

Research on misunderstandings in cross-cultural nonverbal communication between Spanish-speaking countries and China

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Abstract. Nonverbal symbols are pretty much the backbone of how we get information across. As the Belt and Road Initiative keeps deepening cooperation between Latin American countries and China, exchanges between Spanish-speaking countries and China in areas like economy, trade, culture, and education are getting more and more frequent. But here's the thing—cultural differences can easily lead to misunderstandings and conflicts in cross-cultural nonverbal communication. This paper zeroes in on a few Spanish-speaking countries. It starts with a quick look at existing studies comparing cross-cultural nonverbal communication between Chinese and Spanish-speaking cultures, then gathers data from people who've actually interacted with folks from Spanish-speaking countries through questionnaire surveys. By analyzing typical cases, it examines manifestations of nonverbal misunderstandings between China and some Spanish-speaking countries, explores the complexities of regional differences encountered in communication research, and identifies targeted coping strategies. The aim is to provide theoretical and practical references for future cross-cultural communication between China and Spanish-speaking countries.

Keywords: intercultural communication, nonverbal communication, Spanish-speaking countries, misunderstanding, cultural differences

1. Introduction

Nonverbal communication is actually a big part of how we interact—it includes stuff like body language, paralanguage, how we see time, and how we use space. Here's the catch: these things can easily trip people up in cross-cultural communication. Current academic research on cross-cultural nonverbal communication mostly focuses on directions such as China-US and China-UK, with fewer systematic analyses targeting China and Spanish-speaking countries. So, digging into why misunderstandings pop up in nonverbal communication between these two cultures is actually pretty useful—it can go a long way toward making real-life communication run more smoothly. This paper mainly looks at some pretty big differences between China and Spanish-speaking countries—things like how okay people are with same-sex physical contact, the etiquette around eye contact, and how flexible people tend to be with time.

2. Research review

2.1. Nonverbal communication

2.1.1. Research origin

Yun Deng [1] noted that studies on nonverbal communication can be traced back to Darwin's 1872 work *The Expression of the Emotion in Man and Animals*. In this book, Darwin laid out human nonverbal behaviors—things like body language and facial expressions—and how they function in communication, which pretty much established the groundwork for modern nonverbal communication research. Then in 1959, Hall's classic *The Silent Language* zeroed in specifically on nonverbal communication, and that really pushed the field forward in a major way.

2.1.2. Definitions

Scholars have proposed diverse definitions of nonverbal communication. Wenzhong Hu [2] defined it as communication activities conducted without verbal language. Ting-Toomey [3] described nonverbal communication as intentional and unintentional encoding and decoding of information through multiple channels. Samovar [4] emphasized that nonverbal stimuli generated during communication hold significant informational value. Xiaomei Zu [5] broke down nonverbal communication types that are closely tied to intercultural communication into four main categories: body language (covering things like appearance, attire, eye contact, gestures, posture, and physical contact); paralanguage (those non-fixed semantic sounds that tag along with speech—think pitch, speech rate, and turn-taking); time perception (basically how people use informal time); and spatial utilization (distance-related stuff like personal space, physical proximity, seating arrangements, and furniture placement).

2.2. Related research

Yuanxue Jiang [6] looked at how Chinese and Italian folks use gestures differently when they're trying to communicate across cultures. The paper dug into the communication contexts and cultural gaps and found some pretty noticeable differences in how people gesture and what those gestures actually mean. They walked through some real-life case studies showing where things can go sideways, and tossed out a few practical tips like building up your intercultural awareness and doing a bit of homework before you jump into cross-cultural conversations; Ha Kai [7] did a side-by-side comparison of body language and gestures between Chinese and Arabic cultures, tracing where these differences come from—think religious backgrounds and historical contexts. He also shared some teaching ideas that actually land, like ditching the filler to focus on building real-world communication skills; Yang Zhou [8] checked out how body language, gestures, and even the concept of time differ between Chinese and Korean cultures, stressing that you've got to respect these cultural variations if you want to get your point across effectively; Jiaxin Yue [9] took a broader look at nonverbal communication gaps across different cultures and how they play into language interaction. The study broke down Chinese-Western differences into four buckets: body language, object language, paralanguage, and environmental language, arguing that getting a handle on these cultural differences is key to smoother communication; Jieqiong Wu [10] used case studies to unpack cross-cultural nonverbal communication between Chinese and Korean cultures, suggesting strategies like beefing up your theoretical knowledge, steering clear of negative transfer from your own culture, working on empathy, etc.; Yihan Li [11] explored Chinese-Western body language differences from an intercultural angle, comparing things like eye contact, gestures, posture, and physical touch, and made the case that body language really matters; Siyao Cai [12] ran a comparative analysis of Chinese-Western body language differences across four dimensions: facial expressions, gestures, body posture, and eye contact, looking at how body language functions in cross-cultural

communication; Yao Liu [13] takes a look at how things like posture, gestures, and body language shift from culture to culture. She talks about the misunderstandings that can pop up and suggests that building better cultural literacy is effective.

2.3. Related research of nonverbal communication between Spanish-speaking countries and China

Ping Li [14], drawing on his cross-cultural communication experiences with Spaniards, explored the cultural connotations of Spanish manual speech, pointing out that language accounts for a high proportion in interpersonal communication, Spaniards use gestures frequently and with specific meanings, some of which differ from other cultures, and emphasized that understanding manual speech facilitates cross-cultural communication; Yuemiao Zhang [15] compared the differences in spatial distance studies between China and Spain from aspects such as fixed space, semi-fixed space, and informal space, analyzed cultural roots, and proposed cross-cultural communication strategies to provide references for mutual communication; Zhizhi Zhang [16] analyzed cross-cultural communication issues among Chinese and Spanish business interpreters at the levels of linguistic symbols (such as differences in expression habits), paralinguistic symbols (such as loudness), and nonverbal symbols (time perception, spatial perception, etc.), and explored the causes through case studies to enhance their cross-cultural communication and interpreting abilities; Zhizhi Zhang [17] also analyzed the time perception of Spanish enterprises in China. Through semi-open interviews and other methods, the study identified issues focusing on daily work and rest, meetings and business trips, holidays and vacations, further analyzed communication problems caused by these differences, and provided references for cross-cultural corporate communication between China and Spain.

2.4. Related research of other cross-cultural communication between Spanish-speaking countries and China

Le Tang [18] analyzed cross-cultural conflicts in a company's Latin American project, examining Latin American cultural characteristics and discussing manifestations of such conflicts among clients, governments, communities, and employees. The study came up with some practical fixes like strategic planning, training programs, and localization strategies. The evaluation results showed these actually worked pretty well in terms of management, offering some useful takeaways for companies going international. Xiaotong Fu [19] applied Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory to analyze cultural differences between China and Venezuela in power distance and individualism dimensions, exploring the impacts on business negotiations. The research suggested a game plan covering prep work before negotiations, rolling with the punches during the process, and following through after the contract's signed, giving folks some practical pointers for cross-cultural business dealings.

3. Manifestations of nonverbal misunderstandings between China and Spanish-speaking countries

3.1. Body language and culture

3.1.1. *Physical contact*

Physical contact is one of the essential non-verbal means for humans to express emotions and convey information, yet its specific manifestations and connotations vary across cultures. People in different cultures hold distinct perceptions and feelings regarding the acceptance of physical contact, its appropriate contexts,

and its symbolic meanings; the same act of physical contact often carries entirely different implications in different cultural settings. China is a typical "low-contact culture" country, where individuals tend to maintain appropriate social distances in social interactions, and physical contact is primarily limited to close relatives and friends—even handshakes in formal settings are generally light and brief. In contrast, most Spanish-speaking countries belong to "high-contact culture" nations, where physical contact is regarded as an expression of warmth and sincerity. Gestures such as kissing upon meeting, light patting during conversations, or hugs upon farewell are common expressions in daily interactions [5].

Case: Xiaoyue (a pseudonym), a student in International Chinese Education, had been helping Xiaoya (a pseudonym), a female student from a Spanish-speaking country, practice Chinese throughout her studies. After one practice session, as they were saying goodbye, Xiaoya smiled and asked, "Can I give you a hug to say thanks?" This caught Xiaoyue off guard for a second—normally, she'd just smile or wave when parting with friends who aren't super close, and hugging felt a bit awkward to her. But then it clicked: this was just how people in Xiaoya's culture show gratitude, a warm way of saying "I really appreciate this". So Xiaoyue smiled back and said, "Of course". Notably, Xiaoya didn't just go in for a hug right off the bat—she asked first and only went ahead gently after getting the green light. That mutual respect on both sides kept any potential conflict or misunderstanding from cropping up.

Yong Zhu [20] pointed out that two Chinese women walking hand-in-hand, shoulder-to-shoulder, is just something you see all the time among "best friends" in China. But in an American context, people might read that as a sign of a romantic relationship. Kai Zhu [21] ran a questionnaire survey that found something similar in Colombia—two adult women holding hands there tends to be seen as romantic rather than just friendship. So these kinds of cultural differences are definitely worth paying attention to. Kai Zhu [21] noted in her study that numerous cases demonstrate cultural "shock" frequently occurring between China and Spanish-speaking countries due to differences in cultural exposure, with one of the primary triggers being divergent perceptions of gender and physical contact. Specifically, Chinese people exhibit higher acceptance of physical contact between individuals of the same sex: during ordinary gatherings, meals, or walks, they are more accustomed to interacting with people of the same sex, maintaining distances ranging from personal to intimate levels. In contrast, Spanish-speaking countries tend to favor mixed-gender seating arrangements, with social interactions typically maintaining personal or appropriate social distances; physical contact between genders is more common there, while interactions between individuals of the same sex are relatively limited.

3.1.2. Eye contact

Eye contact is another big deal when it comes to nonverbal communication—it's how people express emotions and get their point across. It pretty much reveals what someone's actually thinking inside, but what it means culturally can be totally different depending on where you are. The rules around eye contact and how people read them vary quite a bit across cultures: something that's seen as polite in one place might come off as disrespectful or offensive in another. The heart of this gap really comes down to how different cultures define "eye contact" in the first place. This form of nonverbal communication doesn't just bridge emotional connections; it can also quietly spark cross-cultural misunderstandings [5]. Kai Zhu [21] pointed out in her research that plenty of cases show how eye contact can trip people up across cultures. Spaniards and most Latin Americans tend to lock eyes during conversations as a way to show they're paying attention; however, in China, it isn't really the norm, especially between opposite sexes, where it's often taken as offensive or at least pretty rude. So folks from Spanish-speaking countries often don't get what the big deal is—they see this kind of eye contact as just a natural way of showing you're engaged in the conversation. Spaniards generally think avoiding eye contact while talking is actually impolite.

Case: A Spanish teacher who had just landed in China once shared how puzzled she was: after class, when she'd run into students outside the classroom, they hardly ever said anything first or smiled at her, almost like they hadn't even noticed she was there; during class, they also didn't make much eye contact with her. In Spain, that kind of behavior would be considered pretty rude.

The root of these nonverbal communication mix-ups goes deep into how cultures fundamentally see eye contact differently. The way Chinese people understand eye contact is apart from folks in Spanish-speaking countries—making direct eye contact during interactions doesn't just seem impolite, it also gives off this aggressive, pressuring vibe, especially in hierarchical situations like subordinates talking to bosses, younger people addressing elders, or students facing teachers, where that kind of direct stare is particularly out of line. On the flip side, slightly looking away is actually a polite move that quietly shows respect for the other person's status and authority.

3.2. Paralanguage

Nonverbal vocal (covering stuff like pronunciation, intonation, and dialects): People actually pick up a ton of information from paralanguage when they're talking. This piece of the linguistic puzzle gets messages across through vocal characteristics and body language, or just adds extra layers to what someone's saying. That phrase "how a person speaks in terms of tone", that's exactly what the present study is aimed at—the word "tone" itself is basically paralanguage in action. Latin Americans speaking Spanish have pretty distinct vocal traits: the tone of Spaniards tends to be more laid-back and moderate, while Spanish speakers from the Americas often go for highly modulated intonation, which gives their speaking this almost "singing-like" vibe. Every Latin American country and its various regions have their own local accents, kind of like how different parts of China have their own dialects. Right now, Spanish programs at Chinese universities are mostly taught by instructors from Spain; even when some schools have Latin American teachers, it's still tough to shift students' overall vocal habits. Latin Americans can communicate just fine with those who speak Spanish in the Spanish style, but honestly, they'd rather chat with someone who uses their flavor of Spanish. Some locals might straight up tell you, "Your Spanish sounds like Spanish-style Spanish", when they catch the difference; on the flip side, they get pretty excited when speakers try to copy their local intonation or vocabulary [21].

Case: A student who had been learning Spanish in China chatted for the first time with a friend from a Latin American country. The native speaker gave her props for speaking Spanish well, but felt the Spanish was too "official" and the vocabulary too by-the-book.

3.3. Time concept and culture

Single-Time Culture and Multi-Time Culture: Hall categorized global cultures into single-time and multi-time cultures based on how people use informal time [22]. Each culture has its own distinct features: single-time cultures stress getting things done on time, while multi-time cultures put more weight on interpersonal relationships [5]. Spanish-speaking countries are largely shaped by multi-time cultures. In many Latin American nations, feeling at ease in social settings and keeping relationships harmonious matter most—showing up a few minutes late is perfectly fine, and being late for appointments is pretty common, often chalked up to things like bad weather, a sudden mood shift, or the car breaking down. Take Mexican negotiators, for example—they usually start with some casual chitchat before getting down to business, just to keep things relaxed. As a result, this usual "warm-up" often runs over the scheduled time, leaving eager foreign clients feeling like their time's been frittered away [21].

Case: A teacher who used to live in Spain once told this: If you walk into a bank or somewhere to get things done, you'll often see loads of people waiting in line, while the staff are just standing about chatting

among themselves. In moments like that, whatever you do, don't disturb them—they're actually working on their relationships. If you just wait quietly, they might actually feel a bit awkward and come over to help you out pretty quickly. This is a far cry from what we're used to in China, where staff often have to juggle several customers at once since questions tend to pop up out of nowhere. In reality, the Chinese concept of time combines both the single-time system and the multiple-time system characteristics.

4. Current issues in relevant research

4.1. Not systematic or targeted enough

Most academic work on cross-cultural non-verbal communication zeroes in on comparisons between mainstream cultures like Chinese and American, or Chinese and British. There's not much systematic analysis of China and Spanish-speaking countries, and in particular, a real shortage of in-depth looks at how non-verbal misunderstandings actually happen between them.

4.2. Regional differences are pretty complex

Spanish-speaking countries cover Spain, a whole bunch of Latin American nations, and one African country—Equatorial Guinea—and the cultural diversity within them is pretty striking. A lot of existing research tends to gloss over these regional traits, which can easily lead to overly broad conclusions.

4.3. Not enough empirical research or case studies

Most studies in this area lean heavily on literature reviews and case analyses. While some mention cases of misunderstandings around physical contact and eye contact, they don't really dig into the cultural logic behind them, and they don't systematically sort out and examine how non-verbal behaviors vary across different situations.

4.4. Bidirectional research is missing

Current studies mostly look at how non-verbal behaviors in Spanish-speaking countries get misread from a Chinese perspective, while paying little attention to how these countries themselves might misinterpret China's non-verbal norms. That gap makes it tough to come up with communication strategies that actually work both ways.

5. Solutions to the above issues

5.1. Deepen cultural awareness and break stereotypes

Systematically study the non-verbal communication norms in Spanish-speaking countries and get a real feel for core cultural differences like "high contact", "low contact", "single-time systems", and "multi-time systems". That way, you won't end up judging others by your own cultural yardstick. For example, realize that physical contact in Spanish-speaking cultures is about warmth, not crossing a line; and that Mexican pre-meeting small talk is relationship-building, not "wasting time".

5.2. Watch out for regional diversity

Keep in mind that Spain isn't the same as the rest, and don't treat everyone from Spanish-speaking countries as if they're cut from the same cloth.

5.3. Beef up cross-cultural practice training to get more adaptable

Sharpen your skills through case simulations and real-world experience. When it comes to physical interactions, do your homework on what's culturally acceptable—like going for a handshake when you first meet instead of dodging it; during conversations, keep eye contact natural without deliberately looking away; and with scheduling, give people from Spanish-speaking countries some breathing room and be okay with reasonable delays.

5.4. Set up a two-way communication mechanism to close the information gap

Companies and schools can put together cross-cultural non-verbal communication guidelines that compile typical non-verbal behaviors and their cultural meanings from Spanish-speaking countries, then run training sessions with real case studies. Encourage cross-cultural communicators to proactively ask about others' customs—like "Do you mind physical contact?"—and take a more open attitude toward adjusting how they communicate across cultures.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, differences in things like body language, paralanguage, and how people perceive time in cross-cultural non-verbal communication between China and Spanish-speaking countries are pretty likely to cause misunderstandings. Future research needs to further integrate empirical cases to refine studies on cultural differences within Spanish-speaking countries, providing more targeted theoretical and practical support for cross-cultural communication between China and Spanish-speaking countries, and facilitating in-depth cooperation in areas such as economy, trade, and culture under the Belt and Road initiative.

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