

## Lesson 6 Communication without Words

(1) Words are not the only tool we use to convey our emotions. We also communicate feelings by leaning forward during a conversation, or narrowing our eyes, or folding our arms. Because as much as 70 percent of what we say comes from this type of non-verbal communication, it's clearly important to be aware of our body language. That is especially true when dealing with people from other cultures. For example, the meaning of a smile in Baltimore may be extremely different from its meaning in Beijing.

(2) There are several types of body language. With gestures, we use our arms and hands to show moods, ask questions, and share information. Our faces are very expressive, with more than 90 muscles working to send messages of surprise, happiness, anger, and so on. There is also kinesic communication, which refers to messages conveyed by body positioning. For example, a slumped position shows sadness or timidity, while a straight posture displays confidence. Other types of body language include our tone of voice, clothing, and the physical distance between people.

(3) Since body language differs greatly from place to place, it's easy to misunderstand the gestures or expressions of foreigners. For instance, smiling shows happiness or friendliness in North America. Yet in East Asia, it can be a sign of discomfort or embarrassment. Shaking one's head may mean "no" in England, but it carries the opposite meaning in Bulgaria. In addition, many daily actions, from greetings to shaking hands, vary in the way they are done around the world.

(4) Culture has a strong influence on non-verbal expression. The simple act of looking someone in the eye, for example, is not actually straightforward, varying in meaning from culture to culture. In the USA, people are encouraged to look directly at others when speaking to them. It shows interest in what they are saying, and it is thought to convey honesty. However, in Japan and South Korea, people avoid long eye contact. It is considered more polite to look to the side during a conversation. The Lebanese, in contrast, stand close together and look firmly into each other's eyes in order to show sincerity and give their counterparts a better sense of their desires.

(5) Given such differences in even the most common expressions, people traveling abroad and those in international business have a real need to learn about body

language in other cultures. One helpful method is to watch movies or TV shows. Picture books showing sequences of events can help illustrate concepts like personal space. Moreover, during face-to-face contact, it is a good idea to simply ask individuals what they mean if their gestures or expressions are unclear.

(6) Because body language is subconscious, people tend to be unaware of the messages they are sending to others. So before dealing with people from other cultures, consider your own body language. The last thing you want to do is anger a friend or lose some business over a misunderstanding. Having knowledge about the body language of friends, clients, and colleagues —as well as your own unspoken messages— can go a long way toward improving understanding and avoiding miscommunication.