

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Actions speak louder than words: Non-verbal mis/communication**

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**Effective inter-cultural interaction relies heavily upon non-verbal communication. Para/non- linguistic means constitute non-verbal communication. A seminal contribution of Ferdinand de Saussure, the Father of modern linguistics, was the analysis of the word as a verbal sign having two sides; an acoustic image or a sound pattern (signifier) and a concept or meaning (signified). He highlighted the arbitrariness of the verbal sign that necessitates a systematic structure of language. Applying Saussure's system of language to non-verbal signifier, the paper posits that the non-verbal signifier is a cultural construct. For any given sign, each culture assigns its own meaning. When one is dealing in inter-cultural settings, sensitivity towards these associations is a prerequisite for communication. If these aspects are not manifested properly, the end result may be no/mis-communication. This paper is concerned with sociolinguistic understanding of communication. It cites a few real life experiences from individual, organizational and societal spheres to analyze how non-verbal communication, though potentially one of the strongest modes of communication can act as a barrier to convey the intended message. It extends the Lacanian paradigm to kinaesthetic to infer that body language fails to transcend the limits of language if culture is not taken into consideration. So, non-verbal communication can prove to be more volatile than verbal communication. In this era of cross-cultural learning, one needs to assess the strengths and weaknesses of non-verbal communication to facilitate effective intra- and inter-cultural understanding.**

**Key words:** Non-verbal communication, inter-cultural interaction, communication, a bridge/ a barrier.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper aims at highlighting whether actions really speak louder than words and attempts to show how non-verbal communication is liable to be misinterpreted in different communities, as it is culture dependent.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Examples of controversial non-verbal miscommunication were chosen from the mass media to represent the culture specific meaning content.

## **PLEASE LOOK AT THE FIGURES AND INTERPRET THE MEANING**

Figures 1, 2 and 3 in succession, communicate, forcefully and clearly, a message that can be understood only by those who are familiar with Indian films and/or culture. The first two pictures do not contain any verbal message yet, they, if posed in succession, transmit an intended message, verbalised in the third slide. This happens because both the pictures are integrated in our culture and are understood by all the members of our culture. It invariably reminds us of one of the non-violent modes adopted in the film 'Lage Raho Munnabhai' to fight the concomitant evils of our society. Even those who are not

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Figure 1. Three monkeys.



Figure 2. A bouquet of flowers.



Figure 3. A get-well-soon card/message.

acquainted with Indian films will get the implied meaning of the message, if they have knowledge of Gandhian principles and certain constructs of our culture. The message, thus, would be more effectually communicated through non-verbal mode than verbal mode.

Communication, in general, verbal or non-verbal, is one of the basic necessities of human life; perhaps, as integral and as vital as our breath. Humans sustain themselves in the society through interaction with fellow-beings. Communication, a derivation of a Latin term 'communico' means 'to share'. If we accept this meaning then we also will not be able to ignore its sociological affiliation as Schefflen (1972) argued that communication includes all behaviours by which a group forms, sustains, mediates, corrects and integrates its relationships. In any cultural and linguistic group, the flow of interaction indicates the states of each participant and their relationships. All individuals that are contained within a group learn these behavioural patterns since childhood. They all ascribe same communicative interpretations to these activities when any member in an interactive situation performs them. By its very nature, it implies at least two participants in the communicative situation; one active who encodes and transmits the information and the other, who receives and decodes the message. The message can be encoded verbally (using lexical items of a language system) or through non-verbal means (using signs, symbols, postures, gestures, etc.) Non-linguistic communication is further classified into three fields: Kinesics (body semantics), metalinguistics (vocalizations and interjections) and Proxemics (spatial arrangements).

Abercrombie, one of the proponents of the study of paralanguage believes, "We speak with our vocal organs but we converse with our entire bodies; conversation consists of much more than a simple interchange of spoken words" (Abercrombie, 1972: 67). These non-linguistic elements may occur independently or alongside spoken language. For instance, Franklin Southworth in his insightful essay "South-Asian Emblematic Gestures" points out that there are as many as nine different non-verbal modes to greet someone and each mode is culture specific (Southworth, 1992: 110- 111). These behaviours are regular, uniform and mutually owned within a culture and their expression is so familiar to all in that context that they lead to immediate recognition and instantaneous interpretation by all the members of that linguistic community. Schefflen correctly points out, "Such paralexical behaviours occur in characteristic, standard configurations, whose common recognizability is the basis of their value in communication" (Schefflen, 1972: 225). It is a popular notion that these non-linguistic items cut across language and culture boundaries. Our intention in this paper is to posit and prove, with the help of a few real life experiences from individual, organisational and societal spheres that these behavioural patterns are culturally determined and differ among social groups, languages, and nations.

The messages conveyed through non-verbal mode are susceptible to misinterpretations in trans-cultural situations. For example, the expression of two of the simplest and commonest ideas, 'yes' and 'no' varies from one culture to another. A rocking of head forward and backward, in vertical axis is a general indication of affirmation whereas rotation from left to right on a horizontal level has normally been accepted to be negation. Many cultures including Japanese do not give these indications by nod of the head; instead, they use hand gestures to convey affirmation or negation. Movement of right hand signals negation whereas both the hands together in a specific movement are used to indicate 'yes' (La Barre, 1972: 207). A particular tribe of Malaya cast their eyes down to indicate 'no', whereas the same gesture made by Indian girls indicates acceptance. When a teacher asks in class whether students have understood or not, some students nod their heads up and down, while some tilt their heads to either side in an up and down motion instead of standing up and answering verbally. These nods can be interpreted differently; for instance in Western India, nodding the head from side to side means 'yes' whereas in Northern India, tilting of heads in an up and down motion indicates 'yes'.

Proxemics, one of the types of non-verbal communication is a culture sensitive communication symbol. The distance between people reserved for categories of acquaintance vary depending on the cultural interpretation of the distance. When involved in cross-cultural communication, understanding these variations of proxemic symbols is essential to maintaining effective communication. For instance, Hungarians are relatively non-tactile and they like to maintain personal space, whereas Italians are the most touch friendly people in Europe. Thus, for some cultures, the Proxemics is compressed, whereas, for some it may be expanded. The personal zone of the Middle East and the Arab world is smaller than that of the West. Man will stand much closer to other men when holding a conversation than is usual in the West. In Indian subcontinent, it is acceptable to have tactile contact with a person of the same sex but not inter-sexually. Men shake hands, hug and pat each other. Women too hug or even clasp each other firmly. But a man would think twice before extending his hand to a woman even for a formal handshake. In western countries, it is quite acceptable between a man and a woman to shake hands or even to peck each other at the cheeks (Clayton, 2006: 142-150).

In India, recently, a controversy was raked up when the main actors in a film were shown in an intimate kissing scene. Such a scene would be absolutely inoffensive in western culture but was made into an image-threatening issue in Indian context.

Some more instances of gestures leading to cross-cultural misunderstanding and uproar are:

1. In November 2006, after winning their maidens

Champion Trophy, Australian Cricket Team Captain, Ricky Ponting waved his fingers at BCCI President, Sharad Pawar signalling him to come and hand over the trophy. Later one of the Players, Damien Martyn, tapped at Pawar and nudged him out of the stage. Indians and Australians reacted differently to this episode. The media as well as some sports celebrities in India called it "a wilful and intentional" and cricket fans in India were up in arms whereas Dean Jones, former Australian cricketer, said, "It looks like the Aussies are treating it as no big deal".

2. Another controversy erupted when in Kolkata, in November 2005; TV cameras filmed Greg Chappell, Indian cricket team coach, making what appeared to be a gesture to some hecklers as he boarded the Indian cricket team's bus. Chappell's alleged offensive and obscene gesture had drawn angry response in the city with politicians and prominent personalities denouncing it while the Indian team management denied it and said that he was only attending to an injured finger.

3. Referring to some bodily gestures like belching, burping, spitting and breaking wind, Pathiyan in her article in The Sunday Times states that though they are "universal gestures", they are "unabashedly" executed in public by Indians. Later in the essay she quotes from a homemaker's blog "burping is not about feeling guilty. On the contrary it is about being content with food that you have eaten and about giving the hosts a compliment" (Pathiyan, 2006: 1).

With the aforementioned instances, we try to bear out that through non-verbal signs of communication; people may unintentionally offend someone and thus consequentially expose themselves to the peril of miscommunication.

A seminal contribution of Ferdinand de Saussure, the Father of modern linguistics, was his analysis of the word as a verbal sign having two sides – an acoustic image or a sound pattern (signifier) and a concept (signified). He saw the arbitrariness of the verbal sign that necessitates a systematic structure of language. Symbols and words are concrete signs, which represent relatively abstract ideas. For example, a concrete non-verbal pictographic sign, 'the skull and cross bones' stands for 'danger' and the word 'book' is a verbal symbol and it refers to 'sheets of papers bound together'. Because all signs are arbitrary and there is no logical reason why we use one particular sign, meaning is generated when we combine the 'producer' who uses the signified, the signifier, the 'consumer' who is the destination of the text/message and the 'message/text'. Combining these three factors, a general model of semiotics was developed as shown in Figure 4.

Saussure's analysis of the 'word' stands valid for all signs, verbal or non-verbal. Though arbitrary, a sign has meaning in its respective linguistic or cultural context. Saussure had argued that a sign has a meaning only

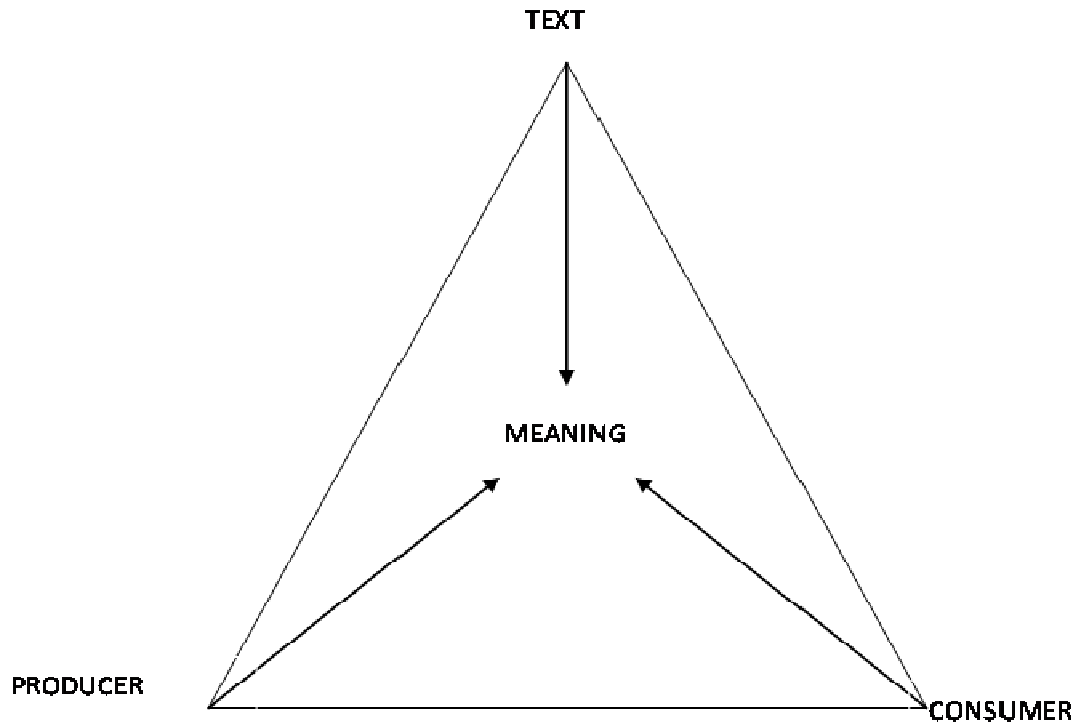


Figure 4. General Model of Semiotics (Beck et al., 2004: 25).

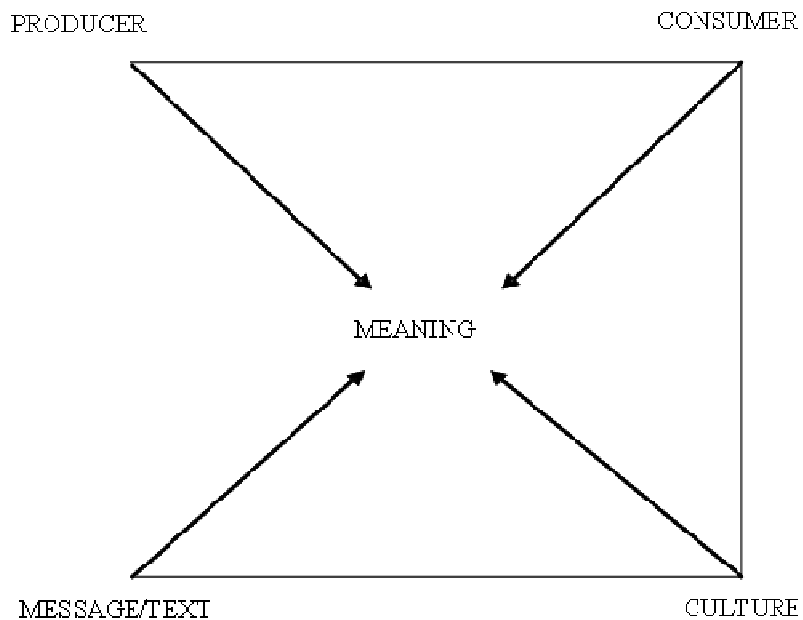


Figure 5. Reworked Model of Semiotics

within its system or some related context. It is not an autonomous body. He stressed the importance of considering each sign in relationship to all other factors within the system. While interpreting non-verbal sign, thus, one needs to consider culture as a major factor.

Inclusion of culture becomes necessary because when we communicate through signs, we are also offering data to the world. We provide information about our attitudes, our culture, and ourselves. So, a reworked model of semiotics can be assumed which will include the

producer's and the receiver's 'culture' as shown in Figure 5.

Following the lead given by Kroeber and Kluckhohn in the late twentieth century, by Redfield and others, Brian Bullivant defines culture as:

"The generalised composite of interdependent and valued traditional and current public knowledge and conceptions, embodied in behaviours and artefacts... to give meaning to and cope with its definitions of present and future existential problems" (Bullivant, 1986: 43).

Thus, in essence, culture is dynamic in nature, yet is founded on certain static values and principles. These values can pose problems in communication, because traditional values and norms are divergent in different cultures. The paradigm proposed by Charles Sanders Peirce, an eminent American philosopher in the nineteenth century, of icon, index and symbol bears a close relationship between communication and culture (Abrams, 1993: 276).

Applying Lacanian paradigm of innate figurativeness of language to non-verbal communication, one can infer that language is transparently referential (Lacan, 2004: 62). Non-verbal language will fail if one does not relate it to culture, religion and other factors. This form of interaction is much more limited than the verbal mode if it is used separately. Consequently, interpersonal interactions have gained vital importance due to widening horizons of intercultural communications. This mode of communication as modifier, substitute or reinforcement has the potential to form a parallel signalling system if it is interspersed with verbal output (Southworth, 1992: 104). Meaning is a social fact, which comes into being within the discourse of a culture (Ashcroft, 1995: 298). It is the responsibility of the speaker in a cross-cultural situation to employ techniques that would 'situate' the action for the listener/spectator. The same can be applied to non-verbal communication.

Non-verbal communication, though potentially one of the strongest modes of communication can act as a barrier to convey the intended message. In recent times,

non-linguistic communications have become all the more critical in defining and displaying meanings and intentions. In this era of cross-cultural learning, one needs to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of non-verbal communication that is universally hailed as the most effective mode because it has no language constraints. Much has been written and said about the positive aspects of this mode but this paper is an effort to provide a holistic understanding of its limitations.

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