

## **A Comparative Study on the Body Language of French and Myanmar People**

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### **Abstract**

The present study is the comparison of the body language used by French and Myanmar people from the semiotic and cultural points of view. Data were collected using descriptive and comparative methods. Qualitative research method was also applied to give the figures of the responses from the participants to evaluate their understanding of the body language in French and Myanmar contexts. The participants were forty final-year students studying French as a foreign language at Mandalay University of Foreign Languages. The study focuses on the fact that differences in culture can bring about the different interpretation and use of body language by French and Myanmar people. From the light of this study it is hoped that the learners of French as a foreign language might become more knowledgeable about the body language of French people in their daily contexts, and this consequently can lead to a successful communication among the participants of the communication as the learners have sound understanding of the body language of the target language community

Key words: gesture, culture, misunderstanding, misinterpretation

### **Introduction**

In non-verbal communication, body language plays a significant role to convey the intended meanings among the participants in a conversation. Body language includes body postures, gestures, facial expressions, etc. Generally people communicate either verbally or non-verbally. In verbal communication, people interact either in spoken or written forms whereas in non-verbal communication, they are likely to send their messages by using gestures, eye contact, and facial expressions. Dr. Albert Mehrabian, an American psychologist who first studied the role of body language in communication developed a communication model that only 7% of what people communicate consists of the literal content of the message and the use of one's voice, such as tone, intonation, and volume, take up 38% and as much as 55% of communication consists of body language. Therefore, those who are teachers and learners of foreign language need to have not only the grammatical competent in the foreign language they teach and study but also the spoken language and the body language commonly used among the speakers of the target language. It is important to recognize that there can be variances in meanings and interpretations of body language used during communication since different countries have different cultural backgrounds. For example, the 'Ok' gesture connotes a positive meaning for American people, but it carries a negative connotation for Brazilians. For the French, the same symbol means nothingness or worthless while it is used as a symbol to talk about money among Japanese people. Another example is that Myanmar people usually point at something using their index finger, and it is thought to be rude in the Western culture where people use their hands to point at something. The present study explores the similarities and differences of the body language used by French and Myanmar people and it is realized that there can be misunderstanding among the participants in the conversation due to the misinterpretation of the body language accompanied during the process of communication if they do not have background knowledge about each other's culture.

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### **Aim**

The study aimed at assisting the learners of French as a foreign language to be able to interpret the body language accompanied during the interactions, to be able to abstain from misunderstanding which can be resulted from the use of body language originating from the cultural differences among the participants, and to be able to establish smooth and successful communication when interacting with the target language community.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the similar and different body language expressions used by French and Myanmar people?
2. Why do Myanmar learners of French as a foreign language often misinterpret the body language of French people?

### **Research Methodology**

The primary data required for the present study were collected from different sources such as books, scholarly articles, internet websites, etc. using descriptive method and comparative method, and qualitative method is used to represent the data of the Myanmar learners of French understanding of the body language of their own people and French people. Forty Myanmar learners who are studying French as a foreign language in their final year at Mandalay University of Foreign Languages participated to respond to a 15-item questionnaire about the body language used by French people. The participants were required to write the meaning of each picture described in the questionnaire. The responses were then categorized into four groups: right, almost right, wrong, and no answer. The similarities and differences between the body language of the people from two different countries – French and Myanmar were explored from cultural and symbolic points of views.

### **Literature Review**

There have been many studies on the importance of body language in communication in the fields of international economics, politics, education and cultures by adapting the linguistic, cultural and semiotic points of view.

Adam Kendon published a book '*On the Origins of Modern Gesture Studies*' in 2004. In his book, he stated that the studies on the body language in Western cultures have gained more interests by scholars after the late Roman Empire and the works of philosophers and anthropologists of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries have become influential in the study of body language in the Western societies.

Zhi Peng (2004) highlighted that differences in cultures can shape the interpretation of the body language used by people of different origins in his publication '*Body language in Different Cultures*'.

Another study on the importance of body language in communication was done by Tiechuan (2016) in the article 'A Study on Nonverbal Communication in Cross-Culture'. It was asserted that knowing the body language in different cultures and the ability to communicate well in the international and cross-cultural settings are crucial to the success in the negotiation and management processes in international businesses.

The research article 'Nonverbal Communication: A Cultural Guide' by Topan (2011) discussed the importance of nonverbal communication and body language in order to deal with multi-national people across the globe.

With regards to the similar studies on the body language in the foreign language teaching and learning setting, Dr. M. Hismanoglu and S. Hismanoglu (2008) conducted a study

named 'The Use of Body Language in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching'. Their article is the brief description of the history of body language studies, their perceptions about the use of body language, meanings of body language expressions from different cultures.

In a real communication process, there are two types: verbal which is the spoken form of a language system using different linguistic components and nonverbal which is usually done with the use of human behaviours such as gestures, posture, tone of voice, eye contact to project one's feelings and thoughts without the use of any words. This is discussed in details in the article 'A Comparative Study of Native and Non-native Body Language: The Case of American' Kinesics vs. Persian English Speakers' by Sharifabad and Vali (2011).

In his book 'The Inner and Outer Meanings of Facial Expressions', Hager (1983) put forward his belief that the interpretation of the nonverbal behaviours and body language may differ from culture to culture. Therefore, he proposed a semiotic theory that there is necessity to study the cultural background of a particular group of people before interpreting the body language they use when they interact with others. The present study is based on Hager's theory since culture is not possible to be separated from the teaching and study of a foreign language.

### Findings

French people use different body language expressions for greetings, for indicating something good or something bad, and for neutral purposes. In contrary to this culture is Myanmar culture in which people are less likely to use body language to the ease of their communication. When the use of body language in two different cultures are studied side by side, it can be inferred that there are nonverbal expressions which have similar or different meaning in both cultures, and those having similar meaning yet with different body expressions. There are also some nonverbal behaviors which are not found in Myanmar, but used among French people. The following descriptions are provided to answer the first research question of this research.

#### 1 Body language of similar expressions and same meaning in French and Myanmar

A thumb-up sign (figure 1) is accepted as a good body language expression while a thumb-down (figure 2) denotes negative meaning in both French and Myanmar cultures.



Figure 1



Figure 2

When French and Myanmar people want to deny something, they shake their head from side to side and wave their hand or flash their palm at someone. (figure 3)



Figure 3

There are some other gestures which are common in both French and Myanmar cultures such as putting one's index figure on the lips to mean 'silent' (figure 4); a hand with thumb and little figure extended (often known as Call Me Hand) to tell someone to make a phone call (figure 5); and putting palms facing together near one's ear to mean going to sleep (figure 6).



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

French people often hold their mouth with their thumb and index finger or zip their mouth with their thumb and index finger together to promise that they won't recount something secretive or confidential. Such hand gestures are also used by Myanmar people in the same situation (figure 7).



Figure 7

When counting numbers, both French and Myanmar people start with the thumb for number 1 (figure 8). To say that someone is crazy or mentally unwell, people in France and Myanmar roll their index finger near the side of the head (figure 9). They tap the side of their head with the tip of their index finger to indicate that someone is a nerd or to say 'Be sensible' (figure 10).



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

## 2. Body language of similar expressions with different meanings in French and Myanmar

The 'OK' sign has the meaning of zero in French while Myanmar think of that sign as something good or money (figure 11). French people extend their index finger, palm up, and fold it inward to mean 'Come here' whereas Myanmar people use such hand gesture to challenge somebody for fun (figure 12).



Figure 11



Figure 12

In Myanmar culture, people fold their arms in front of the body when talking to their elders, parents and teachers for showing respect. But in France, such body language is interpreted as rude.

### 3. Body language having similar meaning yet with different gestures

When greeting someone, French people usually give a hand-shake or a kiss on the cheeks (figure 13) (but with different times according to the regions) to show their close friendship. In Myanmar, people greet each other with their palms pressing together in the prayer shape in front of their body (figure 14). As Myanmar people are too timid, they would be uncomfortable to interact with the other people closely and give a hug or a kiss in public. They might think it is rude and disrespectful to use the body language used in French and this can lead to misunderstandings among the participants of a conversation.



Figure 13



Figure 14

To wish someone 'Good luck' in French, people use either one hand or both hands to cross their middle finger and index finger together (figure 15). However, in Myanmar there is no similar gesture and Myanmar people just say 'Good luck' verbally or give a thumb-up.



Figure 15

In sports competitions and entertainment shows, the spectators and audience in Myanmar cheer up the players and the performers by clapping and producing a whistling sound with their thumb and index fingers in mouth (figure 16, figure 17). But in French culture, the latter body language sounds rude. French people just give a big round of applause to show their support.



Figure 16



Figure 17

French people use their index finger to pull down the bottom lid of one eye or fill their mouth with air and press the mouth with their index finger to say 'I don't believe you' or 'I highly doubt that' (figure 18). Myanmar people raise their eyebrows with their wide eyes to express their disbelief in such a situation (figure 19).



Figure 18



Figure 19

To say that something is boring or uninteresting, French people rub their cheek with the back of their palm (figure 20). In Myanmar, they rest their chin on their palm or pretend to be sleepy or yawn to prompt their feelings playfully (figure 21).



Figure 20



Figure 21

French people are seen placing a loose fist around the tip of their nose and rotate it as if trying to unscrew it when they want to talk about a drunkard (figure 22). Myanmar people indicate the similar situation by tipping their thumb sticking up in their mouth in drinking position.



Figure 22

To indicate it is time for going back home, French people pat their left wrist with their right hand (figure 23) while Myanmar people give a glance to their watch or tap their watch (figure 24).



Figure 23



Figure 24

In French society, when people get angry they bend their fingers and put their hands near their neck (figure 25). In Myanmar society, on the other hand, people express their irritations with different body language such as a click in their tongue, a tight fist or fists and a palm hit on the table.



Figure 25

The other different body language expression to say someone is a chatter-box in both French and Myanmar societies is playing a flute gesture in the former setting (figure 26) and a hand in an ear in the latter (figure 27).



Figure 26



Figure 27

#### 4. French Gestures that Myanmar people lack

While someone's ability to communicate well depends not only on the linguistic forms they use verbally but also on the nonverbal cues or 'body language', the latter is assumed to speak the loudest in the real communication. In the observation of body language use in two countries under study for this research purpose, there are some gestures which are used only in France but not in Myanmar. The following describe the gestures and when they are used.

- In France, to say ‘I promise’ or ‘I swear’, people usually put one hand on their head (figure 28).
- When a person wants to say that he knows about something very well, he ticks the side of his nose with his index finger (figure 29).
- People kiss the joined tips of their fingers and joyfully spread them outward, which is sometimes referred to as ‘The Italian Chef Kiss’ (figure 30), when they want to say that a meal is delicious.
- When something they talk about is ‘out of question’ or ‘needless to answer’, people fill their mouth with air, blow it out and pretend to throw something over their shoulder (figure 31).
- To say that a great chance has been missed, French people use the gesture of their index finger going from left to right under their nose (figure 32).
- To say that someone is a lazy bone, they interlock their fingers, their thumbs going inward and outward at intervals (figure 33) or they use a gesture of finding something small on their palms (figure 34).
- To mean ‘I don’t care’; ‘I don’t know’; or ‘I’m not sure.’, French people generally spread their arms open with palms up, and raise and lower their shoulders at the same time (figure 35). However, since the same gesture can have different meanings, the context is necessary to be able to interpret the actual intended meaning.
- To tell someone that ‘I’m fed up’ or ‘I’ve had enough’, they are likely to swipe one hand up horizontally over their head (figure 36).
- To act like mocking someone, people hold their index and middle fingers of both hands up together, then bend them up and down two times (figure 37). This gesture is also used by other westerners.
- The last commonly used body language expression in France to say that something is expensive is rubbing one’s thumb against the tips of one’s index and middle fingers (figure 38).



Figure 28



Figure 29



Figure 30



Figure 31



Figure 32



Figure 33



Figure 34



Figure 35



Figure 36



Figure 37



Figure 38

In order to find out the answer for the second research question about the cultural knowledge of Myanmar Learners of French as a foreign language concerning common French body language expressions, forty students studying at their final year of B.A (French) were asked to respond to the 15-item questionnaire (table 1). The participants were required to write down the meaning of the given pictures describing the body language used by French people. Their responses were later analyzed and categorized into four groups: correct, almost correct, and wrong and no answer. Table (2) illustrates the data analyzed.

**Table 1 (The 15-item questionnaire of French Body Gestures)**

Les gestes françaises	
 figure 1 : -----	 figure 2 : -----
 figure 3 : -----	 figure 4 : -----

 figure 5 : -----	 figure 6 : -----
 figure 7 : -----	 figure 8 : -----
 figure 9: -----	 figure 10 : -----
 figure 11 :-----	 figure 12 : -----
 figure13 : -----	 figure 14 : -----
 figure 15 :-----	

Table (2) Participants' answers to the pictures

Picture Number	Answers				Total
	Correct	Almost correct	Wrong	No answer	
1	38	-	-	2	40
2	40	-	-	-	40
3	29	-	11	-	40
4	33	1	6	-	40
5	16	-	20	4	40
6	-	-	40		40
7	1	2	36	1	40

Picture Number	Answers				Total
	Correct	Almost correct	Wrong	No answer	
8	-	-	31	9	40
9	16	16	8	-	40
10	-	-	35	5	40
11	16	-	21	3	40
12	-	-	37	3	40
13	11	-	28	1	40
14	-	-	35	5	40
15	9	24	6	1	40

For pictures 1-4, as the body language use in both countries is similar, almost all the participants could give the correct meanings of the pictures. For pictures 5-15, most students failed to define the correct meanings of the pictures. This might be because the body language expressions in these pictures are different in the two countries, while some expressions are absent in Myanmar but present in France. Another reason might be that the participants have very limited knowledge about some body language use by French. Only few participants who have seen or read about the body language commonly used in France either on social media or in the books were able to write the correct definitions of the pictures in the survey questionnaire.

### Discussion

From the comparative study of the body language use in France and Myanmar, it is found out that the communication among French people more often involves the use of body language compared with that among Myanmar people. Both French and Myanmar people make use of facial expressions, and gestures. In Myanmar society, it is found out that some body language expressions which are commonly used by other cultural communities have been increasingly used in everyday conversations among younger people. As French and Myanmar people come from different cultural backgrounds, some body language expressions mean the same in the context of the two countries while some expressions have different meanings. Sometimes one country lacks some body language expressions, for example Myanmar in this case. Due to the limited knowledge of the target language community cultures, there can sometimes be misinterpretations and misunderstandings of the messages conveyed. Therefore, it is recommended that foreign language learners should know about the culture of the target language and the target language community so as to maintain a good relationship with the native language speakers when they happen to communicate outside their classrooms.

### Conclusion

From the light of this study, the data analysis showed that both French and Myanmar people often use facial expressions and gestures when expressing their feelings during the interactions. Another finding of the study is that culture constitutes as a dispensable aspect of a language study since cultural differences can bring about misunderstandings among the participants of a conversation. Therefore, it is obvious that body language plays an important role in foreign language studies, and knowing the proper body language system of the target language the study can help the foreign languages learners to avoid misinterpretation and misunderstandings among the interlocutors. As the present study put an emphasis only on the two features of the

body language: facial expressions and gestures in the success of communication, further studies can be done on the aspects of eye contact, tone of voice, and physical distance between and among the interlocutors.

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