

## The Cultural Dimensions of Non-verbal Signs in International Business Banquets

Han Xiao, Liang Kexin

(Guangdong Polytechnic College, Zhaoqing, China)

**Abstract:** Non-linguistic symbol is a carrier of language, which carries ideas, positions, attitudes and emotions that people communicate. Based on the case of business communication and the theoretical framework of semiotics, this paper probes into the influence of nonverbal signs on international business banquets from a cultural perspective, and then puts forward relevant strategies to promote the smooth communication. The study finds that nonverbal signs play a significant role in the communication and exchange of international banquets. Nonverbal signs can be made use of to accurately understand the meaning of the other party, and further foster the realization of effective communication. The purpose of this study is to aimed to provide correspondent strategies for language barriers encountered in business banquets and business activities, in an attempt to provide certain implications for such fields as business discourse research, business communication and cultural exchanges.

**Key words:** non-verbal symbols; international business banquet; culture

### I. Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, Saussure, the Swiss linguist and the father of modern linguistics, put forward a vivid and accurate explanation of "signs" when he was speaking general linguistics at the University of Geneva. He pointed out that symbols are the combination of concept and sound image, that is, any symbol has an inseparable connection with the meaning that is always integrated with this signal (Saussure, 1910). Pierce held that any object can be used to represent something else in some way (Guiraud, 1975: 38).

Umberto Eco, is a very famous philosopher and semiotician from Italy, defined symbols as "all signifiers that can be used to refer explicitly to something else" (Umberto Eco, 1992, 58). Symbols are symbols of meaning, information and knowledge. Symbol is another thing that represents a certain thing, which is both a material object and a psychological effect. Symbols are media that can express ideas and feelings in the process of communication. There is no denying that the basic function of symbols is communication and cognition. In today's international business activities, whether it is a government-sponsored construction project, or technology introduction or cross-border investment, goods trading, financial insurance, international transportation, consulting services, etc., it is inevitable that both Chinese and foreign parties need to plan. Negotiations are carried out in order to reach an agreement acceptable to both parties and business banquets.

In the sense of semiotics, human communicative behavior refers to the coordination process in which people use symbols to express their feelings, communicate and share information with others. Actually, only the use of verbal symbols is easy to convey the meaning when human communicate with others. Most of the verbal signs interweave with many non-verbal signs to accomplish the communicative task (Saussure, 1959). Such as paralanguage, facial expression, gesture, body posture, behavior symbol, light, heat, color and so on.

Cooper once said that people should all remember every piece of information includes both content and relationship (Cooper, 1988). Posture, facial expressions, body contact, etc., all has an impact on the content of the

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\*Han Xiao: a teacher in Department of Foreign Languages of Guangdong Polytechnic College. Her research fields include applied linguistics and legal translation.

message. Besides, the message of communication is mainly expressed by non-verbal forms. Non-verbal signs are the linguistic signs system for human to communicate thoughts, convey information and express emotions. Non-verbal signs are the semantic unit of information communication which have their own characteristics and communicative functions as well.

Guan Zhihui (2004) analyzes the features of non-linguistic symbols and the influence of non-linguistic symbols on class-teaching, and attempts to reveal the communicative function of non-linguistic symbols. Laura L. Namy; Aimee L. Campbell; Michael Tomasello (2004) explores the changing role of iconicity in non-verbal symbol learning. Liu Pingping (2012) makes a study on features of non-verbal symbols and their discursive meaning in the interpersonal communication. Scientific researches on nonverbal communication are not that large in scale. Zhang Xin-min (2018) discusses English translation strategies of verbal signs and the non-verbal signs of Chinese classic *Zhouyi*. Tian Xia (2018) explores the chorus *Geteng* of Miao nationality from the perspective of verbal and non-verbal signs of folklore and relevant translation strategies are thus proposed.

Based on the above-mentioned research results, this study aims to analyze and research the application of non-verbal symbols in business banquets, and emphasis is placed on the impact of non-verbal symbols on business negotiations, and thereby put forward correspondent measures against language barriers caused by non-verbal communication.

## **II. Influences of Non-verbal Signs on International Business Banquets**

It is inevitable to be faced with individuals of different cultures in international business banquets. People with different cultural backgrounds have different ways of thinking, different values, different customs, different aesthetic tastes, etc., so they not only have different commands for goods and services, but also have different or even opposite understandings of the same gesture, action and thing.

### **2.1 Influences of Eye Signs on International Business Banquets**

Experienced international business people know that eye contact rules vary from culture to culture, and eye contact is positioned differently in different countries. When engaged in business activities, it is fairly confusing regarding such questions as when to see, how long to see and who can see.

In North American and western European cultures, eye contact indicates honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, and nothing to hide. If an American woman looks someone straight in the eye, she is allowing that person to look her in the eye to see if she is trustworthy. A person who is afraid to make eye contact with others is seen as cunning and insincere; he will make the listener full of doubt. In such a case, the other party must be on his guard and more wary about the ongoing negotiation.

Compared with the western culture, the Arab culture pays more attention to the intense eye contact and focuses on the eye movement of the other party so as to get the real intention of the other party. It is believed that the eyes do not tell lies, and as such Arab businessmen talk to each other very close, which makes non-Arab businessmen uncomfortable. In business meetings, Arab businessmen often stare intently at each other when they first meet, while Asian businessmen avoid direct eye contact. When listening, the American businessman will often focus on the speaker, while the African businessman will look down at the floor. When conducting business negotiations, Chinese and Japanese businessmen often do not look at each other and sometimes close their eyes slightly, however, American businessmen regard it as indifference and disrespect. When listening to their elders and people of higher status, Chinese businessmen, Japanese businessmen and Korean businessmen often bow their heads naturally to show their respect to the American businessmen. However, American counterparts think that respect should be shown by looking the other person in the eyes. Bowing down is a kind of impolite behavior. Japanese people are uncomfortable with direct eye contact. They always try to avoid eye contact, and they believe that taking their eyes off a business colleague is a sign of respect. The American level of eye contact is considered rude in Japan because it is too harsh. In Japan, even on crowded subways and trains, there is no eye contact. People just glance at each other. In the company, the Japanese sit in the same office, but

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\*Han Xiao: a teacher in Department of Foreign Languages of Guangdong Polytechnic College. Her research fields include applied linguistics and legal translation.

they seldom look up and look into other people's eyes. In business meetings, south Africans steal glances at each other to gauge the boss's reaction. With so much business to decide, south Africans believe eye contact is essential to achieving mutual trust.

For those engaged in international business banquets, it will more often causes misunderstanding if individuals know little about non-verbal signs, while those who do not know the other country's language may undoubtedly be confronted with business failure. A case in point is a female college student who just graduated and was sent to the Canton fair. On the third day, she met a Canadian customer whose trial order reached two containers. The Canadian customer stared at her and asked, "is this your lowest price?" the female college student was not used to this kind of look and lowered her head and said, "yes." The client politely said "goodbye" and left her. The college girl was puzzled because she didn't know that in western countries people don't trust people who can't look you in the eye. Obviously, the failure of the negotiation was due to the fact that Chinese did not understand western culture and customs, and the Canadian also misunderstood the Chinese eye language.

## **2.2 Influences of Gestures on International Business Banquets**

The way we sit, stand, or walk conveys nonverbal signals. In western culture, standing tall is a sign of confidence. A confident person will stand tall with his head held high, which implies "I'm not afraid of anything." Good posture is related to one's social status. For example, supervisors tend to stand up straight when talking to subordinates. However, when faced with the subordinates and the second division of the conversation, the arms will be drooping. In traditional societies, people of lower social status are expected to show their respect by standing in front of tribal leaders or village elders. While this kind of reverence and humility is not appropriate for cross-cultural business communication, an international manager should know what posture is acceptable to a particular culture.

Although people sit on chairs in most business situations, in many parts of the Arab world they sit on the floor. Traditional Japanese businessmen also sit on the ground. The Japanese way of sitting with bent legs is quite taxing for outsiders who are not used to it. During an hours-long treat, the Japanese like to challenge westerners to sit in Japanese positions. When doing business in more traditional countries such as Japan and India, western women need to adapt to the way they sit and stand to avoid offending others.

In business communication, our posture reflects our perception of our power, authority, and status relative to the person we are talking to. If the other person in the conversation comes from the same cultural background, he can understand the meaning of each signal quite accurately. However, if he comes from a different cultural background, he will encounter difficulties. When the speaker uses his own cultural style to talk with others, those signs will be interpreted as offense or impolite practice.

## **2.3 Influences of Emoji on International Business Banquets**

Verbal signs are rational and sometimes even planned in advance, so it is difficult to explain the real intention of the other party. And the nonverbal signs -- smiles, nods, anger, disappointment, surprise, joy -- are often spontaneous and difficult to hide. In different cultures, even the same facial expression can represents very different things. It is often a mistake for negotiators to judge each other's inner world solely on the basis of domestic customs. For example, nodding your head may mean agreement in the United States, but in Japan it means "I'm listening, but I don't necessarily agree."

It is essential to be equipped with the ability to get the intended meaning behind facial expressions. Even the most basic facial expression, like a smile, has different implications in exotic cultures. A smile sometimes indicates joy and pleasure, but sometimes it reflects embarrassment and shyness. The following case illustrates the point. When an American businesswoman was negotiating in a Chinese hotel, she accidentally knocked over the coffee cup with her sleeve, and the coffee spilled all over the table. The American businesswoman's face was flushed, her eyes were clearly unsatisfied, and she began to walk away with her head down. The atmosphere

suddenly became tense, when her manager stopped her and explained to her that a Chinese family just had a special function of laughter -- people often use laughter to relieve tension and embarrassment. The smile of the Chinese just now shows that they care about you and want to help you out of the awkward situation. Then the American manager, who often comes to China, explained to the Chinese that the smile on this occasion just now was obviously of a sneering and insulting nature to the Americans. The Chinese did a double take and apologized to the businesswoman. Thanks to a cross-cultural expert, a misunderstanding was avoided and the negotiations continued in a harmonious atmosphere.

Americans consider a smile to be a sign of enthusiasm. To people from other cultures, American smiles are often insincere and hard. Why, for example, do waiters smile many restaurants in the United States spend a lot of time training their staff to make sure they all smile appropriately. Americans are surprised and confused that no other country in the world seems to emphasize the importance of a smile like the United States. For example, when McDonald's was training its staff in Moscow on the importance of smiling and how to do it properly, it was difficult. The Japanese, on the other hand, were largely unsmiling during the negotiations, smiling only at the signing. To Japanese, a casual smile at the negotiating table is a sign of seriousness, even malicious mockery. A Japanese executive's expressionless face can be mistaken by his American business partners for an uninterested response. The Japanese women who greet customers at Banks and shops bow deeply, but do not smile by American standards. They look pleasant, but they don't have the American smile. Germans don't smile as often as Americans. The German would simply say, "life is serious, nothing to laugh about." Although Germans are conservative, the reasons for their conservatism are not entirely the same as those of the Japanese. The Japanese do not want to be disturbed, and the Germans realize that everything in the world is not to their liking. Life is about doing your duty, and doing your duty doesn't mean smiling. The German branch of Wal-Mart is insisting that staff smile at customers in an effort to improve its poor service. Germans often say that when it comes to service, Germany is a desert. Germans complain of poor service, but they do not appreciate such efforts. They think the smile of the shop assistant is artificial hypocrisy.

South Koreans think it is not appropriate for minors to smile in public. Smiling at strangers is seen as a sign of low intelligence, or a child's behavior without proper training. In addition, like many east Asian cultures, a Korean smile doesn't indicate pleasure but a sign of embarrassment, something that an American or European might blush with embarrassment or take defensive measures against, but which an Asian might laugh off.

## **2.4 Influences of Environmental Signs on International Business Banquets**

Individuals of different cultures have different understandings of time, which is the very reason why negotiators behave differently in gamut process of business negotiation. Businessmen from different cultures who have different attitudes towards time are tending to violent friction. Therefore, in international business banquets, it is also very important to make clear the "time" concept of business partners to promote the success of business communication.

In a monochronic culture, we can't ignore the importance of time in daily life. Every link of business activity should have a plan so that you won't waste your limited time. The time units are divided into very small ones, and people should strictly follow the schedule in everything they do. Due to the United States belongs to the single-hour culture, their time view is straight. Everything is arranged in a straight line, they will try to shorten the negotiation time in each link, and strive to make every negotiation quick. They are used to conducting complex negotiations in sequence, moving from one stage to the next, addressing issues such as price, packaging and delivery in turn. The final agreement is the sum of these small agreements. For them, the measure of progress in a negotiation is how many small problems have been solved.

In contrast, a multi-temporal culture views time as an endless and unlimited resource, emphasizing completion of business and participation of people rather than following a rigid clock. Multi - temporal culture of timing, when more arbitrary. Some countries in Asia, the Middle East and Latin America and South America are belonging to the multi-temporal cultural pattern. They believe that time is circular and usually pay more

attention to the promotion of cooperation, and they don't have a certain limit on the length of time to finish the negotiations, and they do not want to separate the whole negotiation into a separate topic to discuss separately. It is normal to discuss several issues at the same time, which will not be strictly followed by the agenda, and may even bring up the issues that the other party thinks have been solved. In Brazilian culture, Brazilian businessmen want to negotiate for a relatively long time, and their initial offer is often far from the actual bottom line. The Japanese are known for their patience in negotiations. They can wait without complaint for an ideal deal. As long as the desired goal can be achieved, time is not the most important.

Due to the length of history, different nations subconsciously divide the time scale, such as the regular summary of the work of companies, French companies are basically once a year, while American companies are once a year. The medium - and long-term plans of enterprises in France generally take years as a cycle, while in the United States, it is often only years or even half a year.

In Western Europe, appointments should be made three to four weeks in advance for business. Arrange business meetings in countries such as the U.S. and Germany at least two weeks in advance, if not longer. In the United States, you should make an appointment with the general manager at least half a month in advance and more important things two months in advance. Calling at the last minute to request a meeting is considered troublesome, even insulting. Schedules are sacred to Americans, Germans and Nordics.

American businessmen have an energetic business style, especially punctuality, and highly value the efficiency. Many Americans make appointments, walk into their offices, sit down and get down to business. They think only in this way could finish work efficiently and show respect to each other. They always follow a prearranged agenda, and unpunctual people are seen as unreliable or irresponsible. In the United States, business negotiations or other meetings are punishable by tardiness. People in Australia, Israel, Germany, Sweden and Scandinavia have similar attitudes to time. South American businessmen are not particular about attending business negotiations and banquets on time, and sometimes even deliberately delay the time. It is possible for a South American businessman to arrive an hour or two late for a business negotiation. It's rude for being late when you attend business appointments in the USA and Germany; however, it's normal in Italy, Brazil and India. To Chinese, punctuality, though important, is not strict. What should be done may not be done on time; the end of the time may not end. Chinese people also have the habit of making appointments, but their understanding of conventions is not as "untouchable" as people in western countries. They are very random and sometimes disturbed by other people or things. In business negotiations, if the other party chooses the meeting place, they will never arrive early, always on time or deliberately slightly late.

### **III. Countermeasures Against Non-verbal Communication Barriers**

Undoubtedly, it is a science to successfully distinguish non-verbal signs and their different meanings in various cultures. Whether those non-verbal signs can be understood will, in a sense, determine the trend of negotiation, and even further influence cultural interaction between different countries. According, it is rather imperative to effectively cope with nonverbal communication barriers in international business banquet.

#### **To respect exotic culture**

Non-verbal behaviors in different cultures are characterized by universality. For example, human being expresses emotions in much the same way, making certain behaviors, such as smiling, crying and frowning, have generally similar expressive functions. However, non-verbal communication has its particularity and cultural limitation to a greater extent. Only by developing the habit of consciously observing and correctly explaining the cultural rules that restrict non-verbal communication can international business banqueters adapt to various behaviors in specific culture, society, occasions and situations.

The French cultural expert once pointed out that "our own culture has become a part of ourselves, so that we can't see our own culture, and it is because of our blind spots to our own culture that we always think other people's culture is similar to our own culture. "(David,1979,301)When people from other cultures behave

differently than we do, we often show great surprise and even frustration. In fact, cultural differences are an objective fact and do not necessarily involve moral issues of right and wrong. Whether domestic or foreign, developed or developing, eastern or western cultures, non-verbal signs should be respected, and everyone can use their own non-verbal signs to communicate.

#### **To cultivate Cultural Awareness**

International business culture awareness is the cross-cultural awareness of business activities. In international business communication, cross-cultural awareness is like a specific code. Only by understanding and following this code can international business activities be carried out smoothly, and international business culture awareness can be described as one of the guarantees for the smooth progress of business activities.

When the behavior of people affected by other cultures is inconsistent with our behavior, we often show emotions that are very surprising or even frustrating. In fact, cultural differences are facts that exist objectively and do not necessarily involve correctness. With erroneous moral issues. Regardless of whether it is domestic or foreign, whether it is developed or developing, whether it is Eastern culture or Western culture, its non-verbal symbols should be respected. Everyone can use their own non-verbal symbols to communicate. International business banqueters often don't realize how their behavior is influenced by cultural values, so that other people are the same as themselves. This kind of "cultural myopia" is easy to mislead. In international business banquets, we must cultivate culturally sensitive awareness, learn to understand, accept, and respect each other's culture. We must not unilaterally believe that things that are recognized in our own country are equally effective in other countries. Be good at seeing the problem from the perspective of the other party, and be good at understanding the way the other person thinks about the problem and the way the logic judges.

#### **To develop Cultural Empathy**

One of the keys to empathy is to be mindful of the other person's natural emotions. We should focus on the non-verbal communication ways of business partners, for example, gestures, movements, eyes, facial expressions, etc. In business negotiations and other activities, empathy can help eliminate misunderstandings and deepen feelings.

To learn acculturation means to improve one's own cultural accomplishment, deepen one's understanding of one's own country and other cultures, and gradually adapt to the cross-cultural business environment. To learn foreign culture, understand the country's cultural model. In economic and business activities, learning to acculturate helps to win the trust and respect of the other side, it can greatly improve the image of the enterprise or company, and can bring immeasurable economic benefits. In short, international business people have different values, ways of thinking, ways of behavior, languages and customs, so that the barriers to international business communication is much greater than the domestic. Only by clarifying the cultural differences of different countries and comprehensively analyzing the influence of culture on international business banquets, can we deepen and expand cross-cultural theories to guide our business activities.

### **IV. Conclusion**

Non-verbal signs have valuable function in international business banquets and other daily communicative activities. Non-verbal signs can convey rich, complex and subtle information. As auxiliary tools of verbal signs, sometimes they can play a role that verbal signs cannot replace. Based on the research, development, function and classification of non-verbal signs, this study systematically analyzes the role of non-verbal signs in international business banquets under the background of specific business activities, and proposes strategies so as to avoid failure in international business communication.

China has joined the WTO. China's vast market will attract a large number of foreign businessmen to enter China, and many Chinese businessmen will go to other parts of the world. However, different cultures endow non-verbal signs with different connotations, which also bring obstacles in communication. It is hoped to throw

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\*Han Xiao: a teacher in Department of Foreign Languages of Guangdong Polytechnic College. Her research fields include applied linguistics and legal translation.

light on the relevant study and broaden the research field of non-verbal signs.

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