

EXTRALINGUISTIC ISSUES IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: WORLDVIEWS, CUSTOMS, NONVERBAL LANGUAGE AND THE ROLE OF SOCIETY

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Abstract

This article examines the extra linguistic dimensions of intercultural communication with a particular focus on worldview, customs, non verbal language, and the role of society. While linguistic proficiency is vital in cross-cultural contexts, effective communication also requires a deep understanding of cultural practices that extend beyond language. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from anthropology, sociology, and communication studies, the paper analyzes how different worldviews shape perception, how rituals and traditions reinforce identity, how customs and social norms regulate behavior, and how nonverbal communication conveys meaning across cultural boundaries. The discussion also highlights the influence of societal institutions in shaping communicative norms. Practical implications are explored in relation to education, diplomacy, and business, emphasizing the importance of cultural competence in today's globalized world. The study concludes that intercultural effectiveness depends not only on linguistic ability but also on sensitivity to the symbolic, behavioral, and social dimensions of culture.

Key words: Intercultural communication; extralinguistic factors; worldview; customs; nonverbal communication; body language; society; cultural competence.

Introduction

Intercultural communication is more than the exchange of words across cultural boundaries. It also involves the negotiation of meanings, values, and identities embedded in what scholars call extra linguistic factors. These include worldview, rituals, traditions, customs, body language, taboos, stereotypes, and the social roles that shape cultural interaction. Understanding these aspects is crucial for successful cross-cultural encounters, whether in diplomacy, education, or business. Scholars such as Edward T. Hall and Geert Hofstede emphasize that language is only the surface of communication, while culture provides the deep structure that determines interpretation.

Worldview and cultural perception

A worldview refers to the set of beliefs, values, and assumptions through which individuals interpret reality. In intercultural contexts, conflicting worldviews often lead to misunderstanding. For example, Western cultures shaped by Cartesian dualism and

Enlightenment rationality emphasize individual agency, linear time, and empirical truth, whereas many Asian cultures are grounded in holistic philosophies such as confucianism, taoism, or buddhism, which stress harmony, circular time, and relational truth worldviews influence communication by shaping expectations about interaction. For instance, in many African societies, time is polychronic, meaning that relationships and events matter more than strict schedules. In contrast, Northern European societies often adhere to monochronic time, where punctuality and planning are essential. This difference can create tension in international business negotiations if not acknowledged. Furthermore, religious worldviews shape communication. Islamic cultures often prioritize collective identity and moral obligations derived from the Qur'an, while secular western societies emphasize individual rights. In intercultural encounters, such contrasts require sensitivity to avoid ethnocentric judgments.

A worldview refers to the overall perspective through which people interpret life and human behavior. It shapes how individuals think, what they believe, and how they react in social situations. For instance, western cultures often emphasize individuality, personal freedom, and self-expression. People are encouraged to speak openly and share their opinions. In contrast, many eastern or collectivist societies value harmony, respect for authority, and group solidarity. Silence or indirect speech may be preferred over confrontation. Such differences can easily lead to misunderstanding. A person from a culture that values directness may find another's indirect communication confusing or evasive, while the other person may view directness as rude. Recognizing that each culture operates from its own worldview helps people approach communication with greater empathy and flexibility.

Customs and social norms

Customs are unwritten rules that guide social behavior. They encompass etiquette, dress codes, dining manners, and symbolic practices. Customs are dynamic and reflect societal values. For example, in Mediterranean cultures, long meals with extensive social interaction reflect the value placed on community and family. In contrast, in the US and Northern Europe, efficiency often governs dining practices. Customs also reflect power structures. Gender norms in Middle Eastern societies, for instance, influence how men and women interact in public. In intercultural communication, the lack of awareness of such customs can lead to offense or misinterpretation. For example, maintaining eye contact is a sign of confidence in the US but in some Asian cultures it may be considered rude or confrontational.

Customs are the unwritten rules that guide how people behave in daily life. They express the shared values and beliefs of a community. Simple acts such as greeting, gift giving, or eating habits may vary widely from one culture to another. For example, in Japan it is customary to bow when greeting someone, while in many western countries a handshake or hug is common.

Ignoring these customs can unintentionally cause offense or discomfort. In some Middle Eastern cultures, showing the soles of one's shoes is considered disrespectful, while in others, refusing an offered drink may seem impolite. Therefore, being culturally aware means not only learning the language of another culture but also respecting its traditions and etiquette.

Nonverbal language: speaking without words

Nonverbal communication is often more powerful than speech. It includes facial expressions, gestures, body posture, tone of voice, and even the amount of personal space people maintain. While these signals seem universal, their meanings are often culturally specific. A smile, for example, can express happiness in most cultures, but in some contexts, it may also hide discomfort or embarrassment. Similarly, eye contact signifies confidence and sincerity in Western societies but may be interpreted as disrespectful in others. Even simple gestures—such as nodding, waving, or pointing carry different meanings around the world. Misreading these signs can lead to confusion or offense, which is why nonverbal awareness is a key skill in intercultural communication.

Nonverbal communication is perhaps the most visible extralinguistic factor. Albert Mehrabian's famous study suggested that up to 93% of meaning in face-to-face communication comes from nonverbal cues though the exact figure has been debated, the importance of nonverbal behavior is undeniable. Gestures, facial expressions, posture, and proxemics (use of space) vary widely across cultures. A thumbs-up gesture means approval in much of the west but is offensive in parts of the Middle East. Similarly, silence can carry different meanings: in Japan, it often indicates respect or contemplation, while in western cultures it may be interpreted as disengagement or disagreement. Clothing and physical appearance also function as nonverbal symbols. For instance, the wearing of hijab communicates religious identity, while business suits in western contexts signal professionalism. Misinterpretations occur when these symbols are judged by ethnocentric standards.

The role of society in shaping communication

Society provides the framework in which communication practices are formed. Institutions such as family, school, religion, and media transmit cultural norms. For example, collectivist societies emphasize interdependence, reflected in communication styles that prioritize group harmony over individual expression. Media representations also influence intercultural communication by shaping stereotypes and cultural perceptions. Hollywood films, for example, often depict American values such as individualism and freedom, while Bollywood emphasizes family ties and tradition. These representations affect how cultures perceive each other globally. Moreover, political and historical contexts shape communication. Colonial histories, for example, continue to influence postcolonial societies' attitudes toward Western powers.

Awareness of such contexts is crucial in avoiding miscommunication in international relations. Society plays a major role in shaping how people communicate. Social norms, class systems, gender expectations, and age hierarchies all influence the way individuals express themselves and interpret others. In many Asian and African cultures, for example, elders are shown great respect, and younger people are expected to speak politely or use honorific language. In contrast, Western societies tend to promote equality in communication, where even students can freely question their teachers or elders.

These social structures also determine the level of formality, emotional expression, and politeness in communication. When people from different social systems interact, misunderstandings may arise not because of language barriers but because of differing social expectations.

Bridging cultural gaps

To communicate effectively across cultures, one must go beyond learning vocabulary and grammar. True intercultural competence involves cultural sensitivity, open-mindedness, and the ability to adapt. Listening actively, observing nonverbal signals, and showing respect for local customs can prevent many misunderstandings.

Developing awareness of extra-linguistic factors helps people build stronger relationships, avoid stereotypes, and appreciate diversity. As the world becomes more interconnected through travel, education, and technology, this awareness becomes not just a skill but a necessity. Understanding extralinguistic issues is essential in diplomacy, business, and education. In business, misinterpreting a ritual or taboo can lead to failed negotiations. In education, ignoring students' cultural customs can hinder participation. In diplomacy, stereotypes and ethnocentrism can exacerbate conflicts. Training in intercultural competence should therefore include attention to extralinguistic factors. Programs such as cultural simulations, role-playing, and study-abroad experiences help individuals develop the empathy and adaptability needed for intercultural success.

Conclusion

Intercultural communication is like a dance between languages, cultures, and minds. Words are only the surface; beneath them lie deep cultural meanings expressed through worldviews, customs, gestures, and social roles. By understanding these extralinguistic elements, we learn to communicate not only with words but with respect, empathy, and genuine understanding. In the end, successful communication is not about speaking the same language, it is about sharing the same humanity.

Extralinguistic issues worldview, customs, nonverbal language and the role of society are central to intercultural communication. They shape how messages are sent received and interpreted across cultural boundaries. Failure to recognize these elements can result in miscommunication conflict or broken relationships. Conversely,

awareness and sensitivity to these factors foster trust, collaboration, and mutual respect. As globalization intensifies, developing intercultural competence is not optional but essential. By understanding the extralinguistic dimensions of culture, individuals and institutions can navigate cultural differences with greater insight and effectiveness.

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