

Benefits body language bring to us during communication Body language can convey one's emotion. Our feelings are showed in our gesture, posture, facial expression and eye contact-it can be happy, sad, anxious, anger and so on.

For example, when we are happy, we would smile; when we are sad, we may cry. We can know more about people's instinctive feelings situation grounded on their behavioral communication. For example, when we notice a

person closing finger tightly with stern appearance, we can judge that this person is sad based on his action. When we are hearing people with shaking sound and noticing them with quivering hands, we can judge that this person is mentally troubled regardless of their saying In Chinese terms "???? ???? " and English terms " cast sheep's eyes at sb, make eyes at sb", we can understand that body language can express one's emotion. Body language is the key of creating first impression.

We often judge a person from nonverbal information, especially body language. It is important that much original information usually can have intuitive recognition. Even how we choose a partner is based on the people who give us the first impression. For example, a famous Chinese proverb going on" fall in love at first sight. Whether we can have a long-term association with other person also based on the first impression.

To create a good first impression, we should form a good sense of body language. Body language can replace verbal communication; to some extent, verbal communication should be replaced by body language. Traffic policeman use postures and gestures to direct traffic without speaking any words, basketball referee also use gestures and postures to make judgment and convey crucial information to players. Body language make the adjustment in matches and traffic simple and easy. Leathers' point shows that information conveyed by one's body language is more precise and more reliable than that by one's words (Leathers, 1986).

For some reason, people may hide the true feelings and mislead others' opinion by saying some words on purpose, but the body language would tell

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the truth. For example, when former American Clinton was asked whether he accept bribery, he stepped back and cross his arms, said he had never take bribery. In fact, we can tell his lie by his body language, steeping back and crossing his arms indicate he was afraid to be asked about that. Body language often tells people the truth. According to these above, we conclude that body language is rather significant, as well as using it to express ourselves, we can get more information by reading one's body behaviors.

### Chapter 3 Characteristics of body language from the view of Sino-America cultural communication

In this section, by analyzing some body languages have different meanings in China and in America, different body languages are used to express the same meaning in China and America, we can conclude the features of body language in intercultural communication.

Besides, the features can guide our behaviors during the cultural communication.

#### 3. 1 Same body language conveys different meaning due to different culture

As Ray Birdwhistell suggests " A smile in one society portrays friendliness, in another embarrassment, and in still another may contain a warning that unless tension is reduced, hostility and attack will follow. "(Ray Birdwhistell, 1970: 34). Affected by culture, some body languages differ from culture to culture.

For example, while we Chinese use fingers to count numbers, " one" is used the thumb to count, but Americans will use the index finger; In the United States, people would like to point at something or somebody using their index finger, while this gesture is regarded as rude. In the United States, using one's thumb and index finger to make a circle while extending the

others is symbol of the word “ ok”; in China, it stands for “ zero” . In the United States, putting a hand flatly under the neck means “ I am full”, In China, such a gesture means” killing”. Che Yingjun, 2009: 14) 3. 2 Same body language represents same meaning in different cultures.

During the study of body language, we found it a mere coincidence that we use some body languages to express a feeling as same as Americans. For instance, both Chinese and Americans will hold up the thumb to express their admiration, this action stands for “ well done” or “ good job”. Besides, they also will handclap while they see something spectacular, this behavior stands for “ congratulations”, also this body language will be used to express the welcome to special body. However, only a very small amount of body language own this feature, we shall not simply think a body language represents same meaning in a different culture while we are not sure about its meaning, nor shall we simply use this feature to guide our body language in Sino-America communication. 3.

3 Only few body language exist in unique culture, one Country or one region Compare some body behaviors in china with that in America, we can find some body language belongs to one country only. For example, Americans always shrugs to show that “ I do not know” or “ I have no way”, but in China such a body language does not exist. The behavior that Americans turn their finger rings means they are a bit worried and anxiety, but Chinese do not use this body language. In China, we worship on bended knees, which mean we are pious, but Americans never do that. However, the amount of body language which has this feature is also very small.

3. 4 Different body behaviors can convey same meaning Different gestures are used in China and American can express the same meaning. For instance, to express the meaning “ come over here” to an adult, Chinese will move a hand downward, but Americans will wave their hands or forefingers upward. In China, the gesture of forefinger of one hand stretched, tip touches one’s own face several times quickly, similar to scratching, but with the forefinger upright (usually with the remark “ Shame on you! “) means “ Shame on you. “ In the United States, forefinger of each hand stretched, palms down before somebody’s body, one forefinger makes several brushing moving over other forefinger showing “ Shame on you. (Che Yingjun, 2009: 15).

To pray for success or good luck, Chinese will just fold palms and put their hands in the front of the chest, but Americans will cross their index fingers and middle fingers, and then put their hand in front of the chest. 3. 5 The using of body language is influenced by the situation that a person is in In a specific situation, we shall not simply identify the meaning of body language by the culture. In fact, the body language one use just bases on one’s personal habit. For instance, a football player may turn a somersault or run quickly after he scores, these body behaviors just mean the player is happy. Besides, his teammates may run to him and pat his head, these body behaviors just stand for “ congratulations” or “ well done”.

According to these above, we have a brief understanding of body language’s features. Under the guide of these features, we may form strengthened intercultural communication ability. Chapter 4 Advices for body language

using in cross-culture communication In this section, according to the features summed in chapter three and some examples, we can come up with some specific advices for those who are involved in body languages using in intercultural communication. 4. 1 Try to learn body language on purpose Although we have gained the brief understanding of body language's features, we can't directly identify a body behavior's meaning under the guide of the features.

Although many studies about body language have been done, no regular pattern about the differences of body languages between China and America was found. Therefore we should learn about body language on purpose.

While we read books, attend a lecture, watch American movies, communicate with Americans, we can learn a lot about body language. In our daily lives, we can learn body language through various ways. These are the basic ways to learn body language; also they are the most efficient ways.

The more we accumulate, the better we can understand, the better we can use. 4. 2 Be sensitive about the situation one is in during the communication

We have known that the using of body language is influenced by the situation that a person is in. To express one meaning, the body languages one use in a job interview may be different from that in a party. One's body behavior may be casual at home while formal and polite in workplace. If we are not aware of the situation, we may identify the meaning of body language wrongly, and then culture misunderstanding may appear.

Therefore to be sensitive about the situation, we can understand some unusual body language easily. 4. 3 Try to participate in more intercultural

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communication As for English learners, they best way to learn English is to go to English-speaking countries and communicate with the native speakers. As the same, if we take part in one intercultural communication, on the one hand we can learn many body language from the person you communicate with; on the other hand, we can imply what we have learned about body language in practice, our abilities of using body language are strengthened. To participate in intercultural communication is significant and greatly helpful. According the above suggestions, we need to work hard to strengthen our Sino-American communication ability.

Follow these advices; we can have a good performance in intercultural communication. Chapter 5 Conclusion Body language plays an important role in our lives and communication; we should attach sufficient importance to it, and even pay special attention to it. We can have a better understanding of communication and body language. Body language differs from culture to culture. Conflicts may be caused if the unconsciousness always exists in one's mind.

While in communication, the unconsciousness may cause people think in his or her own way, and misunderstand others' behavior. Moreover, these often make people have suspicion of others. Only if we improve our abilities of understanding and using body language, can we upgrade the validity of intercultural communication.