Interpretations of Kinesics Are Cultural Not Universal

by Alice C. Pack

Many people seem to think that there is inherent meaning in nonverbal communication because gestures, unlike the phonology of languages which have a different arrangement of sound sequences and various intonation patterns, are alike. They think this indicates universal interpretation.

This assumption is reenforced by those who, having had a short encounter with someone without their native language competence, explain that they had no trouble establishing a pleasant relationship for communication.

Scientific studies are quoted to substantiate this fallacy. Darwin believed that, regardless of cultures, facial expressions of emotion are similar among humans. Reported at a convention of the American College of Medical Hypnotists was a newly discovered kinesic signal--an unconscious widening of the pupil when the eye sees something pleasant, i.e. the pupil of a normal man's eye becomes twice as large when he sees a picture of a nude woman.

It is true that people can be understood by making pantomiming gestures such as indicating hunger or thirst by opening the mouth, pointing a finger toward it, and making chewing motions. Also accepted is the fact that there may be instinctive body reactions to outside stimuli. However, the establishment of a universal communication interpretation by either of these two arguments is not justified.

The first, illustrated by the communication of pantomime, admits no standard gesture for specific communication, but is completely subjective, relying on the listener's decoding ability for meaning. The gesture indicating hunger might also be used to indicate that the person had just eaten, or had put something into his mouth which was difficult to chew. Other mimed gestures, or additional body movement that accompanies the gesture, might also suggest a different intrepretation to a different person.

Formalized gestures as part of theatre performance are found in every literate country and extend back in time to early India. This is evidence of an international interest in gestures and their proper ritualistic performance. However, these highly stylized gestures, though interesting, are definitely culturally oriented. Attendance at an Eastern theatre by Westerners without previous explanation or interpretive material would quickly prove the non-universality of interpretation of the gestures used. A 174 page book of instruction for pantomime performers in English seems to express the strong belief of the author and others in the universality of their interpretation of kinesics. However, these gestures might suggest different interpretations to an Easterner or to other non-English cultural groups.

Additional research and time may also prove that so-called instinctive or innate actions are also partially, if not wholly, learned cultural acts. (Consider recent research on I.Q. Tests,mice catching by cats, etc.)

In 1950 Bruner and Taguiri wrote that thirty years of study indicated that the best available research indicated that there was no innate, invariable pattern accompanying specific emotions. Research cited in 1964 by Ekman, Fiesen, and Sorenson on studies in New Guinea, Borneo, the United States, Brazil, and Japan show that "observers in these cultures recognize some of the same emotions when they are shown a standard

This is the first part of a three part article on the relationship of body movement to culture, language, and language teaching.

***See**

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set of facial photographs. In contradiction to a theory of culturally learned facial display of emotion, they postulate that man's brain is innately programmed for specific facial movements. They state that there are *"innate subcortical programs linking certain evokers to distinguishable universal facial displays for each of the primary affects-interest, joy, surprise, fear, anger, distress, disgust, contempt and shame."*

They do recognize, however, that in opposition to this innate reaction to condition there are "culturally variable expressions and rules learned early in life," and that "these rules prescribe what to do about the display of each affect in different social settings; they vary with the social role of each affect in different social settings; they vary with the social role and demographic characteristics and should vary across cultures."

Psychologists Davitz, Beldoch, Blau, Demitrovsky, Levitt, Levy, Mattes, and Turner made a four year study (1958-1962) on the communication of emotional meaning by facial expression with and without the auditory characteristics of speech. Levitt concludes that "The correlation between vocal and facial expressive abilities is indeed low, but nevertheless positive and significantly different from zero." And Davitz comments that *"despair was mistakenly identified as affection of boredom much more often than as anger or joy. Similarly, fear was mistakenly identified as joy or anger much more often than as admiration or despair."* As these studies were made between subjects of the same culture there certainly should have been some correlation.

Fast concludes that our nonverbal language is partly instinctive, partly taught, and partly imitative.

"What their work proved seems to be the fact that we can inherit our genetic makeup of certain basic physical reactions. We are born with the elements of a nonverbal communication. We can make hate, fear, amusement, sadness and other basic feelings known to other human beings without ever learning how to do it. Of course this does not contradict the fact that we must also learn many gestures that mean one thing in one society and something else in another society.

When man, because of his culture, controls or masks these innate displays of emotion this implies a negation of any universal interpretation of even this type of body movement. Gestures are sometimes used to provide an individual with a screen to hide his real feelings. "The fixed smile, the nervous hollow laugh, the busy hands, the downward glance that conceals the expression of the eyes, have become famous as signs of attempting to conceal embarrassment."

Dr. Birdwhistell, professor of research in anthropology at Temple University, believes that body language and spoken language are dependent on each other. Spoken language alone will not give full meaning of what a person is saying, nor will body language alone give the full meaning. He states that all of our movements, if they are significant, are learned, and we pick them up as part of our culture. Because laughing and smiling seemed to be universally recognized human expressions he decided to use these as a starting point for measuring individual conventionalized behavior. At first he felt that smiling provided the perfect example of a behavior bit which expressed pleasure in every culture. He states *"Almost as soon as I started to study "smiling" I found myself in a mass of contradictions. From the outset, the signal value of the smile proved debatable. Even the most preliminary procedures provided data which were difficult to rationalize. For example, not only did I find that a number of my subjects "smiled" when they were subjected to what seemed to be a positive environment, but some "smiled" in an aversive one...*

As I enlarged my observational survey, it became evident that there was little constancy to the phenomenon.... In one part of the country, an unsmiling individual might be queried as to whether he was "angry about something," while in another, the smiling individual might be asked, "What's funny?" In one area, an apology required an accompanying smile; in another, the smile elicited the response that the apology was not "serious." That is to say, the presence of a smile in particular contexts indicated "pleasure," in another "humor," in others "ridicule," and, in still others, "friendliness" or "good manners." Smiles have been seen to indicate "doubt" and "acceptance," "equality" and

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"superordination" or "subordination." They occur in situations where insult is intended and in others as a denial of insult. Except with the most elastic conception of "pleasure," charts of smile frequency clearly were not going to be very reliable as maps for the location of happy Americans.

As an illustration of the learning power of humans Dr. Birdwhistell has considered the most common kinesic motion, that of the eyelid. We squint to guard against too much light, or we blink to keep out dust and to cleanse our eyeballs. Contradicting this, he cites the numerous cases of learned eyelid movement. Fakirs in Indian religious cults can learn to look at the sun without blinking, or face a dust storm without closing their lids. He mentions that girls in our society learn to "bat their eyelashes" in flirting, even when there is no need to clean the eyeball. He suggests that examples like these prove that lid behavior varies from culture to culture, the same as language.

Dr. Birdwhistell concludes:

Insofar as I have been able to determine, just as there are no universal words, no sound complexes, which carry the same meaning the world over, there are no body motions, facial expressions, or gestures which provoke identical responses the world over. A body can be bowed in grief, in humility, in laughter, or in readiness for aggression. 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.

...It is easier to avoid the idea of culture concept than to face up to it.

A study of expectations and actual status in group situations reveals that subjects with expected consistency experienced significantly more positive affect than other groups. This seems to be the principle behind the effect of particular gestures upon individuals in some societies. An example of this is the so-called "Voodoo Death" caused by the pointing of a bone toward an individual. The foreigner is unaffected by the gesture, while the native, knowing the significance of the gesture, expects and accepts the death which follows. Scientists have recently documented these deaths as due to shock–the effect of the specific meaning held by some of a particular gesture. *(to be continued)*

This is the first part of a three part article. Part two will appear in the next issue.