

An illustration may help us grasp the importance of the non-verbal aspect. The following exchange takes place in a conference room in a Middle Eastern city during the weekly meeting of the unit heads of an American organization.

As the men took their seats around the long table, John Smith, the American supervisor, was already in the room, engaging those present in a premeeting friendly conversation. Almost the entire staff was there. Omar Mohamed who had just arrived sat in an empty chair not too far from the supervisor. John Smith then turned around to Omar Mohamed and asked, "How's the wife, Omar?" Omar flushed, blushed deep red, mumbled some incomprehensible sound, and John Smith, smiling, nodded contentedly. At the time, the staff knew that Omar Mohamed's wife had been hospitalized for the last six weeks. However, to Omar and the Middle Easterners present, the friendliness and concern implied in the remark of the supervisor were offensive and in poor taste (Yousef 1974:384).

Mr. Smith had violated the cultural code. The subject of women and their relation to men involves the Arab's concept of honor. It is a matter for private conversation, and should not be brought up in public in a loud voice in the presence of the other men. To do so makes it impersonal, unimportant and casual. If Mr. Smith had known about and paid attention to the rules governing non-verbal communication--if he had spoken in a low voice, within two feet of the employee, while patting his arm or shoulder and listening intently to his response--his concern and his sincerity would have been unmistakable. This is what is expected of supervisors in the traditional, authoritarian Middle Eastern setting. Unfortunately, the distance between them and the loud voice changed the meaning of his message (Yousef 1974).

Not only does non-verbal behavior comprise a large part of communication, it is also of extreme importance for ensuring that the meaning we intend to communicate is properly understood. Non-verbals convey our emotions, and our perceptions of ourselves and of others. They complement verbal messages, and help them to produce the effect that is desired. They are symbols, and convey specific meaning. Each culture has its own set of non-verbal symbols, which must be learned with their meanings.

Categories of Non-verbal Communication

The purpose of this article is to help missionaries become aware of the non-verbal aspect of communication in Arab society and motivate them to begin learning this silent language which may influence whether the Gospel will receive a hearing. We will focus on non-verbals specific to Arabs, but to make it as practical as possible, we will also look at how they differ from North Americans.

Carley Dodd divides non-verbals into several categories: kinesics (body language), proxemics (spatial language), haptics (touch language), chronemics (use of time), and paralinguistics (how we say things) (Dodd 1982). Body language is what one thinks of first when

speaking of non-verbals. Understanding it is an important first objective in intercultural communication. It is involved in such things as gestures, greetings, eye contact, facial expressions and posture. Proxemics includes everything from how close one stands to another when conversing, to the way we arrange furniture in a room, or rooms in a building. The language of touch is used in greetings, showing affection, conversation, etc. Learning how a culture views time is important for lowering the frustrations of adapting to a new culture. How we say things--loudness, quality, pitch, silences--influences the interaction between persons.

Others divide non-verbals differently or perhaps add categories. The interaction and overlapping can get complicated. However, to ignore the subject may not only hinder cross-cultural communication, but may even involve communicating a message opposite to the one intended!

Although one may find material on non-verbal communication in general, there is a lack of material that is culture-specific. Edward T. Hall is one of the better known contributors on Arab non-verbals. Contributions by Arabs themselves are mostly in the form of articles; Barakat has devoted one to Arab gestures (1973), but almost no research has been done on non-verbals specific to Arab women.

High-Context versus Low-Context Communication

One important aspect of non-verbal communication concerns how information is processed. A high-context culture is one in which much information is taken for granted. A person is expected to know how to proceed; the context gives the cue to the behavior expected. Low-context cultures supply lots of information; procedures are explained in detail and expectations are frequently discussed (Dodd 1982).

High-context cultures reflect patterns and value systems of people intensely involved in each other's lives, while in low-context cultures relationships are usually looser and less binding. High-context cultures are also marked by behavioral patterns of interdependence, while low-context cultures emphasize independence (Yousef 1978: 61).

From this quote one can see why Arab culture is considered to be high-context, and American culture low-context. Let us now look at how these differences affect communication.

A high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite. ... People raised in high-context systems expect more of others than do the participants in low-context systems. When talking about something that they have on their minds, a high-context individual will expect his interlocutor to know what's bothering him, so that he doesn't have to be specific. The result is that he will talk around and around the point, in effect putting all the pieces in place except the crucial one. Placing it properly--this keystone--is

the role of his interlocutor. To do this for him is an insult and a violation of his individuality (Hall 1976: 79, 98).

Non-verbals take on added importance in a high-context situation such as exists in Arab culture. "People from HC cultures expect communicators to understand unarticulated feelings, subtle gestures, and environmental clues that people from LC cultures simply do not process" (Anderson 1988:279). Relationships and reciprocity are valued highly. Getting to the point of a conversation or transacting business takes longer; that is "simply because the people have developed a need to know more about you before a relationship can develop" (Friedman 1979: 47).

Proxemics--The Language of Space

To help us understand the differences between Arabs and North Americans, we begin with the idea of personal space which is the most important aspect of proxemics to get a handle on. One writer describes Arab communication as "mutual bathing in the warm moist breath during conversation" (Hall, quoted in Key 1975: 93). Research on Arab and American college students revealed that:

Arabs confronted each other more directly than Americans when conversing, they sat close to each other, they were more likely to touch each other (no Americans ever touched each other), they looked each other more squarely in the eye, and they conversed more loudly than Americans (Watson 1966: 976-977).

Arabs consider it impolite to view the other person peripherally, and rude to stand or sit back. When with friends, one must interact. They consider the American "social-consultative" distance of four to seven feet to be cold and uncaring (Hall 1969).

One reason Arabs stand close while conversing is to be able to watch the other persons' eyes for their response. Psychologist Eckhard Hess has shown that when a person is interested in something his eyes dilate, and when he does not like what is said they tend to contract. One cannot control the reaction of his eyes. For this reason, many Arabs wear dark glasses, even indoors (Friedman 1979:47-48).

As concerns public space, Americans tend to view Middle Eastern culture as pushy and shov. Public space seems compressed, full of people, full of noise--and various smells. This perception derives from how we view relationships and how we experience the body. In the Arab mind, a person does not have a right to a spot just because he occupies it. Hall describes how he discovered this in an incident that occurred in a deserted lobby; an Arab came up to him, close enough to touch because, as it turned out, he wanted to use the same choice spot. In public space, there is no such thing as intrusion; even the body is not inviolate (Hall 1966).

As for private space, by contrast, Arabs like spacious houses if they can afford it. The traditional Arab house, with its large rooms around a central courtyard, was designed as a single protective covering to hold the family together. Partitions are avoided. Arabs

are deeply involved with one another and do not like to be alone. They do not value physical privacy as highly as Americans (Hall 1969). In my experience, in North Africa the entire family often sleeps in one room. In this context, privacy is achieved by not talking. Silence does not mean something is wrong, but rather that one wants to be alone (Hall 1969: 159).

Haptics: The Language of Touch

In North Africa, we found that people do not mind having many people squeezed into a room, or a car. When visiting, I have often had women sit close enough to be physically touching, with a hand laid on my arm. I still remember a home in the country which I must have been the first foreign woman to visit; the ladies and children all crowded around me as we sat on a small carpet trying to communicate.

Men will often touch one another while talking together. The same holds true for women. In our experience, a hand is often laid on the arm or shoulder when a special point is to be made. It is not unusual to see men arm in arm, or even holding hands, while walking and talking together. Greeting one another with a kiss on the cheeks is common, but only between males or between females. In parts of Algeria, the number of kisses increases with the length of time one has not seen each other. In some places, male and female family members may greet one another by kissing on the cheek, but never on the lips. Embracing or kissing the deceased is also commonly practiced as a way of showing emotion (Poyatos 1983:151).

In many places in North Africa, a man and a woman do not walk side by side; the woman must be a step or two behind the man. In general, however, today only middle-aged or older couples adhere to this rule.

Male-female tactility in public, however, is frowned upon. The implications and assumptions are that such behaviors are of a sexual and hence private nature. In the same manner, contexts involving a male and a female alone smack of sexual connotations that could jeopardize a female's reputation and bring shame and disgrace to her, her family, and her clan (Samovar 1976: 234).

Eye Contact

We have seen that Arabs are conscious of the messages eyes can give. Women should not look men in the eye when walking down the street. The eyes should be lowered slightly. Traditionally, men and women on the street give no recognition of knowing one another. In so doing, the man shows his respect for the woman; her reputation could be at risk. This practice may be changing among the younger generation in some countries due to urbanization and Western influences.

However, between men or between women, prolonged eye contact is the norm. When the eye is diverted, it usually focuses on the mouth or another part of the face, and then returns to the eyes. By contrast, Americans only make limited eye contact, focusing mainly on something just to the side or behind the person, and then back to the eyes (Barakat 1973).