

# Nonverbal Communication and Its Translation

## LA COMMUNICATION NON LANGAGIERE ET SA TRADUCTION

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**Abstract:** Nonverbal communication, mainly based on nonverbal signals, carry different connotations in different cultures. This essay is going to give a brief account on nonverbal communication and the measures adopted in the translation of nonverbal communication. It is concluded that when translating the nonverbal communication, the most important thing is to convey the cultural connotations carried by nonverbal signals.

**Key words:** nonverbal, communication, translation, measures

**Résumé:** La communication non langagière fondée essentiellement sur les signes de traduction non langagiers est une partie importante de la communication courante de l'homme. La communication non langagière est souvent ambiguë et indirecte à cause de différentes significations culturelles. Commencant par la présentation brève de la communication non langagière, l'article présente les techniques de traduction concrètes de cette communication. Il en conclut que la tâche la plus importante dans la traduction de la communication non langagière consiste à dévoiler la signification culturelle du signe de la communication non langagière.

**Mots-Clés:** non langagier, communication, traduction, technique

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In daily communication, both verbal and nonverbal communications play an important role. Compared with verbal communication, nonverbal communication is often indirect and ambiguous. A person may use different nonverbal signals to show his different attitudes when speaking. Even if a person is silent, his attitude can be revealed by his nonverbal signals. Due to the cultural differences among different countries, it is possible that the same nonverbal signal conveys different meanings, and the same meaning is conveyed by different nonverbal signals. As a result, in the translation of nonverbal communication, the translator must have a clear understanding of various nonverbal communication and its relationship with different cultures.

### 2. BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

#### 2.1 The definition of nonverbal communication

Samovar and Porter propose that "nonverbal communication involves all those nonverbal stimuli in a communication setting that are generated by both the source and his or her use of the environment and that have potential message value for the source or receiver"(Samovar and Porter,2004: 169).

In Chinese culture, people also view nonverbal communication as important. The idioms such as "察言觀色" and "見風使舵" are used to remind people of paying special attention to nonverbal signals in communication.

#### 2.2 The cultural differences of nonverbal communication

Nonverbal communication, conveyed mostly by nonverbal signals, can be divided into four categories (Jia, 1997: 449). They are kinesics, proxemics, paralinguistics and appearances. The cultural

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\*Received 9 March 2007 ; accepted 16 May 2007

differences among different nonverbal signals are crucial to the study of nonverbal communication.

Kinesics includes body movements, gestures, eyesight, facial expressions and the volume and tone of the voice. The connection between the nonverbal signals and their meanings is sometimes arbitrary and sometimes are theoretical based. The gesture of "OK" used by Americans means different in other cultures. In Japan it symbolizes money while zero in France. To the same extent, the kinesics used in greeting is different too. In some cultures people shake hands to greet each other, while in some eastern cultures, people take a bow instead. Also in some cultures, people kiss when meeting, while in some other cultures, people greet each other by touching. Different eye contacts transfer different messages. In some cultures, people tend to stare at the speaker to show their interest in the conversation, which is considered as an unfriendly behavior.

As for the proxemics behavior, the most remarkable difference is the different requirements of distance between persons. American expert E.T. Hall points out there are intimate, personal, social public and long distances in the communication. Americans tend to keep a certain distance, usually an arm's length, with each other in public. On the contrary, Arabians are used to crowds, so they stay intimate with others as well.

Compared to the other two nonverbal signals, paralinguistics in different cultures do not differ so sharply. However, sometimes people in different cultures use different paralinguistics to express the same idea. For example, "well" and "唔" are used in different languages to show hesitation.

### 3. TRANSLATION OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Since the cultural differences affect the understanding of nonverbal communication, when translating the nonverbal communication, it is suitable to use terms in target language that are functionally equivalent to the terms in source language.

When translating the nonverbal communication on the basis of functional equivalence, there are mainly five techniques for the translators to adopt. They are foreignization, amplification, annotation, substitution, and paraphrasing.

#### 3.1 Foreignization

Most of nonverbal communication shares the same meaning in different cultures. It would not cause any misunderstanding in people of different cultural backgrounds. When translating them into another language, it is better for the translator to adopt the

method of foreignization to keep the original flavor. For example,

孔乙己是站著喝酒而穿長衫的唯一的人。(魯迅《孔乙己》)

Kong Yiji was the only long-gowned customer who used to drink his wine standing. (Translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang)

In federal Chinese society, people wear the long gown to show his high social status. In the Chinese original, the costume Kong Yiji wears and his standing form a sharp contrast. Kong wears the long gown to show off his high social status, but he does not have enough to pay for a seat so he has to stand while drinking. The translators keep the original nonverbal communication of the contrast, through which the irony effect is achieved.

#### 3.2 Amplification

One of the characteristics of nonverbal communication is ambiguity. Most of the message the source wants to give is hideous. What's more, sometimes the same nonverbal communication may cause misunderstanding in people of different cultural backgrounds. When translating this kind of nonverbal communication, it is important for the translator to add some words to convey the proper meaning in accord to the situation at that moment for the clearer understanding of the target language readers. For example,

I raised a finger to the waitress and paid the bill.

我招手叫女招待過來，把賬結了。

In the English tradition, it is usual for people to "raise a finger" to call a waiter or waitress, and a waiter or waitress would come to the customer when he or she sees the gesture. But the gesture could not be fully understood by all the Chinese. Therefore, in the Chinese version, the translator add "叫過來" to convey the exact meaning of the gesture "to raise a finger".

E.g. Here he crossed his fingers.

說到這裏，他交叉起手指，祝好運。(樊葳葳和張迎豐, 2000: 38.)

To "cross one's finger", which the Chinese seldom use, is a gesture used to express one's wish to another of good luck. It is unique to English spoken people. If it is translated to "交叉起手指", most Chinese may not understand the man's idea. Therefore, the translator added "祝好運" to explain the gesture meaning "wish you a good luck".

E.g. The young girl *thumbed her way* to the passing cars.

那個年輕姑娘站在路邊向過往的汽車擺動著豎起的拇指表示要搭車。

When people "thumb" on the roadside in an English

speaking country, they mean they want to get a free ride. However in china, people show their praise to someone by thumbing. So it is necessary for the translator to add “表示要搭車” in the Chinese version to avoid misunderstanding.

When Tom won the first prize in the composition competition, we all *patted him on the back*.

當湯姆在作文競賽中獲一等獎時,我們都拍了拍他的背向他表示祝賀。

Most people in the world “pat somebody on the back”, so it is almost a universal behavior. But it carries different message in different cultures. For example, in Chinese culture, to pat someone on the back shows friendliness or encouragement, while in English culture, the same action means congratulation. In order to give a clearer idea to target language readers, “表示祝賀” is added in the Chinese version.

### 3.3 Annotation

When translating nonverbal communication into another language, the translator may come across some nonverbal communication full of cultural traditions. In this situation, it is necessary for the translator to add a note to tell the traditions carried by the nonverbal communication. For example,

獨在異鄉為異客,每逢佳節倍思親

遙知兄弟登高處,遍插茱萸少一人

Alone, a lonely stranger in a foreign land

I doubly pine for my kinfolks on holiday

I know my brothers would, with dogwood spray in hand,

Climb up the mountain and miss me so far away.

(Note: A dogwood spray arrived on mountain climbing day, the ninth day of the ninth lunar month, was supposed to drive away evil spirits.)

In the original poem, “遍插茱萸” meaning holding a dogwood spray in hand is a tradition for the Chinese to get rid of evil spirits on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month. Perhaps most target language readers have little idea of what significance this nonverbal behavior has. Therefore, it is very important to supply a note in the English translation. Moreover, the cultural connotation is fully conveyed.

### 3.4 Substitution

Sometimes, the same meaning is conveyed by different nonverbal communication in original and translated languages. In this situation, the translator could find the equivalent nonverbal communication to substitute the original nonverbal communication. For example,

“You should not be discouraged.” Mother said to us gently.

We all shook our head.

媽媽輕輕對我們說：“別洩氣。”

我們都點點頭。

The response in English to the negative question or sentence is just in the contrast to that in Chinese. People would use a negative response to 肯定 the negative question or sentence in English culture, while in Chinese culture, people in contrast tend to use a positive response to 肯定. Therefore, the translated version must replace “shook our head” by “点点头” meaning nodding our head to show 肯定 in Chinese language.

E.g. 入畫也黃了臉。因問是從哪里來的,入畫只得跪下,哭訴真情。(曹雪芹,《紅樓夢》)

Ju-hua turned pale. And asked where these things came from, she knelt down and sobbed. (Translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang)

In the Chinese original context, it can be inferred that Ju-hua was very much scared when she saw the things found. In the English version, the translators change the word “yellow” into “pale” to achieve the same effect of showing Ju-hua’s fear.

### 3.5 Paraphrasing

Apart from some shared nonverbal communication, some unique nonverbal communication also exists in a certain culture. It is not possible to find equivalence in the target language. To translate this kind of nonverbal communication, the translator may explain the meaning nonverbal communication for the purpose of better understanding of the target language reader. For example,

三個人品字式坐了,隨便談了幾句。(茅盾,《子夜》)

The three men sat down *facing each other* and began casually chatting. (Translated by Sidney Shapiro)

In the original sentence, “品” is a Chinese character which exists only in the Chinese language. The place of each speaker could be easily seen for source language readers from the arrangement of three “口” of the character “品”. However this arrangement could hardly be replace by any letter of word in English, for the shape of “品” is unique in Chinese. Therefore, in order to show the faithful arrangement of the three talking men, “品” is paraphrased as “facing each other”.

## 4. CONCLUSION

After a careful analysis of nonverbal communication from the perspectives of its definition, function and cultural differences, it can be concluded that when translating the nonverbal signals, the translator must take cultural differences into consideration. There are

mainly five methods for the translator to adopt to find functional equivalences of the nonverbal signals. Only in that way can the meaning of nonverbal communication be faithfully conveyed.

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