

***Proxemics: a fundamental dimension in
cross cultural communication***

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Abstract

Proxemics (the use of space) is part of the various components of non-verbal communication and plays an important role in the process of interaction. One's perception and use of space is widely influenced and conditioned by one's culture. One is identified according to one's cultural traits that are reinforced by one's language, traditions, behaviour and non-verbal communication. As there are cultural differences in kinesics (use of gestures), facial expressions, body movements, eye behaviour and so on, there are cultural differences in proxemics. Proxemic behaviour differs from a culture to another. Space is owned and handled according to the culture one has been brought up in. Proxemics, an essential facet of non-verbal communication, also communicates and must answer "cultural rules" or "codes of behaviour".

"Human beings are territorial animals and like to protect and control their space. Have you ever felt angry when you re-entered a meeting and found "your" seat taken by someone else. Have you felt offended when a co-worker or boss entered your office without knocking or when you discovered him pawing through your file cabinet? The territories we stake a claim to at work give us a sense of permanence and control."
(Jill Bremer)

When communicating, one has to bear in mind the proxemic codes so as to avoid the cultural as well as the cross-cultural misunderstandings. Proxemics (the use of space) is part of the various components of non-verbal communication

and plays an important role in the process of interaction. One's perception and use of space is widely influenced and conditioned by one's culture. One is identified according to one's cultural traits that are reinforced by one's language, traditions, behaviour and non-verbal communication.

As it is known universally, language and culture, the twins, are inseparable and indissoluble entities. Generally, in any process of communication three dimensions operate: language, culture and non verbal communication. The latter is said to represent up to 70 per cent of the message conveyed through a communication, while the verbal communication represents 30 per cent.

The present paper aims to report on an important facet of non verbal communication: Proxemics, i.e. the person's perception, use and protection or defense of space. This behaviour, known as proxemic behaviour, is, as one may guess, adopted "unconsciously". It is now established that proxemics, just as kinesics (use of gestures), haptics (touch), posture, body movements, eye behaviour, to cite only these few non verbals cues, conveys meanings and plays a major role in the process of communication. It is worth noting at this point that the proxemic behaviour adopted by people interacting is largely influenced by their cultural heritage.

In some cultures, the proxemic behaviour adopted by people engaged in conversation is one that keeps a small distance, or dimension of space, between the partners. In others, the distance is much closer. In the first case, people belong to low- contact cultures. In the second case, people belong to high-contact cultures. The distance adopted by the

people interacting also communicates and adds up to all verbal and non verbal elements that produce communication and transmit messages. When we communicate with a person our body also communicates through gestures.

“Proxemics” has been widely researched by anthropologists and linguists who are much aware of the necessity to investigate this facet of non verbal communication especially in relation to cross cultural communication. The researcher and anthropologist Edward Hall deeply investigated this area of studies as early as the 1950’s and 1960’s. He has dealt with the study of the individual’s and group’s use of space and has reached the conclusion that: the way we use space is indicative of our feelings, i.e. we can be relaxed, nervous and so on...

Anthropologists generally divide “proxemics” into three dimensions: “Public space”, “Social space”, and “Personal space”. The latter is also termed “Personal territory.” This paper is concerned particularly with “Personal space.”

Personal space is perceived and used differently from a culture to another, and even inside the same culture. Arabs, French, Italians, Latin Americans adopt small distances between them when they communicate. Their culture is classified as a high-contact culture. Conversely, the North Americans, the Germans, the English, the Dutch, keep larger distances between them. Their culture is classified as a low-contact culture.

Given the fact that proxemic behaviour is a cultural dimension, one has to be aware of both the cultural codes of

the society he is immersed in and the cultural codes of other societies. It is true that when engaging in a cross cultural conversation, the communicator instinctively adopts his own proxemic behaviour that might, in some cases, be perceived as an impolite behaviour, or a sign of friendliness, or even as an assault. In this case, when this fundamental (cultural code) is ignored or overlooked, a misunderstanding or a problem can occur. Consequently, the latter, most of the time, limits the interaction, and sometimes even breaks down the process of communication.

It is understandable that misunderstanding can arise from an excessive or wrong use of space on the grounds that the human being has a strong need for personal space that he keeps as his boundaries that help him barricade himself whenever he is threatened by any intrusion. This “territorial instinct” or “personal ownership” of space varies not only from a culture to another, but from a person to another within the same culture.

Let’s take the example of a person who looks for a seat in the in the waiting lounge of an airport. He will first select a place where people are not very close to him. He will then take as much space to display his luggage and keep a comfortable personal zone. He will keep an eye on his luggage to make sure nobody infringes the place he delimited for him and his belongings. Finally, he will look at his luggage when an intruder shows up to make the latter aware of his “personal space”.

This looks like a universal proxemic behaviour, and the reaction widely adopted, in many cultures, concerning this critical incident, is:

1. The passenger will gather his luggage much closer to him.
2. Spread his luggage even more to acquire more space, and, therefore, to get a larger “body boundaries” that are clearly visible to the intruders.
3. The passenger will feel threatened by the invasion, and, unconsciously, adopt eye behaviour to warn the new comers that they are not welcome.
4. The passenger will collect his luggage giving the impression that he is keeping a close eye on his belongings, and, in some cases, he will move to another place to acquire more “personal space” when he feels that latter has been narrowed due to the intruder’s use of space.

In this instance, non verbal defence of “personal space” is not adopted, but an extreme non verbal defence of space may occur (“personal boundaries” may be narrowed or extended because of sudden intrusion).

Personal space is, therefore, a space determined or “owned” by a person to keep as his territory. The distance adopted is more or less important, according to the culture one belongs to, i.e. high-contact culture or low-contact culture. The space is also more or less distant according to individuals and to life circumstances.

The personal behaviour described above is certainly adopted by most cultures of the world. But the reaction relative to space defence may be more or less visible according to the type of culture the person comes from. When personal space is

“invaded” or “violated” (these are the terms used in low-contact culture) or “taken” or “occupied” (these would probably be softer the terms used in high-contact cultures) by new comers, the person will react using his defensive non verbal communication: he will use gestures, facial expressions, and body movements, i.e. he will use his own proxemic behaviour.

In the same line of thought, it has been established that a person’s choice of seat is a proxemic behaviour that communicates his territorial markers. The place we select to sit in a public place can introduce and maintain communication or avoid it. As one may guess, these territorial markers are more or less visible according to cultures. They belong to a cultural code of behaviour and, obviously, determine the amount of communication and contribute to the success of the latter.

To corroborate the issue discussed, it seems noteworthy to give the following critical incident (F. Mouaid, 1992: 37):

An American tourist found among a group of young Moroccans a guide to take him around to the medina in Fez. During the trip, the young Moroccan enthusiastically showed the old monuments to the tourist, patting him on the shoulder to call his attention from time to time, looking at him straight in the eyes during explanations, waking very close to the tourist even in relatively large streets. Much to the surprise of the Moroccan, after only one hour of the sightseeing, the tourist expressed a wish to go back to the hotel.

In the example given above, non verbal communication relative to Maghrebian behaviour in general and Moroccan

behaviour in particular, was used. The latter, which is completely different from the American behaviour had worked as a “culture shock” to the eyes of the tourist who felt that the Moroccan guide was violating his “personal territory” and therefore, had stepped into his privacy.

To conclude, it is worth stating that non- verbal communication (kinesics, haptics, proxemics and so on) is an important component of both cultural and cross cultural communication. As an EFL teacher, I would like to stress the fact there is an urgent need today to include the teaching of the British and American proxemic behaviour to our EFL students who are far from being aware that a wrong cross cultural behaviour can be perceived as an “offending behaviour” by a foreigner. Before closing the issue, I would like to mention that proxemic behaviour is generally wrongly adopted (especially by the younger generation) even in cultural communication.

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