Introducing Cultural Anthropology
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I have gone back to college and one of my general electives is Cultural Anthropology.

When I started reading chapter 4 – Languages, I could not help noticing the close proximity of this information to that of the training I received from Wicklander – Zulawski & Associates. I wanted to be sure to give credit where it is due - A large portion of this information is from the textbook.

Silent Language

Silent language refers to the myriad nonverbal ways that we communicate within a culture. Such communication may take the form of kinesics (the use of the body), proxemics (the use of space), cultural time (the use and treatment of time), words, silence, and material culture. Silent language can be one of the most difficult aspects of another culture to learn because it is not formally taught. It can be misinterpreted by people with different cultural or subculture backgrounds. Lack of awareness of another culture’s silent language can lead to embarrassment, misunderstandings or failure to unearth the truth from an interview. Because it easily generates frustration, it can feed one’s ethnocentrism. Lack of awareness of silent language may even be dangerous, as in the case of inadvertently wearing a gang’s colors or using a gesture that carries a confrontational message.

Silent language is a powerful form of communication.

Kinesics

Kinesics is the study of the use of the body in communication. Specific kinesics studies analyze cultural gestures, facial expressions, and body position. Common gestures such as the North American A-OK sign, made by placing the forefinger and thumb in a circle, can create misunderstandings outside of the United States. In some countries this gesture refers to a part of the anatomy and is used as a grave insult. In Japan it means money, and in France it means that you think someone is a zero. In Malta and parts of Italy at one time it was a male homosexual gesture soliciting sex.

The familiar North American “come here” gesture of motioning with the palm held up, fingers folded into palm, and the index finger alternately extended and crooked toward the body can also be insulting when viewed through the lens of another culture. A student from the Philippines recounted that an older relative of his, a recent immigrant to the United States, quit a job as a busboy in a restaurant because he constantly felt insulted when people would use this gesture toward him. In the Philippines this gesture is used to call animals, and the older relative felt that he was being treated like a dog. Because he was enculturated to interpret the gesture in a different way, even when the North American meaning was explained to him, the gesture made him very uncomfortable.

Remember that gestures are symbolic and the meaning assigned to them may change from time to time even within one culture. For this
reason I believe that it is more important to be alert to silent language issues rather than simply to memorize the meaning of gestures for various cultures.

We are all familiar with facial expressions, and most of us do a good job of reading them within our own culture. We’ve all had friends ask us if something is wrong when we thought that we were hiding our sadness or pain. Something about our facial expressions or the way we were holding our bodies communicated our true emotions. A student who was enculturated in Cambodia remarked that in his culture it was considered an insult and very bad manners to look at a teacher when she was talking to you. He was confused when he first entered an American classroom. He said that even after seven years in the American school system it was hard for him to look instructors in the eye when they spoke. In traditional American culture, people who don’t look at you when you speak are considered inattentive and shifty, or even dishonest.

Body positions, such as arms tightly folded across the chest, also communicate. Actors are particularly good at studying and using body position as a means of communicating an attitude or emotion. The next time you watch a movie, try to articulate what it is about an actor’s body position and movement that the actor is communicating to you.

The process of interpretation or reading of the silent language cues happens almost instantly, and in the interview process it is most important to know if the body language is due to lying or just a part of a person’s culture. Establishing behavioral norms is an essential step in the process and may assist you in avoiding a false positive later in the process.

Proxemics

Another area of silent language is called Proxemics, the study of how people of different cultures and subcultures perceive and use space.

Touch, spacing, and territorial distance between bodies are all aspects of Proxemics.

According to Edward T. Hall (1955), the use of space within middleclass American culture is broken into four main distances in social relations and business: intimate, personal, social, and public. Those who have been enculturated into the middleclass American subculture understand these proxemics categories very well, though they were never formally taught about them. When sharing intimate information with a friend, middleclass Americans move in close, usually about six to eighteen inches. We lower the volume of our voices to a whisper or near whisper and share the bit of gossip or personal thought. As we grew up, we also learned about how far away to stand in ordinary conversation, and we learned to use the appropriate voice level. We become aware of these cultural spatial distances when someone violates them.

A visitor from a Latin American country, for example, often stands in our intimate space while using a voice level that we would use in personal or social distance. The middleclass American’s reaction is to back away, trying to get comfortable with the distance. The Latin American visitor is suddenly uncomfortable and tries to move closer.

The ethnocentric voice in the American’s head is beginning to register: pushy, pushy Latin. The Latin’s ethnocentric inner voice is beginning to say cold, stand-offish North American. Unless one or both are culturally aware, unpleasant feelings will likely arise about the other person. If this happens to take place within the context of an interview, it does not bode well for the outcome. It must be noted that this is an example only. Within Latin America, there are variations in the details of Proxemics, just as there are proxemic variations within most societies. Again, establish behavioral norms.

Cultural Time

Time is another aspect of silent language. For the American business executive in an Arab country, frustration about time can be particularly annoying. Five minutes in American time is about fifteen minutes in Arab time. To an American executive, a fifteen minute wait in an outer office requires an apology. To an Arab, the equivalent cultural time would be forty-five minutes. The American feels that the Arab is rude indeed for being so late. The Arab feels right on time or even a bit early for the appointment and perceives the American as pushy and uptight.
The two simply operate on different value systems of expectation regarding time. Awareness and understanding of different silent language systems is clearly important for understanding in the interview process.

Words

Words may have meanings other than the formal, generally recognized ones. Alternative meanings of common words are usually understood by members of a culture. Such silent language can, however, be quite confusing to members of other cultures. The phrase, “see you later” caused many problems for foreign students. In many cultures, customs of hospitality dictate that “see you later” means, literally that the person expects to see you later. Foreign students reported feelings of frustration when expecting to see a new friend stop by their apartment and the person never comes. In Thailand the greeting, “how are you?” is understood as a genuine interest in one’s welfare and requires polite reciprocal discussion in detail of one’s current condition. When in an interview situation use common understandable language. Slang words or phases may be misconstrued and your rationalization not understood.

Silence

Silence is also a form of nonverbal communication. Its use is situational dependent, and there is much variation in its use within a culture.

When interviewing we know that if used at the appropriate time, silence can yield a great deal of information from the interviewee.

Material Culture

Artifacts and features are also a part of silent language communication.

Members of a particular culture share an understanding of the symbolic meaning of their material culture, and someone from another culture does not. Artifacts such as clothing, jewelry, home furnishings, and make of vehicle can silently communicate about issues such as socioeconomic status, ethnic group membership, and job status. This information is invaluable when it comes to rationalizations and assumptive questions.

Summary

The nonverbal symbolic communication systems of silent language are important aspects of culture – kinesics, proxemics, time, words, silence, and artifacts are examples of cultural behaviors that we gain through enculturation and rarely think about, though they are powerful agents of communication. A lack of awareness of differences in silent language can lead to embarrassment and misunderstanding that can significantly undermine cross-cultural communication and your interview.