

Original Paper

A Comparative Study of Body Language Between Chinese and Western Cultures

Linyuan Qiu¹

¹ Hainan Vocational University of Science and Technology, Hainan, China

Received: January 22, 2026

Accepted: March 25, 2026

Online Published: April 16, 2026

doi:10.22158/eltls.v8n2p201

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/eltls.v8n2p201>

Abstract

The rapid development of globalization has led to the interweaving of people of different cultural backgrounds, which has not happened before. Body language is an important form of non-verbal communication, which plays an important role in the process of information sharing and emotional expression. Compared with language, body language can convey some information that can not be expressed by language through touch, eye contact, posture, facial expression and other ways, and there is no intention. However, due to the differences in cultural background, the same gesture or facial expression may have different meanings in different cultures, which is the root cause of misunderstanding and even conflict in cross-cultural communication. This paper focuses on the typical body language of the East and the West, systematically reviews the differences and similarities between the two, and puts forward reasonable suggestions for college students to use body language in cross-cultural communication, including improving their overall communication ability, mastering non-verbal skills, and enhancing their cultural awareness. In this way, this paper enriches the literature on cross-cultural communication, and also promotes theoretical research, and can provide reference for the communication between the East and the West.

Keywords

body language, cross-cultural communication, Chinese culture, Western culture, cultural differences, non-verbal communication

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

In the context of globalization, cross-cultural communication has become increasingly frequent, and non-verbal language is no longer a supplement to verbal language. Body language is a non-verbal language, which can play an irreplaceable role in conveying information and expressing emotions.

Compared with verbal language, body language is more unconscious, including gestures, eye contact, touch and so on, which can convey more information than verbal language. In the process of cross-cultural communication, if people can not feel the differences between different cultures, they will lead to misunderstanding and even conflict. For example, in the eyes of Westerners, eye contact is a sign of sincerity, but in the eyes of Chinese people, it is not appropriate to look directly at the eyes of the elderly, which is regarded as disrespect. In the process of cultural communication between the East and the West, college students have participated in many international exchanges and cross-cultural activities, and the two sides have reached a consensus on the need to systematically analyze the differences between the two languages, which can help avoid cultural misunderstanding and improve the efficiency of cross-cultural communication.

In this study, a series of research results have been achieved in the fields of body language and intercultural communication, and the research results of predecessors have been updated. At present, most scholars only analyze body language from a single cultural perspective, and there is a lack of systematic comparison between Chinese and Western body language. In this study, the differences between the body language of the two cultures are analyzed from many aspects, and the reasons for the differences are analyzed, which can provide reference for the follow-up research.

This paper also guides college students to carry out intercultural communication practice, because college students have strong thinking ability and actively participate in intercultural activities, but they have not been fully aware of the importance of body language, which has led to misunderstanding in the process of international exchanges. In this study, the differences between Chinese and Western body language are analyzed, and the correct usage skills are mastered to guide college students to avoid communication barriers, so as to improve their intercultural communication ability and lay the foundation for their learning and work.

1.3 Research Questions

According to the above analysis, this paper focuses on the following three problems:

What are the differences between the body language of the two cultures? In this study, we will analyze the body language used by the two cultures in daily communication, focusing on posture, gesture, expression and physical contact, and analyze the differences between the two cultures.

Secondly, what are the reasons for the above differences? This paper analyzes the differences of body language from many aspects, including historical culture, etiquette culture, values and so on.

Third, how to use body language correctly in cross-cultural communication to avoid misunderstanding? In this study, the differences between the two cultures are analyzed, and reasonable suggestions are put forward to help college students use body language correctly in cross-cultural communication.

1.4 Research Methods

In order to improve the rigor of the research and enhance its scientificity, this paper chooses three research methods:

First, analyze the literature. Through the collection and sorting of books, papers and other literature, we

can grasp the current research status and theoretical basis of body language and cross-cultural communication, and prepare for the subsequent research.

Second, the comparative analysis method. When using this method, we should compare the same or similar body language in Chinese and Western cultures, analyze the differences between the two in terms of expression and connotation, and summarize the differences of body language between the two cultures.

Third, case study method. In the process of cross-cultural communication, if there are misunderstandings caused by body language, we should analyze the reasons for the occurrence of such problems, draw reasonable conclusions, and continuously enhance the persuasiveness of the research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Definition and Classification of Body Language

Body language is also called non-verbal communication, which can be expressed through a variety of ways, using body movements, facial expressions, postures and other ways to convey information. At present, there are many scholars at home and abroad to define body language, and there is no unified conclusion. Birdwhistell (1970) is an American scholar who first put forward the concept of “kinesics”, which is similar to the use of spoken language to convey information, but the difference is that it is a non-verbal way. Birdwhistell pointed out that body language is not arbitrary movement, but a kind of symbolic behavior, which has rich cultural connotations.

In China, many scholars believe that body language is a kind of non-verbal communication, which can convey information and express emotions in a variety of ways, which is an indispensable part of human communication. From the classification point of view, body language can be divided into many types according to different standards, which are generally divided into four categories: posture, gesture, facial expression, physical contact, etc. Gestures refer to the use of hands, arms and other parts to convey information, and facial expressions are expressed through the mouth, eyes, eyebrows and so on. Posture refers to the position of walking, standing and sitting, and physical contact refers to the direct contact between people, including hugging, patting and so on.

2.2 Research on Body Language in Cross-Cultural Communication

In the process of intercultural communication, body language has attracted the attention of scholars from many countries, and the research has a long history. In the 1950s, scholars analyzed the relationship between body language and culture. Hall (1959), the founder of intercultural communication, put forward the “proxemics” theory, pointing out that the distance between people in the process of communication will be inevitably influenced by cultural factors. Different cultures have different norms for communication distance, and the use of body language is related to these norms. Ekman et al. (1969) analyzed the facial expressions of people from different cultural backgrounds and found that although the same basic facial expressions were used, the specific ways of expression and understanding were inevitably related to the cultural background.

In recent years, more and more foreign scholars have paid attention to the role of body language in intercultural communication, and have made efforts to promote its application. Shidujaman et al. (2018) compared the differences in the use of gestures in the process of greeting among people of different cultural backgrounds, and put forward reasonable suggestions for the development of social robots. In China, scholars have only paid attention to body language in the process of intercultural communication since the 1980s. With the continuous deepening of Sino-Western cultural exchanges, more and more scholars have realized the importance of body language, and they are willing to analyze the differences between Chinese and Western body language. Yang Li (2010) compared the differences between the two cultures in the use of gestures, and analyzed the reasons from the cultural level. Li Hong (2015) analyzed the impact of body language differences on Sino-Western communication, and put forward suggestions for improvement.

2.3 Summary of Literature Review

Existing research has already achieved considerable results in the fields of body language and intercultural communication, and these results provide a solid theoretical foundation for this study. The theoretical system of foreign research is relatively mature, and in-depth exploration has been conducted on specific types of body language. However, most studies still focus on comparisons within Western cultures, and systematic research on the differences in body language between China and the West is not yet comprehensive. In contrast, domestic research, although paying more attention to the comparison of body language between China and the West, mostly remains at the descriptive level of surface differences, and the exploration of deep cultural roots is still insufficient.

In response to the research gaps mentioned above, this study will focus on body language commonly shared in Chinese and Western cultures, systematically compare the differences between the two, deeply explore the cultural causes behind these differences, and, combined with the actual characteristics of university students, propose practical intercultural communication suggestions. Through the above work, this study to a certain extent enriches the research content in the fields of intercultural communication and body language, and also possesses a certain degree of innovation and practical value.

3. The Comparative Analysis of Body Language Between Chinese and Western Cultures

3.1 The Comparison of Common Body Language

3.1.1 Gestures

In life, people will use gestures to communicate with others, but there are obvious differences between the East and the West in this respect. In Western countries, handshakes are a common way of greeting, which can be used in the first meeting or to greet familiar people. When shaking hands, we should be warm and friendly, and the time should not be too long, about two or three seconds. Waving is also a common gesture in life, which can be used to greet others at a distance. In China, handshakes are also a common way to greet others, but the way of handshaking is relatively gentle compared with Western

countries. Bowing is also a common way to greet others in China, which is used to show respect to superiors or elders.

Although the two countries have similarities in the way of greeting, there are also differences in the meaning of some gestures. In the process of calling others, the palm of Westerners is up, the index finger moves back and forth, and the palm of Chinese people is down, and all fingers are used to attract others to themselves. If Westerners use this gesture in China, they will be regarded as calling dogs, which is a very impolite behavior.

“V-sign” is another typical contrast, also known as “scissors hand”. In China, people usually raise the index finger and middle finger outward with the palm outward, which means victory, but in the United Kingdom, especially in Scotland, if the back of the hand is raised in the same way, it is regarded as an insult, which is equivalent to raising the middle finger.

3.1.2 Facial Expressions

Smiling is a common facial expression in people’s daily life, but there are obvious differences in the social functions of Chinese and Western cultures. In Western countries, especially the United States, people smile at strangers, which is a common way to show tolerance and friendliness. In contrast, smiling in Chinese culture is more dependent on the specific context, which can not only show tolerance and kindness, but also achieve social harmony, and can also be used to relieve embarrassment. In the process of education, Chinese parents often smile at their children, not to make fun of them, but to encourage them and help them save face, while Westerners may frown or make negative comments in the same situation. These differences are related to cultural values. Westerners are more willing to express their emotions, while Chinese people are more willing to restrain their emotions for the sake of social stability.

Eye contact is an important way of communication, which is similar to smiling, but its connotation is different in different cultures. In Western countries, if people look at others when they talk to others, they are respected by others. In the process of communication, they often look at others for a long time, and if they do not look at others, they will be regarded as dishonest. In Chinese culture, eye contact is also very important, but the duration is short. Ordinary people should not look at their elders or superiors, because this is a sign of respect. If you stare at someone for a long time, you will be regarded as rude.

3.1.3 Postures

A person’s sitting posture is enough to show his respect for others and his own attitude. There are obvious differences between the East and the West in this respect. In Western countries, people usually adopt a relaxed sitting posture, such as crossing their legs or leaning back, which is a symbol of openness and confidence. Traditional Chinese etiquette requires people to keep their backs straight and their legs together, especially when they meet their elders or leaders. It should be noted that Chinese people often cross their legs in their daily life, but this behavior is not appropriate in the face of elders or leaders, which is a sign of disrespect.

Cross-cultural research has put forward a more reasonable view: Westerners are more open and relaxed in body language, and their gestures are relatively large, while Chinese people are relatively restrained in body language, but they can occupy the table space by spreading papers.

Standing posture is also different between the two cultures. In Western countries, people usually stand with their hands in their pockets or on their sides, which is a sign of ease and confidence. In China, people stand upright, hands in front of the body, not in the pockets, which is a sign of respect, stability and modesty.

Some scholars say that the gait of Westerners is more aggressive and faster, while the gait of Chinese people is gentler and more stable, but this conclusion is not supported by empirical research. What we can see is that Chinese culture requires people to “sit and stand properly”, which is a cultural value of self-discipline and politeness.

3.1.4 Physical Contact

In the process of body language communication, physical contact is an indispensable content. Because of the differences in etiquette and values, there are obvious differences between Chinese and Western cultures. In many Western countries, people have physical contact with each other in daily life, especially in Latin America and Southern Europe, where people often kiss each other and hug each other when they meet their friends and family members. In the United States, hugging is a common way of greeting, but it is not common to kiss each other on the cheek.

In the process of communication, Chinese people do not have frequent physical contact. Generally speaking, only close relatives such as parents and children will hug or kiss each other, and children are relatively young. In the process of greeting others, Chinese people do not have physical contact, and they think that handshakes are the most intimate form of contact. In the process of daily communication, the physical contact between people who do not know each other or are not familiar with each other should not be too much, otherwise it will cause discomfort.

In recent years, this situation has changed. The younger generation in China has gradually changed their views on hugging, especially the people born after 1980 and the people who have lived abroad for many years, who have a strong tolerance for hugging.

3.2 *The Similarities of Body Language Between Chinese and Western Cultures*

Although there are obvious differences between Chinese and Western cultures in body language, there are also many similarities. First, body language can play an important role in expressing emotions. In different cultural backgrounds, people have the same understanding of basic facial expressions, including happiness, anger, sadness and so on. For example, smiling means happiness, frowning means dissatisfaction or worry, and crying means sadness. This conclusion has been supported by a large number of empirical studies. Ekman et al. (1969) pointed out in their cross-cultural research that whether people are literate or not, they can understand the same facial expressions in the same way, including anger, sadness, fear and so on, which is obviously higher than the probability of chance (Ekman et al., 1969). In the study, 97% of American participants could accurately identify happiness,

97% of Brazilian participants could identify it, 87% of Japanese participants could identify it, and 82% of Fore participants could identify it (Ekman et al., 1969). It can be seen that some facial expressions can be recognized in the same way, which is related to the evolution of human beings and the biological foundation.

In addition, body language is an important part of verbal communication, which can make up for the shortcomings of verbal communication and bring more emotional connotations to the other party. For example, when a person is angry, he will not only raise his voice, but also have a frown and clench his fists, which are all non-verbal cues that can help the listener understand the speaker's emotions. Body language can make communication more vivid, and can also enhance the effectiveness of communication. The importance of this role has been recognized by many scholars. Mehrabian (1971) pointed out that the impact of verbal content is only 7%, and the impact of vocal tone is 38%, while body language can reach 55% (Mehrabian, 1971). Chinese scholars also emphasize that body language can play an important role in communication, not only can convey information, but also can interpret the meaning of language, and can also help people interact with each other. These conclusions show that body language can enhance the effectiveness of verbal communication, play a supporting role, and can also cross cultural boundaries.

4. The Cultural Causes of Body Language Differences Between Chinese and Western Cultures

4.1 Differences in Values

Values are the core content of culture, which will have a direct impact on people's communication style and behavior. The most critical difference between the two cultures is that the former is individualism and the latter is collectivism (Hofstede, 1980). Chinese people pursue interpersonal harmony and emphasize the importance of group interests in their cultural construction. In the process of communication, they are modest, respectful and humble, which is also reflected in their body language. For example, they do not make eye contact with elders and superiors, they only shake hands gently, and they sit upright, which is an important manifestation of collectivism.

Western culture is quite different from Chinese culture, emphasizing individualism, which requires people to pursue personal interests, pursue freedom and independence, and pursue personal rights. In the process of communication, Westerners are confident, self-expressive and pursue equality, which is also reflected in their body language, such as maintaining eye contact with others in the process of communication, having a firm handshake, and a relaxed sitting posture, which is enough to reflect the value of individualism. There are obvious differences between the two cultures in values, which are also reflected in body language.

4.2 Differences in Etiquette Cultures

Etiquette culture is an indispensable part of human society, which can guide people's communication and behavior. China has a long history of etiquette culture, which has been deeply rooted in the hearts of the people. Confucianism emphasizes the importance of harmony, respect for the elderly and

modesty, and the Book of Rites records the essence of Confucianism: “The essence of etiquette is to respect others and be modest”. In the process of communication, Chinese people should abide by etiquette, maintain good hierarchical relationship, and their body language should be consistent with the requirements. For example, when you meet your elders, you should bow to them, you should not point at others with your fingers, and you should maintain a good sitting posture, which is the most direct manifestation of traditional etiquette culture.

Compared with China, Western countries have formed a unique etiquette culture, which is based on the concepts of freedom and equality, and emphasizes respect for each other. In the process of communication, Westerners pursue informality, and their body language is more natural and relaxed, such as shaking hands with others as equals, looking at each other directly to show confidence, and sitting with legs crossed, which are all acceptable in Western countries. The differences between the two cultures are the fundamental reason for the differences in body language between Chinese and Westerners.

4.3 Differences in Historical and Cultural Backgrounds

The formation of body language is inevitably related to culture and history. Because there are obvious differences between the East and the West, there are also differences in body language. Chinese culture has a history of more than 5000 years, which has been influenced by many aspects, especially Confucianism, which has achieved a high status in the hearts of the Chinese people. The concepts of benevolence, propriety and filial piety are the core contents of Confucianism, which requires people to be humble and respectful in their daily lives (Chen Rong, 2023). Confucianism requires people to show respect to others and to be humble to themselves, which is reflected in the body language of the Chinese people, and bowing is a typical example.

Western culture originated from ancient Greece and Rome, which is the most fundamental content. This tradition has been in existence for a long time and has been deeply influenced by individualism and rationality. In ancient Greece and Rome, people paid attention to body language and gesture language in public speaking, and Aristotle believed that gestures could be used as a technique to attract the audience’s attention. In the following period of time, Roman scholars analyzed the role of body language in detail, aiming at improving the persuasiveness of communication. In the process of historical development, Westerners have gradually formed a unique body language style, which is more confident and direct. In the process of communication, Westerners are more willing to have physical contact with others, which is related to the openness and inclusiveness of Western culture. Therefore, because of the differences in historical culture, there is a big difference between Chinese and Western body language.

4.4 Differences in Living Habits

Habits are formed under the influence of various factors, including social culture and natural environment, which will have an impact on body language. China has a long history of agricultural development. Some scholars say that the formation of cultural values is related to agricultural

production, including tolerance, stability and introversion, which are fully reflected in body language, and people usually do not have physical contact. China's regions are different, and there are significant differences in the south and north. In the south, where rice planting is common, people are willing to avoid conflict and have a strong sense of dependence. In the north, where wheat planting is common, people are more individualistic and direct in action.

Western countries have a long history of commercialization and industrialization, and their lifestyles are inevitably related to this process. Westerners have the characteristics of confidence, openness and directness in body language, which are related to their cultural values and low-context communication style, and this conclusion has been recognized by many scholars in the study of cross-cultural communication. The differences between the two cultures are reflected in body language, including posture, sitting posture and so on. Some people are confident and some people are relaxed. Some people can have physical contact with others in the process of communication. In addition, the differences between the two cultures are inevitably related to the differences in living environment and daily habits.

5. The Enlightenment of Body Language Differences to Cross-Cultural Communication

5.1 Enhancing Cultural Awareness

In the process of cross-cultural communication, we must have a correct understanding of culture, which can help us avoid misunderstanding. In the process of growth, college students should deeply feel the differences between Chinese and Western body language, respect the differences between the two, and not judge right and wrong in body language. The reason for this difference is that the cultural background is different. Students should abandon ethnocentrism, not use their own cultural standards to measure the body language of other cultures, and respect the communication practices of other countries.

College students should actively understand the cultural background of Western countries, understand the meaning of body language in Western countries, and grasp the differences in the use of body language in different situations. They should inherit and promote excellent traditional Chinese culture, deepen their understanding of Chinese body language, and continuously enhance their cultural awareness, which is an inevitable requirement for cross-cultural communication, which can also avoid cultural misunderstandings.

5.2 Mastering Correct Body Language Skills

College students need to master the skills of body language, and to choose the appropriate skills according to the cultural background of the other party. In the process of cross-cultural communication, college students should adjust their body language according to the situation, which requires a full understanding of the cultural characteristics of the other party. For example, if you communicate with Westerners, you should maintain eye contact with them, which can be maintained for 60% to 70% of the time, and you should have a firm handshake, which should last for 2-3 seconds. In addition, you can

also maintain a relaxed posture, which is enough to show your honesty and openness to Westerners.

In addition, when communicating with Chinese people, students should respect each other and be modest, avoid direct eye contact and keep a certain distance, especially when communicating with elders or superiors, they should use body language to communicate with others, which is in line with the traditional values of China, emphasizing social harmony and humility.

College students should pay attention to the body language of the other person in the process of communication, and understand the real meaning of the other person through careful observation, and then adjust their own communication style. At the same time, we should avoid some actions, which may be regarded as unreasonable in a specific environment. For example, it is impolite to point at others with your fingers, and it is also impolite to cross your legs in a Chinese formal setting. Physical contact with strangers should not be too much, which will make others uncomfortable. Avoiding these behaviors can avoid unnecessary misunderstandings.

5.3 Improving Cross-Cultural Communication Ability

Cross-cultural communication is a kind of ability, which is relatively comprehensive, including many aspects, such as language proficiency, cultural awareness, communication skills and so on. College students should realize that body language and language are equally important in communication, and the two can be used together to convey emotions and information. In order to make communication more effective, we should use the two methods together. For example, when students agree with others, they can say “good”, and also give others a thumbs up, or nod to others. These small actions can help to convey positive information to others, and non-verbal cues can make the content of verbal expression more reliable.

College students should actively participate in cross-cultural communication activities, such as participating in international exchange activities, communicating with foreign friends through the Internet, and so on. In this way, they can accumulate more experience in cross-cultural communication and seize valuable learning opportunities. In real life, students should analyze real cases, reflect deeply on their own communication experiences, and continuously improve their cross-cultural communication skills. Students should also actively participate in courses related to cross-cultural communication, read more books, and master a wealth of theoretical knowledge. The above methods can help college students lay a solid foundation for cross-cultural communication.

6. Conclusion

In this research, the body language of Chinese and Western cultures is compared and analyzed, and the following conclusions are drawn.

From the perspective of body language, there are obvious differences between the two cultures. Whether it is gesture, facial expression, posture or physical contact, there are obvious differences in form and connotation. For example, Westerners like to shake hands firmly when they meet, and they can maintain eye contact with others for a long time when they talk. However, Chinese people do not

do so. They do not shake hands with others firmly, and they will not look directly at others, especially when they talk with elders, they will not look directly at others.

Secondly, the differences between the two cultures are caused by many factors, including values, etiquette, history, culture, etc., among which the most critical factor is the difference between individualism and collectivism (Hofstede, 1980). The difference between the two has a significant impact on body language.

Thirdly, body language is also an important content in cross-cultural communication. If people can deeply feel the differences between different cultures and master the correct body language, they will not produce cultural misunderstandings and can communicate more smoothly.

6.1 Limitations

Although the above conclusions have been obtained, the research also has obvious shortcomings. Firstly, in terms of scope, the research focuses on the comparison of body language between China and Western countries, but does not involve the body language of other ethnic groups, which weakens the breadth of the conclusions. Secondly, in terms of research methods, the author compares and analyzes the documents, but the number of cases is relatively small, which is not conducive to the persuasiveness of the conclusions. Thirdly, in terms of depth, this study only analyzes the cultural causes of surface differences, but does not analyze other factors, including technology, society and so on. In the next stage of research, we should make up for these shortcomings.

6.2 Future Research Directions

In the follow-up research, we should pay attention to the following aspects. First, we should broaden the research scope, analyze the body language of other ethnic groups, and carry out comparative analysis. Second, we should increase the number of cases, analyze the typical cases in cross-cultural communication, and enhance the persuasiveness of the conclusion. Third, we should deepen the research and focus on the impact of social development and technological progress on body language. We should also analyze how body language changes in cross-cultural communication.

In the next stage of research, we should focus on the role of body language in specific fields, such as education, business and so on, and put forward reasonable communication strategies for cross-cultural communication, so as to provide guidance for real cross-cultural communication.

References

- Birdwhistell, R. L. (1970). *Kinesics and Context: Essays on Body Motion Communication*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Chen, R. (2023). *Chinese politeness: Diachrony, variation, and universals in politeness theory*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ekman, P., & Friesen, W. V. (1969). The repertoire of nonverbal behavior: Categories, origins, usage, and coding. *Semiotica*, 1(1), 49-98.
- Ekman, P., Sorenson, E. R., & Friesen, W. V. (1969). Pan-cultural elements in facial displays of

- emotion. *Science*, 164(3875), 86-88.
- Hall, E. T. (1959). *The Silent Language*. Doubleday.
- Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values*. Sage Publications.
- Li, H. (2015). A study on intercultural body language communication. *Anhui Literature*, (9).
- Mehrabian, A. (1971). *Silent messages*. Wadsworth.
- Shidujaman, M., & Mi, H. (2018). "Which country are you from?" A cross-cultural study on greeting interaction design for social robots. In *Cross-Cultural Design. Methods, Tools, and Users* (LNCS, Vol. 10911, pp. 362-374). Springer.
- Yang, L. (2010). A comparative study of gesture language in nonverbal communication. *Journal of Xianning College*, (11), 224-225.