The Role of Eye Contact in Iranian Nonverbal Communication

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Abstract—There are some similarities in non-verbal behaviors, but abundant cross-cultural differences exist in nonverbal behaviors that in some discourses it can bring intercultural miscommunication. Among them, the study of messages sent by the eyes is an important code of nonverbal communication that has rarely been inquired about. Cross cultural eye contact variation is an important communication topic. In some cultures, eye contact communicates interest and respect, while in other cultures, it may be considered inappropriate and threatening. In this respect, the researchers tried to examine eye contact in Iranian nonverbal communication. In so doing, the researchers constructed a questionnaire based upon the feedback received from interviews with students, field specialists and literature review. The data gathered through the questionnaire was analyzed by using SPSS software. The data reflected that majority of the participants agreed that eye contact provides an opportunity to initiate and regulate communication as well as to convey intimacy, respect, and impose dominance. Although, the neutral responses from the participants reveal avoidance of eye contact in the conversation can be assumed as disrespect.

Key Terms: eye contact, nonverbal communication, intercultural communication

1. Introduction

Generally speaking, communication can be considered as a continuous process of sending and receiving messages that allows people to share knowledge, ideas, thoughts, information, feelings, emotions, and attitudes (Negi, 2009). It can be divided basically into two types: verbal and nonverbal.

Verbal communication (VC) refers to the spoken or written form of communication which humans produce intentionally for obvious purposes (Burgoon, Birk, Pfau, 1990), while on the other hand, nonverbal communication (NVC) deals with sending and receiving wordless messages by means of facial expression, eye contact, gesture, touch, distance and so on (Knapp & Hall, 2002).

Obviously, one of the foremost parts of any communication especially in an intercultural context is the use of nonverbal communication. Nonverbal communication was defined by Gamble
and Gamble (2002) as any communication without using words. There are many non-verbal codes such as touch, distance, eye contact, and so forth which may have different meanings in different cultures. It should be noted that a basic part is eye contact (Anolli & Lambiase, 1990; Argyle, Bond, Henderson, & Iizuka, 1986). According to Richmond and McCroskey(2004) Oculesics, eye contact, can occur during 10-30% of the conversation. Eye contact is used to praise or avoid the presence of others and can display information about attitudes, emotion, dominance and power in social relationships. In this respect, an inquiry into eye contact can reveal how this behavior facilitates effective social interaction.

An old English proverb says, "The eyes are the mirror of the soul". This reveals the fact that in some discourses, eye contact can speak more than words do. Feldman (1959) posit that we are equipped with a powerful tool in eye contact that can be used in positive ways to effectively express friendship, love, honesty, confidence, and intellect; On the other hand, eye contact may negatively show anger, lies, and dominance. According to Exline (1961), eye contact not only improves interaction and negotiation but also conveys our ideas more effectively. Indeed, a face-to-face conversation, along with eye contact, is an effective way to capture the attention of another person, so this behavior can be a fundamental principle for effective communication (Anolli & Lambiase, 1990).

In fact, one of the most important functions of eye contact is providing feedback on the other person’s reactions during conversation, people look at each other while they are listening and speaking. Simmel (1921) proposes that eye contact shows mutual bond and ideal relationship in human beings.
Different kinds of eye contacts are associated with a wide range of human expressions. For example, downward glances can be associated with modesty while, wide eyes with frankness, wonder, or terror (Knapp & Hall, 2002, Poyatos, 2002). However, how to make eye contact depends entirely on the culture of interlocutors as well as social contexts. For instance, there are some facts that in the United States, making eye contact is interpreted as reflecting interest, paying attention, and a sign of self-confidence. Although, refusing to make eye contact may be interpreted as weakness, disinterest, or as being disrespectful. On the contrary in China and Japan, children show respect to elders by avoidance of eye contact. Moreover, employees do not make eye contact with employers that means making eye contact with a superior will be seen as a challenge or as a sign of disrespect. Therefore, avoiding eye contact is usually interpreted as being polite. In many African and Latin American countries, eye contact can be taken as a challenge of authority. It is often considered more polite to have only brief eye contact, especially between people of different social registers like a student and a teacher. While in the Middle East, particularly among Muslims, direct eye contact between male and female is considered not only inappropriate but also threatening and a sign of evil intention.

It is obvious that eye contact increases the quality of negotiated agreement. Patterson (1982) argued that eye contact can have a variety of meanings namely friendship, attraction, hate, and a struggle for dominance in different cultures. It may create intercultural miscommunication, and confusion (Brown, 1991; Ekman, 1972). Therefore, it is vital to know what eye contact communicates before to start an interaction in intercultural contexts. The purpose of this paper is to examine attitude of participants toward the use of eye contact. The study, therefore, seek answer to following research question:

1. What is the role of EC in Iranian nonverbal communication?
2. What is the attitude of Iranians toward the use of eye contact to Express Intimacy, to Regulate Social Skills, to Impose Dominance as well as to avoid EYE Contact in their Talks?

2. Review of Literature

The results of the various eye contact studies can be summarized as follows:

2.3.1. EC as a Sign of Social Skills and Interaction

Cary (1978) and Kendon & Ferber (1973) cited that people use eye contact as a cue for deciding whether to initiate conversations with one another. They observed speakers ended an utterance with a prolonged eye contact to convey that it was the listener’s turn to speak. There is more EC when the subject is listening than when he is speaking (Argyle & Cook, 1976). Evidence in Staneski, & Berger (1975) shows that no eye contact exists when there is tension in relationship. When less personal topics are discussed, and when influent and hesitating expressions are uttered in competing rather than cooperating contexts. Caproni, Levine, O’Neal, McDonald and Garwood (1977) mentioned that eye contact as a sign to increase interpersonal interactions facilitates communication because eye contact can enhance people's comfort during interpersonal interactions. Therefore, people get along better and communicate more effectively when they look at each other.

2.3.2. EC as a Sign of Liking and Attraction

Participants in conversation make more eye contact when expressing strong feelings than when expressing weak feelings (Kimble & Olszewski, 1980; Kimble, Forte & Yoshikawa, 1981). Some
studies have indicated that people use eye contact as a sign of liking and attraction in social interactions. (Lim, 1972; KJeinke, Meeker & La Fong, 1974; Naiman & Breed, 1974; Thayer & Schiff, 1974). Furthermore, several studies found that eye contact enhances attraction and liking in a social interaction. Indeed, interlocutors with eye contact are viewed more attentive in social encounters (KJeinke, Staneski & Pipp, 1975).

2.3.3. EC as a Sign of Dominance

People tend to increase their eye contact when attempting to dominate. Hence, eye contact may be used to signal dominance. Exline (1971) and Ellsworth (1975) argue that high levels of eye contact signal a dominance challenge rather than intimacy and the high-dominant person views high levels of eye contact as a challenge rather than a threat. On the other hand, a low-dominant person interprets it as a threat. In daily conversations, as Exline, Ellyson and Long (1975) put forth; people exert dominance by direct eye contact while speaking. Eye contact while listening appears to serve an information gathering function.

2.3.4. EC among Sex

Some researchers indicate that females generally use more eye contact in social interactions than males (Argyle & Cook, 1976; Duncan & Fiske, 1977; Harper et al., 1978). This fact has been explained in terms of sex role, which influences females to be more attentive and sensitive (Ellsworth & Ludwig, 1972; Frieze & Ramsey, 1976). Another study shows that there is a relationship between distance and EC being different with respect to gender; as for males amount and length of EC will be increased with distance because males tend to use personal space and EC to signal dominance, while females use reciprocal eye contact. Females make EC to signal dominance and also to avoid physical confrontations.
2.3.5. *Avoidance of EC.*

People who tend to avoid eye contact are more shy and socially anxious, more introverted, less relaxed, and less dominant. They also have lower self-esteem (Iizuka, Droney & Brooks, 1992). They also claim culture is a crucial factor and in some part of part Asia, for example, having less eye contact is viewed as being polite and respectful.

Studies of police officers have also documented that they interpret EC avoidance as a cue for deceptiveness (Winkel & Vrij, 1990). It is worth mentioning that prolonged EC can function as a stimulus for avoidance. Ells-worth et al., (1972) and Greenbaum and Rosenfeld (1978) had experimenters stand on street corners and made direct EC to pedestrians and motorists who were waiting for a red light. When the light changed to green, they crossed the intersection faster.

Conclusively, it is fruitful to learn more about how people interpret eye contact when they are undergoing various kinds of experiences or emotions in different cultures. In this respect, doing cross culture research in EC can improve human relationship.