

**WESTERN AND ISLAMIC CULTURES ON THE USE OF  
NON-VERBAL POLITE EXPRESSIONS  
(A Cross-Cultural Understanding)**

Hj. Muzdalifah Sahib

English Department

Dakwah Faculty of the Alauddin State Institute of Islamic Studies.

Alamat; Jl Palantikang Gowa

**Abstrak**

*Tulisan ini membahas tentang penggunaan bahasa non verbal dalam ekspresi bahasa dan budaya, khususnya budaya Barat dalam hal ini budaya Inggris dan Islam yang bertujuan agar dapat mengetahui perbedaan yang terjadi di antara penutur atau pelaku bahasa. Tulisan ini menyimpulkan adanya kesamaan antara keduanya, minimal budaya Islam dapat menerima beberapa budaya luar sebagai sebuah ungkapan sopan seperti salam, kontak pandang selama bicara, memberikan perhatian terhadap apa yang disampaikan lawan bicara. Namun di sisi lain, perbedaan juga tidak dapat dihindari, ketika terjadi interaksi sosial antara pemberi dan penerima, di mana dalam Islam baik pemberi dan penerima sebaiknya menggunakan tangan kanan bukan tangan kiri, sementara budaya Barat keduanya sama saja. Demikian pula terjadinya komunikasi, terutama persoalan jarak antara kedua pasang manusia yang sedang bercinta, bersentuhan dan segala sesuatu yang menjurus kepada sensitifitas seksual. Dalam kaitan ini, Islam memiliki aturan yang ketat menjaga manusia agar terhindar dari pola komunikasi yang tidak diijinkan oleh Allah.*

**Keywords:**

*Polite, non-verbal expressions, English and Islamic cultures.*

**Introduction**

**A. Background**

Today we are in the era of informaion (21<sup>st</sup> century). World with six billion people who inhabit the five continents as if a neighbor in a large village (global village). An amendment to the ongoing of human civilization from what is called: globalization. Globalization also emerged as a result of the rapid development of communication technology.

The development of communications technology that enables the transformation of information that can penetrate the conventional boundaries: space and time quantitatively and qualitatively. Are the changes on culture or civilization influencing the human communication? Globally, it could be occurred, but one cannot be snored by human is communication both verbal and non-verbal. Watzlewick and Beavin in Liliweri state that human cannot avoid communication. If you are speaking, that is communication. If you are silent, it is also communication. Furthermore, Schram in the same book state that communication is a very fundamental social process of

society. Communication is a way of connecting people<sup>1</sup>. Silence has the same power as verbal expressions with words. Silence means that you has done non-verbal communication. Sometimes, maybe without sounds, without words or maybe with low or high intonation or by gestures, you are still doing non-verbal communication. Even though you are silent, but your face expression can show an interpersonal communication which gives special message towards other people. Remember that many people said that: Silence is gold. One picture is the same as one thousand (1000) words<sup>2</sup>.

You can also make communication by marks of dresses and by other objects around you. Thus, touching is also a part of non-verbal communication which can be done several times depends on to whom did you touch, in what situation, contexts or cultures, touching is done.

Time, space/distance can express interpersonal nonverbal messages.

Proxemics is a study about distance of speaking which can show how far or intimate between two people in communication.

Non-verbal communication is usually used to express feeling and emotion. Besides, non-verbal communication is usually called as communication without words. Study about non-verbal communication is still new which come from the study of cross-cultural communication by the work of Edward T. Hall (1959) in (Hall 1966): *The Silent Language*.<sup>3</sup>

In a long time, people believed that verbal communication is the best, but it is wrong. Why? Since we see the differences of interpersonal cultures expressing that the power of communication is not only for sending messages, but also non-verbal communication has a capability of completing the shortcoming of verbal communication.

Islam supports study non-verbal communication, but can Islam accepts all non-verbal expression which are considered to be polite in other cultures such as Western cultures include American and Australian cultures. Thus, this supports this writing in introducing Western cultures and Islamic cultures on the use of polite expression, the conflicts/differences and similarities between them.

## **Understanding Non-Verbal Polite Expressions In Western And Islamic Cultures**

### **A. Understanding Expressions**

The word expression is not a new thing for human life. We usually used it in communication either verbal or non verbal. An expression is

“An act, process or instance of representing in a medium, something that manifests, embodies or symbolizes something else, a significant word or phrase, a mathematical or logical symbol or a meaningful combination of symbol and facial aspects or vocal intonation to indicate feelings.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus, an expression can be an act, gesture or a facial aspect such as smile, touch, gift, word, phrase, or sentence.

The meaningful sounds, words, phrases and sentences are aspects of verbal expressions. While body postures, gestures, position of body and distance of the body in communication, quality of voice, low and high qualities of intonation are aspects or non-verbal expressions.<sup>5</sup>

Eisenberg and Smith in Liliweri state that the study of body postures and gestures; position and distance of the body; quality of voice and intonation are called kinesic, proxemic and paralinguistic, respectively.

Furthermore, in the study of Mehrabian in Furuta, it is stated that in attitude expressions towards others, only 7% of the message is verbal language, 38% of the message is voice tones, and 55% of the message is facial expressions.<sup>6</sup> This means that non-verbal communication has an important role in communication.

## B. Function of Non-Verbal Expressions

Non-verbal expressions have an important role besides verbal expressions as symbols of language in communicating message. Furuta states three functions of nonverbal expressions as:<sup>7</sup>

- Substitution of verbal message.
- Reinforcement of the verbal message.
- Denial of verbal message.

Signals (whistle blowing and firing pistol) at sports game at the beginning and the end of the game are one example of nonverbal expressions as substitution of verbal message. When people try to get attention from the audience by greeting and bowing his/her head as a nonverbal expression function to enforce the message. But, when a father says to his child who gets up late in the morning, 'You are a really diligent boy' with an angry expression, the function of non-verbal expression here is to indicate denial of meaning to the verbal message.

Huebsch gives another statement about the function of non-verbal expressions. He states that all non-verbal expressions/communication have five basic functions, namely, complementing, regulating, repeating, accenting and supporting verbal communication and substitution.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, he explains those functions as in the following:

*"Accenting and supporting:* Non-verbal messages may accentuate and support interpersonal communication by stressing certain words or phrases expressed verbally.

*Complementing:* Complementing relates to the function whereby messages which need to be emphasized are repeated or substituted. For instance, if you wanted to stress your utterance; of anger towards someone, you would point a finger at him, thus accentuating what you were saying or had said.

*Regulating:* Non-verbal communication can be used to control the flow of communication. Raising a hand in a conversation situation, for instance, could indicate a person's intention of stopping the communication.

*Repeating:* Often hand, facial or limb movements repeat what has been said - compare the angler who indicates the size of the fish that he has caught.

*Substitution:* An emblem can be a substitute for words. ~he referee points an upraised finger in a direction of a team, indicating what would have been expressed in words as: 'I am penalizing you for infringement'.<sup>9</sup>

## C. Types of Non-verbal Expressions

It is not impossible to cover the whole spectrum of each types of non-verbal communication, but the following explanation can illustrate what the types expressions are.

Huebsch states that the types of non-verbal expressions cover:<sup>10</sup>

1. Appearance (body, attire/clothing, accessories).
2. Facial expressions such as emotional expression of anger, disgust, happiness, fear, sadness and surprise, smiling, and eye appearance.
3. Kinesics: emblems such as rolling the eyes for exasperation, patting the stomach for 'I have had enough!'; adaptors such as covering the eyes, and sucking the lower lip as means of coping with or covering up uneasiness and discomfort; illustrators such as when a person bangs his fist on the table to express anger or exasperation; gestures and postures which can serve a collective expressions of attitudes such as ignoring, a non-smiling attitude, keeping a distance and averting a distance; and regulators such as body movement or motion that serves to emphasize and add to the meaning of oral transactions, control and instruction, for example: handshakes, shrugging the shoulders, head movements, smiles, leaning forward or backward, posture changes and fidgeting.
4. Voice: such as inflection (the rising and falling pitch of the voice); resonance (the timbre relates to the amplitude of vibrations in which voice tone could find in the expression of, inter alia, joy, happiness, boredom, contempt, anger, satisfaction, fear, sincerity, surprise and affection); rhythm (regular or irregular): a regular vocal pattern could express confidence, while an irregular pattern could express sadness, anger or excitement? vocal qualifiers (high/low, slow/rapid, and loudness/softness), etc.
5. Touch. Touching conveys a whole range of meaning in communication.
6. Time. In order to use time as an effective communication tool, people should understand the impact of time and then act in accordance with this understanding.
7. Space and territory (proxemics) such as formal distance, informal distance intimate distance and public distance.
8. Silence: Silence is an important vehicle for all nonverbal communication. Communicators may use silence to obtain attention, to maintain attention, to entertain, to persuade or dissuade.
9. Environment (human, object and geographical-atmospheric).
10. Mannerisms: when it is used in excess, mannerism can lead to dangerous communication blockages, especially if they become irritating such as a man who often blows his nose before speaking or when speaking.

Knapp and Tubbs in Liliweri classifies non-verbal expressions into (1) *body language/kinesics* such as facial expressions, the act of eyes, hands, body, attitudes and other acts of the face; (2) *particular physical characteristics* such as color of hair, skin and other parts of the body; (3) behavior such as touching, gripping or clutching, caressing and patting softly, (4) *paralinguistics* such as the characteristics of voice, laughing, crying, silence, and other paralinguistic expressions; (5) *proxemics* or spatial distance in communication; (6) *artifacts* such as mode of dress, accessories; (7) *environment* factors such as furniture, light, lowness and highness of the temperature etc.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, Baker and Collins in Liliweri categorizes the types of non-verbal expressions in four classes:

1. Situation of communication (space and distance, temperature, lights and colors).
2. Self identity (dress/appearance; touching and time).
3. Body language (eyes contact, facial expressions, gestures and the use of body acts (emblems, illustrators, affect displays, regulators and adaptors).
4. Paralinguistics (voice qualities and voice characteristics).<sup>12</sup>

Based on the statement above we can find four mind types of non-verbal expressions i.e. kinesics, proxemics, paralinguistics and touching and those are become the objects of discussion in this writing.

#### D. Polite Expressions

"Polite is having the characteristics of advanced culture, showing or characterized by correct social usage, marked by an appearance of consideration, tact, deference or courtesy and marked by a shortcoming of roughness and crudities."<sup>13</sup>

Polite expressions are expressions, both verbal and non-verbal, that show polite or courteous forms in communication and which may differ from one culture to culture. They can be identified through the choice of words/expressions and specific formula or markers of politeness both verbal and non-verbal such as intonation and gestures. For example:

- Markers of politeness of nonverbal expression: smiling when you greets someone or low intonation when you speak is polite in Islam and Western cultures.
- Markers of politeness of verbal expression such as: 'Come in, *please!*', 'Would you *mind* lending me some money?' or 'Could you help me?' In Indonesian language such as "Silahkan masuk!", "Apakah anda tidak keberatan meminjamkan saya uang? atau "Dapatkah anda membantu saya".

The use of polite expressions can reflect the advanced culture of the speaker, and it varies or differs from culture to culture. It functions to respect someone in communication and to avoid saying/expressing something that might offend or annoy someone's feeling.

Speaking politely or tactfully can be expressed through the use of polite expressions such as words or sentences, gestures, facial aspects, smiles, intonation depending on the participants of communication or interaction. Sometimes we speak by using familiar forms, but it is polite.

Politeness value depends on whom we are speaking to and what the setting or situation of communication is.

#### E. Non-verbal Polite Expressions in Western and Islamic Cultures

Before going to discuss about non-verbal polite expressions in Western and Islamic cultures, it is important to know what culture is. A culture consists of non-observable and observable elements. The non-observable elements include a system of ideas/knowledge of human minds, values and beliefs. On the other hand, behaviors such as language, gestures, customs and habits; and products such

as literatures, art and music are observable elements. A culture covers all ways of life, which are shared by members of a group of people, ideas and rules that organize them. A culture is not something innate, but it is acquired from the environment of society.<sup>14</sup> So, we can say that Western cultures are all ways of life which are shared by members of Western people, ideas and rules that organized them, while Islamic cultures are all ways of life which are shared by members of Muslim people, ideas and rules that organized them which of course refers to the Islamic teaching.

Non-verbal polite expressions in Western and Islamic cultures such as:

1. Kinesics/body language/gestures in Western include smiling, smiling by hugging each other, shaking hands, smiling by put out his hat for greetings and eyes contacts during the time of speaking for showing attention to what the speaker says.<sup>15</sup> All of these are similarities in Islamic cultures or can be accepted in except smiling by hugging each other is only for certain people, since it has a limitation in Islam i.e. two people can be hugging each other if they are muhrim. In Islamic culture respect attitudes towards others has become habits in Muslim not only for what has been mentioned above, but also smiling by bowing his/her head, smiling and bowing his/her by holding his/her knee and other respect attitudes. In this giving much smiling is recommended in Islam as the prophet Muhammad peace be upon him did and what he said in al-hadith:

تبسمك في وجه اخيك لك صدقة (الحديث)

*"Your smiling on your brother/sister face is shadaqah for you"*<sup>16</sup>

Another Hadits states:

ما رايت احد اكثر تبسما من رسول الله (الحديث)

*I have never seen anyone who has more smiling than the Messenger of Allah (may Allah bless and grant him peace).*<sup>17</sup>

The differences or conflicts between two cultures are occurred when Western people giving and accepting something by using left or right hand, while Muslim only using right hand for giving and accepting something as the prophet Muhammad peace be upon him usually did and it is Islamic cultures.

يأخذ بيمينه ويعطي بيمينه

*Accepting by his right hand and giving by right hand.*<sup>18</sup>

2. Proxemics in Western cultures such as: the statement of Liliweri in Sahib that a). the distance between Western speaker before they know each other is 45.72 cm- 50.8 cm and it can change after they know each other; and b). the distance when a man communicates with a woman is 55.88 cm-60.93 cm and it can change if they know each other;<sup>19</sup> c). the distance between man and woman who are in love is much closer<sup>20</sup>. Those are different from Islamic cultures. Even though there is no a specific definition or certain rule about the distance of speaking in Islam or we can say that distance of speaking in Islam is depend on

the context or situation of speaking, such as when an old woman or a very young girl need helping to cross the street than a man come and says to her "May I help you" or when "Thawaf" is conducting by pilgrimages of women and men in Mekkah, but there is limitation for a man and a woman who are in love moreover if only both of them are in the same room as what was said by the Lord Allah:

وَلَا تَقْرُبُوا الزَّوْجَاتِ إِنَّمَا كَانَ فَحِشَةً وَسَاءَ سَبِيلًا (٣٢)

*"And come not near to the unlawful sexual intercourse. Verily, it is a Fahishah [i.e. anything that transgresses its limits (a great sin)], and an evil way (that leads one to Hell unless Allah forgives him)"*. (QS. Al-Isra' [17]: 32)<sup>21</sup>

3. Paralinguistics such as both low or high intonation are polite in Western cultures<sup>22</sup>, but only low intonation is considered to be polite in Islamic cultures. Islam teach us not speak aloud to others as what was the Lord said:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَرْفَعُوا أَصْوَاتَكُمْ فَوْقَ صَوْتِ النَّبِيِّ وَلَا تَجْهَرُوا لَهُ بِالْقَوْلِ كَجَهْرِ بَعْضِكُمْ لِبَعْضٍ أَن تَحْبَطَ أَعْمَالُكُمْ وَأَنتُمْ لَا تَشْعُرُونَ (٢)

*"O you who believe! Raise not your voices above the voice of the Prophet (peace be upon him), nor speak aloud to him in talk as you speak aloud to one another, lets your deeds may be rendered fruitless while you perceive not"*.<sup>23</sup>

4. Touching in Western cultures such as shaking hands for promises, agreement and friendship, embracing between husband and wife and among son/daughter and parents and for friendship, tatting back for congratulation and touching for affection includes touching between boy and girl friends. All of these can be accepted in Islam except touching between a man and his girl friends and some of embracing for friendship, since not all embracing for friendship can be done in Islam such as embracing for friendship between a man and a woman who are not muhrim. So, in Islamic culture, shaking hands for promises, agreement, friendship and congratulation, embracing between husband and wife and among son/daughter and parents and for friendship between men and between women and touching other affection between muhrim are usually done, but touching between a boy or a man and his girl friend or for non-muhrim, moreover if they kiss each other either in a special room or in public places such as what is usually occurred in Western country is forbidden, since it can be called "zina" or the unlawful sexual intercourse. Islam prohibits approach the unlawful sexual intercourse as what has been mention above.

Based on the statements above, it can be said that it is important to know other cultures in order to avoid communication/misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication and especially for muslims in order that they know which one of the cultures that can be followed as long as it refers to Islamic culture.

## Conclusion:

Based on the statements above, it can be concluded that:

1. It is worth to know about Western and Islamic cultural understanding on the use of non-verbal polite expressions, since besides misunderstanding/ miscommunication between Western and Muslim people can be avoided in cross-cultural communication, Muslim people also know which one of the Western cultures that can be followed as long as it is appropriate with the Islamic culture.
2. The similarities between Western and Islamic cultures or at least can be accepted in Islam such as non-verbal polite greetings, eyes contacts during speaking for showing attention to what the speaker said and some of other nonverbal polite touching in Western.
3. Conflicts or differences between both cultures occur when talking about giving and accepting something, proxemics especially distance of speaking between woman and man who are in love, paralinguistics since both high and low intonation are polite for Western people, but only low intonation is polite for Muslims, and touching such as embracing between a man and a woman who are not muhram and touching between a boy and his girl friend or something that approach the unlawful sexual intercourse is not acceptable in Islam.

---

#### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Liliweri, Alo, Dr, M.S. *Komunikasi Verbal dan Nonverbal*. (Bandung: PT. Citra Aditya Bakti, 1994), on page v-vi

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, on page 88

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, on page 89

<sup>4</sup> Webster, A. M. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*. (New York: Prentice Hall, 1991), on page 439

<sup>5</sup> Liliweri, *op.cit.*, on page 77

<sup>6</sup> Furuta. *Komunikasi Antarbudaya: Sebuah Perbandingan antara Jepang dan Amerika*. Translated by Dr. Arifin Bey. (Jakarta: CV. Antarkarya, 1994), on page 83

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, on page 84

---

- 
- <sup>8</sup> Huebsch, J.C. *Communication 2000*. (Durban: Butterworth, 1986), on page. 8
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, on page 8-9
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, on page 8-12
- <sup>11</sup> Liliweri, *loc. cit.*, on page 112-113
- <sup>12</sup> Liliweri, *loc. cit.*, on page 113-114
- <sup>13</sup> Webster, A.M. *op. cit.* on page 910
- <sup>14</sup> Sahib, Muzdalifah, *The Use of Polite Expression in English and Makassare (A Cross-Cultural Study)*. A Thesis (Makassar: Hasanuddin University, 2000), on page 14
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, on page 82
- <sup>16</sup> Muhammad, Isa Abu bin Saurah Al Turmudzy. *Sunan Al Tirmidzy*. Jus IV (Beirut: Dar Al Kutub Al Ilmiah, 1408 H/1987 M), on page 299
- <sup>17</sup> Muhammad, Isa Abu bin Saurah Al Turmudzy. *Sunan Al Tirmidzy*. Jus V (Beirut: Dar Al Kutub Al Ilmiah, 1408 H/1987 M), on page 561
- <sup>18</sup> Wensic, A. J. *Al Mu'jam Al Mufakhras li Al Faadzi Al Hadith Al Nabawy*. Juz 7 (London: Beril, 1969), on page 380
- <sup>19</sup> Sahib, Muzdalifah, *loc. cit.*, on page 83
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, on page 83
- <sup>21</sup> Khan, Muhammad Muhsin, Dr. and Dr. Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al Hilali. *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an in the English Language*. (Dar-us-Salam Publications, Saudi Arabia, US, UK, Pakistan: 1995) on page 405
- <sup>22</sup> Sahib, Muzdalifah, *loc.cit.* on page 84
- <sup>23</sup> Khan, Muhammad Muhsin, Dr. and Dr. Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al Hilali, *op.cit.*, on page
- 730

---

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Echols, M. John and Hassan Shadily. 1997. *Kamus Indonesia Inggris, An Indonesian English Dictionary Third Edition*. PT. Gramedia, Jakarta.
- Furuta, Prof. 1994. *Komunikasi Antarbudaya: Sebuah Perbandingan antara Jepang-Amerika*. Translated by Dr. Arifin Bey, CV. Antarkarya, Jakarta.
- Huebsch, J.C. 1986. *Communication 2000*. Butterworth, Durban.
- Khan, Muhammad Muhsin, Dr. and Dr. Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al Hilali. 1995. *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an in the English Language*. Dar-us-Salam Publications, Saudi Arabia, US, UK, Pakistan.
- Liliweri, Alo. 1991. *Komunikasi Antar Pribadi*. Citra Aditya Bakti, Bandung.
- Muhammad, Isa Abu bin Saurah Al Turmudzy. 1408 H/1987 M. *Sunan Al Tirmidzy*. Juz IV Dar Al Kutub Al Ilmiah, Beirut.
- Muhammad, Isa Abu bin Saurah Al Turmudzy. 1408 H/1987 M. *Sunan Al Tirmidzy*. Juz V. Dar Al Kutub Al Ilmiah, Beirut.
- Sahib, Muzdalifah. 2000. *The Use of Polite Expression in English and Makassar (A Cross-Cultural Study)*. A Thesis. Hasanuddin University, Makassar:
- Webster, A.M. 1991. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*. Prentice Hal, New York.
- Wensic, A.J. 1969. *Al Mu'jam Al Mufakhras li Al Faadzi Al Hadirh Al Nabawiy*. Juz 7 Beril, London.