



THE ROLE OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN INTERNATIONAL NEGOTIATIONS

Alias: Medeea POPESCU

ABSTRACT

In the context of globalization and an increased number of cross-border transactions, intercultural awareness and nonverbal communication play an essential role in international negotiations, especially due to the fact that, usually, body language and other nonverbal elements accompany the verbal statements made by negotiation opponents.

The aim of this work is to assess the influence that nonverbal communication may have on the outcome of an international negotiation. In this respect, this study presents the characteristics of verbal and, particularly, nonverbal communication, focusing on the different types and elements of nonverbal communication and the way these might be used during negotiation in order to obtain a successful result. Moreover, emphasis is also placed on the need to respect cultural differences when using nonverbal communication. Therefore, using appropriate body language along with effective negotiation skills and techniques, in addition to verbal communication, should ensure a satisfying outcome and lead to a mutual agreement.

Keywords: nonverbal, communication, negotiations, relationships, international.

Introduction

Nowadays, negotiations play an essential role in organizations, businesses, and governments, mainly as a consequence of global trade and the increasing number of international transactions. Globalization, digitalization, and other movements lead to numerous interactions among countries, among cross-border companies, revealing the need for intercultural awareness, particularly in a negotiation context.

Negotiations imply exceptionally verbal, but also nonverbal communication, being focused on a specific or controversial topic, aiming to reach a mutual agreement. The agreement can only be achieved if all negotiation sides have common and coinciding objectives, interests, and motives, and the intention to resolve the conflicting views by finding a zone of mutual agreement (ZomA) (O'Brien, 2016).

Negotiations occur in diverse settings, from business deals (like purchasing parts or services) and political coalitions to everyday interactions (like bargaining at a market or taking family decisions), involving formal processes (contract negotiations, job interviews) and informal exchanges (asking for a raise or buying sweets). Even critical situations, such as hostage negotiations, illustrate the expansive nature of negotiations.

The word *negotiation* comes from the Latin *neg* (En. no) and *otsia* (En. leisure), referring to businessmen who, such as the Patricians, the elite aristocratic class of Ancient Rome, founders of the Roman Republic, had no leisure time in their daily business life. It shifted to the meaning of *business* (*le négoce* in French) until the 17th Century when it took on the diplomatic connotation as a discussion between two or more people or parties in order to obtain a particular result regarding one or more issues (Helmold et al., 2020; O'Brien, 2016). Negotiations may be described as the bargaining process between two or more people or parties willing to reach an agreement, to decide upon a matter of mutual concern, or solve a conflict (O'Brien, 2016).

Negotiations have characteristics that can be framed as follows: mutual concerns of parties, bargaining process, two or more parties, overlapping motives and interests, willingness to reach an agreement, willingness of conflict resolution, lose or firm business relationship, buying or selling including consultancy, communication between parties, common interest and language, means of interacting in a direct or indirect way, means of finding conclusion, keeping agreements (Helmold et al., 2020).

Though every single person negotiates in a certain context, it is very important to acquire and develop negotiation skills in business negotiations, paying particular attention to cross-cultural communication, which may be quite challenging in some cases (Helmold et. al., 2020).

Essential skills for effective negotiation

According to Helmold et al. (2020), to obtain the desired outcome of a negotiation, effective negotiators must have a combination of the following skills:

HARD SKILLS:

- Planning and preparation: Before a negotiation, thorough preparation is advisable, which involves researching the other party, defining objectives, and formulating a solid strategy. This includes understanding the Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement (BATNA).
- Active listening: Effective listening means genuinely understanding the other party's perspective, needs, and interests, rather than merely waiting to respond to a specific question.
- Strategic communication: implies presenting your position clearly and convincingly, supported by substantial evidence and logical reasoning. It also involves tailoring your communication style to suit the other party.
- Problem-solving and creativity: Identify common ground and develop innovative solutions that address the needs of all parties involved.
- Analytical skills: Sound judgment during the negotiation process requires careful evaluation of information and the identification of risks and opportunities.

SOFT SKILLS:

- Empathy and rapport-building: Understanding and connecting with the other party on an emotional level is important because building a strong bond helps foster trust and collaboration.
- Persuasion and influence: Subtly driving the negotiation towards a desirable conclusion while still respecting the other party's needs.
- Negotiation tactics: Imply using effective negotiation techniques, like anchoring, making concessions, and value creation, in order to achieve your objectives.
- Patience and persistence: Negotiations can be lengthy and challenging; therefore, maintaining patience and perseverance is very important so that a successful conclusion can be reached.

- Conflict resolution: Constructively managing disagreements and resolving conflicts is of utmost importance in negotiations.

The importance of context in communication

Each national culture has its own traditional philosophy and methods for negotiations, which may be unknown or incomprehensible to outsiders (Helmold et al., 2020).

Hall (1976) uses the terms *high-context culture* and *low-context culture* to depict the importance of context in communication. In a low-context culture, the information is clearly stated in the wording of the message; the data is transmitted successfully if the sender's verbal statement is clear enough and the personal relationship between the communication partners is non-substantial (Hall, 1976). Examples of low-context countries are the USA and Europe. On the other hand, in high-context countries, the conveyance of information also implies nonverbal communication methods, including facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, silence, etc. In a negotiation, social norms and the context could represent an element of the message. Emphasis is also placed on interpersonal relationships - if the bond between the negotiation participants is stronger, the efficiency of communication may increase. Japan is considered a high-context country; therefore, it is possible for negotiations to unfold in informal settings. More than that, business partners from these countries would rather solve problems or discuss issues in groups. Consequently, before negotiating with representatives of high-context countries, it is necessary to get informed regarding the social norms of the business partner, a fact which may build a trustful relationship and contribute to reaching a mutual agreement.

The role of nonverbal communication in international negotiations

Negotiations mainly involve verbal communication, where parties exchange information and perspectives through spoken language. Besides verbal communication, specific signals, defined as body language or nonverbal communication, have a significant role in negotiations (Helmold et al., 2020).

Nonverbal communication (from Latin meaning understanding without words) refers to the part of

communication that does not refer to the conventionalized rules of a spoken language, which is expressed according to non-conventionalized rules of a language.

In nonverbal communication, information is exchanged without using written or spoken words. Nonverbal communication implies using visual cues, such as body language or face language (kinesics), eye contact and blink rate (oculesics), paralanguage and voice signals (vocalics), personal appearance, personal space elements or distance (proxemics), touch elements (haptics), time (chronemics) and the physical environment (Helmold et al., 2020).

Body language is any type of nonverbal communication in which comportment and deportment are voluntarily or involuntarily employed to express or transmit information.

According to Helmold et al. (2020), movements of the body, the head, the arms, or the hands are strong indicators in negotiation, due to the fact that these can provide information about positions, feelings, agreements, resistance, or doubts. Facial expressions, including the eyes - coalesces, may include, for example, frowning, blinking, raising eyebrows, or blushing. Body language, which is displayed by human beings, but also by animals, is called kinesics. Besides body and face language, paralanguage, which refers to speaking style, volume, voice quality, pitch, rate, prosodic attributes - intonation, rhythm of speech, stress - is also considered a nonverbal element. The physical layout of a page, handwriting style, or word arrangement are nonverbal elements specific to written texts.

Negotiators often try to avoid displaying emotions in negotiations because they think it is not appropriate to reveal or use feelings or emotions in business contexts. Nevertheless, they reveal feelings unconsciously because these are directly related to behavior and body language. However, dr. Helmold, as a negotiation expert, recommends the opposite – using emotions in a targeted and situational way, e.g., to yield, dodge, or even exert pressure on the opponent (Helmold et al., 2020). Elements of nonverbal communication involve the following:

- hand gestures;
- legs – folded or closed;
- movements – frenzied, hectic;
- touching of body parts such as ears, arms, or nose;
- fixing a tie, a suit or other attire element;
- expressions of the face, including the eyes;
- posture – collapsed, casual or erect;
- smile – spontaneous or not;
- blushing or/and sweating;
- standing – comfortable or uncomfortable;
- drooping corners of the mouth.

Nonverbal communication implies the conscious and unconscious processes of encoding and decoding (Toppr, n.d.). Encoding refers to the process of producing information through various forms such as facial expressions, body movements, gestures, and postures, using signals often assumed to be universally understood. Decoding is interpreting the information conveyed by another person's nonverbal cues. The psychologists and conflict mediators Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen (2015) say that between nonverbal and verbal messages exists a certain interdependence, outlining six steps regarding the way nonverbal communication affects verbal discourse:

■ People can use nonverbal cues to stress the outspoken words, e.g. making changes in vocal volume or speech rate, deliberately making a pause in speech, etc.

■ What people say or think is often reflected by nonverbal behavior, e.g. – when talking, people may shake or nod their head.

■ Nonverbal cues may replace words, e.g. shaking the head to say *no* or nodding to say *yes*.

■ Nonverbal signals are used to regulate speech through the so-called *turn talking signals* - gestures and vocalizations used to alternate speaking and listening.

■ Nonverbal cues may contradict, sometimes, the verbal messages, e.g. when we ask a child if they like kindergarten and they say yes but their voice lacks emotions and the voice is flat.

■ Nonverbal signals can be used to complete the spoken message, helping to clarify the words used and reveal the true nature of our feelings, e.g. being annoyed could mean we feel upset, bothered, or miffed.

Signals of nonverbal communication are important in negotiations, but also challenging to detect or decode, as mentioned by several authors (O'Brien, 2016). Consequently, dr. Helmold et al. (2020) recommend concentrating on the most visible signals in terms of face, body, and eye signals, which experienced negotiators can more easily decode than others. Though the most suitable for consideration and decoding are body, face, and eye characteristics, experienced negotiators will undoubtedly focus on all signals, categories, and elements of nonverbal communication.

In order to understand repeated signals of nonverbal communication, the three-step approach may be considered. The first step refers to repeated signals and patterns of the negotiation opponent; on this baseline, the other negotiator may start testing cues and behavioral actions of the opponent. The second step encompasses the clustering of persistent behavior and patterns. The third step refers to watching out for changes in the behavior and

using the knowledge acquired this way to fulfill the aim of one's own negotiation. Experts have identified several types of nonverbal communication signals, though some are so subtle that not all people are aware of them:

■ Body language and face language (kinesics) involve body signals, gestures, facial expressions, eye movement, touch, and space use; human body language is defined as kinesics (Helmold et al., 2020).

■ Body postures often reflect a person's emotions, e.g. if a person feels anger, they would exert pressure or dominance on the negotiation opponent, and the body language would show tendencies of approaching or even attacking them. If we compare a person feeling anger to a fearful one, the latter will feel submissive and weak, and their body language would show avoidance tendencies (Ekman & Friesen, 2015). A person's emotions may be reflected by their sitting or standing posture. Someone sitting comfortably on a chair, leaning forward and nodding with their head along with the dialogue, suggests a relaxed attitude and willingness to pay attention and listen. On the other hand, crossed arms and legs and slightly kicking the floor with a foot suggest anxiety and emotional detachment from the subject of the dialogue (Pease & Pease, 2006).

■ Gestures – imply moving voluntarily or involuntarily one's legs, head, fingers, arms, hands, or even other body parts. There are several ways to interpret arm gestures: in a dialogue, standing, sitting or walking with folded arms is usually not a come-at-table gesture, because it could imply that the negotiation opponent is inflexible and probably reluctant to listen and accept the other person's standpoint on negotiation aims and proposals (O'Brien, 2016). Indicating using the finger in question (i.e., the index finger) is acceptable in some cultures, but not in Western ones, because this gesture may be considered hostile. Hindu people believe finger pointing is insulting, using their thumbs in order to point. The thumbs-up gesture is used to show “OK” or “good” in the USA, Germany, and France, but the same gesture is offensive in countries like Bangladesh, Iran, and Thailand, because it is similar to raising the middle finger in the USA. In most cultures, the nodding of the head is used to signify “Yes” and confirmation, being a shorter option than bowing, which is a gesture showing submission. Therefore, the head nod suggests the acceptance of the other person's opinion. Research shows that people born with disabilities such as deafness, mutism, or blindness nod their head to express agreement. Therefore, this might be an instinctive gesture of compliance (Pease & Pease, 2006). In Western cultures like Germany, France, or the USA,

people use handshakes in order to greet; handshakes are usually carried out at the start of a negotiation, but are also done when congratulating, or after the completion of a deal. There are several handshake styles, such as the finger squeeze, the stiff-arm thrust (used to create a distance in order to protect their personal space), the bone crusher (too much strength used in the handshake), and the limp fish (a weak handshake). Nevertheless, in Islamic and Muslim cultures, it is forbidden for men to shake hands or touch women; at the same time, women are not allowed to touch men either. To greet women, men place their hands in a praying posture. Also, the way someone breathes may reflect mood and frame of mind. Therefore, special emphasis is placed on the connection between breathing and body language in negotiations. Abdominal or diaphragmatic breathing, also called deep breathing, is supposed to convey an easygoing and confident impression, while chest or shallow/rapid breathing transmits anxiety, unease, and nervousness (Pease & Pease, 2006).

■ Facial expressions - are an integral part of negotiations when expressing feelings and emotions through the body, as stressed by Pease and Pease (2006). A person may have different moods, which are reflected by movements or a combination of movements of the eyes, eyebrows, lips, nose, and cheek (e.g., happy, sad, depressed, angry).

■ Eye movement (oculesics) - Oculesics involves the study of nonverbal communication related to eyes - eye behavior, eye movement and gaze; it is important to mention that oculesics is culturally dependent – e.g. in traditional Western Europe the avoidance of eye contact is a sign of dishonesty, timidity or even fear, while in South American culture direct, solid or prolonged eye contact suggests either a challenge related to the dialogue partner or a romantic interest in that person; prolonged eye contact may signify, in several Asian cultures, aggression, animosity or fury (Pease & Pease, 2006).

■ Touch (haptics) studies touching and the manner it relates to communication. The most developed sense at birth is touch, a fact which has a huge contribution regarding the way a person views the world. Being the dominant sense at birth, touch reflects our initial views regarding the world. Touching may be used in several ways - to calm, flirt, for enjoyment while playing, to show power, for bonding between people – e.g., the baby–mother bond. Numerous emotions, feelings, and the intensity of these may be revealed by touching. Touch, without using other signals, may reveal fury, anxiety, repulsion, love, appreciation, gratitude, compassion, and attraction, depending on the manner in which touching is

performed. The duration of the touch and the location on the body where the touching occurs are factors that may reveal the meaning of it (Pease & Pease, 2006).

■ Human space (proxemics) - negotiations are also reflected by certain aspects of how close negotiation opponents come to each other. Particularly in international negotiations, it is recommended to understand and apply “rules” related to proxemics. We find from Helmold et al. (2020) that “proxemics is the study of human use of space and the effects of population density on behavior, communication, and social interaction” (p. 169). Also, it contains four territories: public territory, interactional territory, home territory, and body territory. Public territory is a place where one may freely enter, rarely being under the constant control of just one person. Negotiations do not take place very often in public territories, in most cases taking place in venues agreed upon by the negotiators. Interactional territory is the place where negotiators meet up formally, usually the companies or conference centers chosen by the negotiation partners. Home territory is the place where people feel like they have control over their individual territory, normally the home. Some cultures also like to partly involve the home territory, which is often used by Chinese negotiators to influence the other side to make concessions. The body territory is the place and the space that immediately surrounds us; respecting the body territory is important for negotiations (Pease & Pease, 2006).

■ Paralanguage (vocalics) is a component of meta-communication in the voice, prosody (rhythm), pitch (level of voice), volume, or intonation being elements able to modify or convey nuanced meaning, or reveal emotions or feelings (Helmold et al., 2020). Paralanguage may be expressed consciously or unconsciously, and in negotiations with experienced businessmen, paralanguage signals are normally difficult to identify.

■ Time elements (chronemics) refers to the study of the relationship between human rhythm/tempo and human communication. Chronemics implies “the study of both subjective and objective human tempos as they influence and are interdependent with human behavior” (Bruneau apud Helmold et al., 1980, p. 114). Social time, cultural time, psychological time, and biological time represent integrated and interdependent levels of time-experiencing. Helmold et al. (2020) tell us that “chronemics can be defined as the interrelated observations and theories of man's use of time, the way in which one perceives and values time, structures time, and reacts to time frame communication” (p.170). Thus, time perception plays an important role in nonverbal communication, as it involves

interactions, punctuality, and willingness to wait.

■ Physical environment refers to the negotiation's arrangements, surroundings, and venue. Negotiations may unfold in the location chosen, usually by the participants, e.g., in a restaurant, at the airport, in the meeting room of a company, in a hotel, etc. A good choice of the negotiation environment will boost self-determination and uphold quality decision-making, thus leading to a more successful negotiation result (Helmold et al., 2020). A spacious and bright room can increase the comfort level, whereas a small and dark room can lead to a more uncomfortable position (O'Brien, 2016). For example, negotiations in Asian countries, which generally start in the company venue, will be concluded in a friendly atmosphere in a restaurant, often including all participants and stakeholders.

■ Personal appearance is an essential item in negotiations and can be described as the physical characteristics of a negotiator. Personal appearance includes the dress, the hairstyle, clothes, shoes, and other elements, which can be seen by the other negotiating side. Negotiators may rely on appearance attributes to indicate respect for the negotiation situation (Pease & Pease, 2006). How attractive a person is can actually influence a negotiation, too; attractive people are better liked, get better jobs, and have more self-esteem and social power than unattractive people. When people feel very comfortable about their appearance, then they have a nice self-esteem level, thus having an easier time negotiating. Especially when negotiating in an intercultural context, it is of the utmost importance to understand formal and informal practices

in terms of personal appearance. This can include an informal dress code, like in Japan or other Asian countries, or a formal one, like in Arab countries (Helmold et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Nonverbal communication is a vital component of international negotiations that can enhance understanding, convey complex emotional states, and build stronger interpersonal connections. Firstly, to effectively use nonverbal communication in negotiations, it is recommended to establish and maintain eye contact with the other person in order to show interest in what is being said. Facial expressions are also significant, because they can reflect a variety of emotions – e.g., smiling at someone, as long as it is not inappropriate to the situation, may create a friendly atmosphere. Paying attention to personal space is crucial because proximity may be perceived in different ways by people belonging to different cultures; therefore, it is essential to observe and respect the cultural differences in any circumstances. When communicating, attention must be paid also to the posture – it is preferable to stand straight when talking to others; moreover, the one talking must be aware of the tone and sounds made when communicating, because these may reveal their true emotions (which is not always desirable in negotiations). By being mindful of nonverbal cues and cultural differences, negotiators can improve their chances of achieving successful outcomes.

REFERENCES:

- Ekman, P., Friesen, W. (2015). *Unmasking the face. A guide to recognizing emotions from facial expressions* by Paul Ekman. Psychologist Publishing.
- Hall, E. (1959). *The silent language*. Doubleday & Company.
- Hall, E. (1976). *Beyond culture*. Anchor Books-Doubleday.
- Helmold, M., Dathe, T., Hummel, F., Terry, B., Pieper, J. (Eds.) (2020). *Successful International Negotiations-A Practical Guide for Managing Transactions and Deals*. Springer.
- Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture's consequences: International differences in worked-related values*. Sage Publication.
- O'Brien, J. (2016). *Negotiations for procurement professionals*. Second ed. Kogan Page.
- Pease, A., & Pease, B. (2006). *The definitive book of body language: The hidden meaning behind people's gestures and expressions*. Orion Publishing Co.
- Toppr. (n.d.). Nonverbal communication. Retrieved on March 19, 2025, from <https://www.toppr.com/guides/business-communication-and-ethics/intro-to-business-communication/non-verbal-communication/>.

