

Importance of Non-verbal Communication

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In society, non-verbal communication plays many important roles in cultural situations. Non-verbal communication refers to messages transmitted by non-linguistic means and is socially generated and transmitted. This type of communication allows us to express complex emotions and provides context and clarity for interpreting and understanding how a verbal message would be understood. On the contrary, non-verbal communication cues can also create misinterpretation and misunderstandings, as they can have different meanings in different cultures, and also vary in display rules such as gender, relational distance, socioeconomic status, and the situation. Some forms of non-verbal communication include: gestures, proxemics, intonation, eye contact, haptics, kinesics, paralanguage, facial expressions, artifacts, as well as physical appearance. These work to convey emotions and attitudes towards the people around us, and they express things that may otherwise be difficult to vocalize. In my own experience of growing up in a completely different culture than the one I live in today, it is amazing to see how distinctly different communication is from culture to culture and how interpretation by both the sender and receiver of nonverbal communication cues can be influenced by their own cultural backgrounds.

In my motherland of Rwanda, nonverbal cues are very prevalent in the overall communication process due to the structure of the society in terms of class, gender roles, social stratification, and etiquette. An example of a specific form of kinesics is eye contact, a powerful communication tool which holds several meanings and is culturally bound. It is acceptable for an elderly person or someone of a higher status to make eye contact with others, as it is a sign of power and conveys dominance, while a younger or second-class person engaging in a similar manner may be interpreted as disrespectful or arrogant. Alongside avoiding eye contact towards respected members of society, it is also important to offer both hands when greeting them by placing one's left hand over their right elbow or forearm.

Similarly, proxemics is another example that plays a role in the processes of non-verbal communication. This refers to personal space and one's distance from other individuals. People display ownership of their personal space, also known as territoriality. As there are different personal spatial zones such as intimate, personal, social, and public; it is fair to say that Rwandese culture falls mainly in the personal zone due to the emphasized importance of physical contact when

interacting with one another. For example, when greeting a closer friend or a family member, you hug and kiss on the cheek three times, alternating sides. While touch in this context is supposed to provide comfort and affirmation, I personally happen to be touch avoidant, and so growing up around touch approachers often caused me great discomfort, and as a result, was labelled extremely shy or sometimes even rude. In reality, rather than indicating comfort for me, I felt that it allowed certain people to abuse an innocent gesture and use it as a signal of domination and intimidation.

Paralanguage, which refers to how a word is said through volume, pitch, facial expression and pace, is another form of non-verbal communication that is present in the way people interact and convey a particular message. This type of communication is also known as meta-communicative competence, and the ability to interpret it properly is very useful and important for effective communication. More specifically, intonation is the rise and fall of one's voice when speaking and can be used to convey emotions and feelings. While nonverbal communication does not involve speaking, intonation still applies as people also often use sounds and noises to pass on a message. For instance, in Rwanda, low and high pitch in

voice is used to express either empathy in sad times or agitation. Silence is also a powerful aspect of paralanguage because it varies in meaning. It can be a comfortable silence in a positive situation, or it can be used to convey discomfort in a negative one.

A slightly different aspect of non-verbal communication that plays a major role in most societies is the use of artifacts. These are personal objects that signal our identities and background. People may use artifacts to display gender or signal cultural belonging, by decorating and personalizing their spaces to mark territory. While they may be used to convey messages about status, affiliation, and the self that one seeks to project, artifacts outside of religious ones, are actually not seen as important and are sometimes even discouraged in Rwanda. There is a great emphasis on conformity to social norms and expectations, and therefore anyone who fails to follow the laid-out social structure is rejected and viewed differently by others. For example, having tattoos or dreadlocks in some cultures is seen as a way to express and present oneself in a particular way; whereas in Rwandese culture, the first thing that parents whose child has these would be, “How is everyone else going to see us,” instead of being supporting or at least making an

effort to understand that it is simply a form of self-expression for the child. This shows how individual identity is strongly discouraged in light of social perception and how it is more important to most members of society to follow cultural norms and maintain a particular image, rather than exploring personal identity.

Analyzing the several elements of non-verbal communication discussed above and relating them to different aspects of identity, it is evident that non-verbal communication plays a significant role in many cultural situations. Looking at Rwanda as a case study, elements of communication such as gestures, proxemics, haptics, paralanguage, and artifacts, it is important to analyze deeper the meaning of non-verbal cues, as many intended meanings don't match superficial interpretations. Additionally, focussing on how someone communicates rather than what they communicate can also be helpful when interpreting cues in voice or paralanguage. Non-verbal communication increases the understanding of messages and establishes a better perspective of the intended meaning.

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