

BODY LANGUAGE IN DIPLOMATIC COMMUNICATION

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Стаття висвітлює питання функціональної значущості невербальної поведінки у процесі дипломатичної взаємодії. Пропонується характеристика мови тіла дипломатичної комунікації в термінах вибірковості, різного тлумачення та різного комунікативного впливу. Ілюструється взаємодія категорій сигналів та символів у контексті міжкультурної дипломатичної комунікації.

Ключові слова: невербальна комунікація, дипломатичний дискурс, сигнал, символ.

Статья освещает вопросы функциональной значимости невербального поведения в процессе дипломатического взаимодействия. Предлагается характеристика языка тела в дипломатической коммуникации в аспекте избирательности, разной интерпретации и разного коммуникативного воздействия. Иллюстрируется взаимодействие категорий сигналов и символов в контексте межкультурной дипломатической коммуникации.

Ключевые слова: невербальная коммуникация, дипломатический дискурс, сигнал, символ.

The article highlights the functional value of nonverbal behavior in the process of diplomatic interaction. It presents a framework for characterizing the body language in diplomatic discourse in terms of deliberateness, ambiguity and inference. Finally signals and symbols correlations in diplomatic discourse have been illustrated in cross-cultural diplomatic communication.

Key words: nonverbal communication, diplomatic discourse, signal, symbol.

Introduction. Cross-cultural communication is an integral part of the contemporary world. The awareness of communicative behaviour means is a very important component of social interaction, especially in diplomatic relations. Communicative verbal and nonverbal means contribute to the effectiveness of diplomatic discourse. In other words, communication is to diplomacy as blood is to the human body. Whenever communication ceases, the body of international politics, the process of diplomacy, is dead, and the result is violent conflict or atrophy [8, p. 8]. In fact, diplomacy is often defined in terms of communication as “a regulated process of communication” [3, p. 25] or “the communication system of the international society” [5, p. 42]. Observers and diplomatic agents alike testify to the vital role of nonverbal communication in diplomacy.

The article aims to consider nonverbal behaviours as crucial components of diplomatic competence, to highlight such characteristics of body language in diplomatic communication as deliberateness, ambiguity and inference, and finally to outline signals and symbols correlations in diplomatic discourse.

General Information. Social interaction, including diplomatic communication, involves the transmission of messages to which certain meanings are attached. These messages can be either verbal or nonverbal. Just as the verbal components in a normal person-to-person conversation have been estimated to carry little more than a third of the social meaning [6, p. 74], so nonverbal messages or “body language” constitute important aspects of diplomatic communication.

In diplomatic communication “saying is doing” and “doing is saying.” The “semantic obsession” of diplomats rests on the realization that “speech is an incisive form of action” [4, p. 393]. On the other hand, every gesture or action by diplomatic agents sends messages. In fact, both behavior and non-behavior may constitute messages. The observations of one student of interpersonal persuasion are equally applicable to diplomatic communication: “Activity or inactivity, words or silence, all have message value: they influence others and these others, in turn, cannot not respond to these communications and are thus themselves communicating” [6, p. 50].

Nonverbal communication has certain advantages. It is often better able to capture the attention and interest of various audiences than is verbal communication. If nonverbal communication did not exist," argues Raymond Cohen [2, p. 24], "it would have been invented by public relations officers." Another advantage of nonverbal signals, from the viewpoints of diplomats, is that they are inherently ambiguous and disclaimable and thus allow retained flexibility [2, p. 35-40].

Research Results. Diplomatic "body language" encompasses everything from personal gestures to the manipulation of military forces. The venue and format of meetings as well as the shape of the negotiating table (symbolizing prestige and power) and the level of delegations (signaling interests and intentions of the parties) are other aspects that can be used for subtle "body language" [cf. 1, p. 39-40].

A handshake, for example, is commonly used as a metaphor for the quality of inter-state relations, transferring the language of personal relations to the international arena. Some analysts have identified as many as twelve distinct types of handshakes among which we can find the Politician's / Diplomatic handshake. The Politician's Handshake is the excessively intimate and over-sincere two-handed handshake, which is transparently insincere, and the left hand is the culprit. The left hand is manipulative and pushes or pulls, guides or directs in some way, while at the same time claiming excessive intimacy by grasping the hand, wrist, forearm, shoulder, or even neck of the other while the right hand holds his right hand. Politicians' Handshakes are frequently prolonged for photographers [7, p. 274].

Signals are a means for conveying messages. In diplomacy, signals serve as a substitute for language, which is the direct method of communication. The signal must have: (1) an originator; (2) a method or channel of communication; (3) a recipient; (4) a means for both the sender and the recipient to verify, if possible, the authenticity of the message and its receipt on arrival; (5) a sender and a receiver with a common protocol or system, without which the communication might be misdirected or not understood on receipt.

Raymond Cohen, author of several works that have focused on non-verbal signals, has written: "States have become adept at extra-linguistic forms of communication...(these) do not replace language, rather they complement, illuminate and supplement it." As far as diplomacy or dialogue between nations is concerned, non-verbal communication that Cohen identifies has three main characteristics [1, p. 32].

The first characteristic feature is **deliberateness**. The receiver of the signal or observer has to make an assumption of intentionality. But diplomacy involves communication across cultures, and it is not always easy to be certain that a diplomatic signal has the same meaning in different countries. This makes it essential that effective signals are not culture-specific, or hard to discern in other cultures.

For example: The wearing of a particular attire at an event of significance, when images are captured and broadcast around the world, may signify a hidden intent, for positive projection or for negative reasons. When national leaders visit their troops in the field, like President George W Bush in Kosovo in July 2001, they don ordinary combat outerwear, to underscore identification with the ordinary soldier. At one negotiation session with Israel, late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat was photographed wearing a tie that bore a design that some commentators identified as a "swastika" motif. This was firmly denied by Egyptian spokesmen. Was it a subtle gesture of provocation? We do not know.

The second feature concerns the idea of **ambiguity**. Sometimes ambiguity of intent is also part of the signal, to convey some degree of doubt, or to leave room for denying the signal at some point in the future. If the gesture is explicitly acknowledged as a signal, it may lose its effectiveness; hence it is often ambiguous and disclaimable.

For example: The "diplomatic cold" or illness of convenience permits one side to offer an excuse that is probably just an excuse; but the other one cannot be absolutely certain. And the side making the signal is able to insist on the genuineness of the indisposition with a straight face. Many years

ago there was an Asian envoy in Beijing who suffered from a weak bladder and needed to use the rest room in the middle of an event like an official diplomatic banquet. He was invariably at pains to explain to those seated at his table that he was leaving momentarily and would be back. He was mortified that someone might imagine that he was staging a walkout – which was fairly customary at the time in the context of sharp ideological differences!

Finally, the observer has to draw an **inference** regarding a signal, from the timing, context and convention. This is where the rules of protocol, the customary convention of diplomatic discourse, and of course the time and manner in which the signal is delivered have to be taken into careful account. Diplomacy offers rich potential for creativity in signals.

For example, a deviation from protocol becomes a way of sending a positive or a negative signal. This may take the form of the hierarch level at which a foreign dignitary is met at the airport, or who receives the foreign visitor for a meeting. Similarly, a social gesture honoring the visitor, like a lunch, or some other function, is also a signal, especially when it is not mandatory under local custom. (Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was a consummate master of the symbolic gesture; there was a clear but subtle distinction between the foreign visitors she received at the office table and those who were offered the sofa seat!) The repertoire for such gestures – and signals – has become wider in recent years with the easing of protocol and introduction of flexibility in diplomatic usage. Thus, against the classic classification of visits by heads of state and government into “state”, “official” and “working”, there are many variations in the latter category, and new sub-types like “stopover” visits, “official working” visits, and even informal summits involving more than one foreign dignitary.

The signal arsenal includes verbal communication, where the context may give the words a supplementary or nuanced meaning. For instance, a suggestion made in a social setting, outside of a negotiation process, may indicate a trial balloon, or a probe to gauge the intention of the other side, while retaining the option of “deniability”. It would usually not be possible to refer to it in the formal talks, and the response would have to be equally indirect. Then there are those signals, which are conveyed via the media, or intermediaries. With the profusion of cable TV, 24-hour news channels and the “electronic global village”, the use of the media as a vehicle of signals is more common than ever before, and numerous instances can be found of diplomatic signaling through this medium. For instance, a day after the inconclusive India-Pakistan Summit at Agra in July 2001, there were public statements from the foreign ministers of the two states that conveyed differing perceptions of the use of the media in diplomacy. India’s Jaswant Singh declared at Agra on the morning of July 17, 2001: “When it comes to bilateral or international issues, we do not and cannot negotiate through the media”. Pakistan’s Abdul Sattar asserted a differing perspective at a press conference held some hours later in Islamabad: “In contemporary diplomacy it is impossible to separate official talks from interviews with the media”. The problem arose because the two sides had not established ground rules in advance on media briefings – i.e. the summit preparation had been inadequate.

Another category of signals are words or written statements that are not accompanied by action, or by action that is at variance from what the words had indicated. This may apply to situations of threat, or some form of tension in relations between states. Such signals are relatively easy to read and confirm the adage that what counts more than words is action. At the time of the India-Pakistan conflict of 1965, as a means of exerting pressure on New Delhi, without engaging in overt action, the Chinese Foreign Ministry took the very unusual step of issuing an “ultimatum” through a diplomatic note, over an alleged loss of some dozen yaks and some 40 odd sheep, across the India-China border in the Tibet region. A time period of 72 hours was specified for making good the loss. At the precisely indicated time, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs sent a reply to the effect that there had been no abduction of sheep and yaks and the so-called ultimatum was rejected. But the point was well understood that China had made a low-key gesture of support for Pakistan.

One should note that unlike language which is an explicit form of communication, signaling usually involves subtlety, and depends on receptivity by the signal-receiver or observer. Diplomacy today operates in a vastly more diverse setting than, say 50 or even 30 years ago, and professionals conform less and less to a single template. Consequently, the cultural context is of obvious significance. For example, a physical embrace between political leaders in conflict has greater significance than the ritual “abrazzo” between two Latin American personalities. One example is the powerful signal of reconciliation sent by President de Gaulle and German Chancellor Adenauer in the 1950s when they held hands as they stood at the Verdun battlefield cemetery.

The media is an important channel for signals. But in an interconnected world where 24-hour news channels carry “real time” images of major developments, signals via this route are powerful, but hard to control. For one thing, they reach out to all, and audience targeting is difficult. This has to be kept in mind while using the medium. This is particularly true of messages meant for the domestic constituency reaching out to external audiences. One example of astute use of the media emerged during the Gulf War in 1991 when the Iraqis permitted CNN to remain in Baghdad during the hostilities, to transmit images and to convey their own diplomatic messages to the world, more powerfully than they could have done in any other way.

Raymond Cohen [1; 2] points out in his works, that one way of looking at diplomatic signals is to analyze their significance. He highlights the following functional values of nonverbal signs in diplomatic communication as:

- The signal may speech reinforce through action.
- It may give a clue as to the weight of the verbal (or written) message.
- It can be used as a discreet indicator as to the current stage of the relationship.

One simple example is the manner in which an envoy is received at the foreign ministry when he is summoned to receive a message. The interlocutor’s tone of delivery can lend weight to the formal communication. So can politeness, certain rituals such as reception and sendoff, and even the “tea or coffee” ritual, by their presence, absence and manner of execution. In a Western capital, an ambassador may find it hard to call on the foreign minister in the normal course; but if this dignitary delivers a protest personally, it lends weight to the seriousness of the issue.

Signals are part of a dynamic process which evolves in value, depending on time and the circumstance. For instance, one of the classic signals of diplomacy, the “withdrawal of an ambassador for consultations”, used to convey a measured degree of displeasure; it continues to be used, but mainly between countries that are practitioners of “old” diplomacy. In many post-colonial states it would not be understood, and this may be one reason why, for example, Africans seldom use this gesture with another African state, save at the stage of real breakdown in relations. It may also be that the world over, the ambassador is no longer the unique vehicle of contact, and his presence or absence is less remarkable than before. Some observers have noted that no country, which has withdrawn an ambassador for a period of time in a gesture of political disapproval, has derived benefit from the move. It has often had the reverse effect of not having a senior envoy at post when he is needed the most, a situation of difficult relations.

One point that often receives less attention than it deserves is “receptivity” to signals. Just as the “sender” needs to be sure that the message is understood as intended, (assuming that he has not deliberately chosen to be ambiguous), the “recipient” needs to be sure that what he has understood is indeed a real message! Failing this, situations of confusion arise. Individuals tend to display over-sensitivity to what are seen as personal slights; this is a function of one’s ego. It can lead to situations where an unintended meaning is read into an innocent gesture, or even a mistake. (Example: In *Inside Diplomacy* I have narrated the personal hostility that we faced from an important German minister in 1991–92. The situation was serious enough for the Indian Finance Minister to instruct me when I took up appointment to that embassy in May 1992, to do everything possible

to assuage and win him over. His hostility owed in part to a protocol snafu a year earlier when he accompanied the German President to Delhi, and had been left behind at the Indian Presidential Palace when the car convoy departed with customary flurry and speed, for one of the day's engagements. He perceived in this error a deliberate slight; there was another innocent error of judgment on that same visit which also aroused his ire. It took a year to win back grace, and happily, establish even better mutual understanding!) The moral is to make sure that a perceived signal is indeed a signal. The difficulty in discerning signals is complicated by the complex cross-cultural environment in which we now function.

Countries can miss out on major signals of the most obvious kind, and later wonder in hindsight how this happened. One glaring instance is the appearance of Edgar Snow on the Tienanmen rostrum on October 1, 1970, at the Chinese National Day parade review. He was a long-standing personal friend of Mao Zedong, the author who brought the Chinese Revolution to notice in the West with his classic *Red Star Over China* published in 1937. But the importance of exposing him to the Chinese public at the symbolic core of the nation on the most hallowed day in the calendar, went much beyond this – except that the gesture was unread in Washington DC for a while! Developing these skills of discernment, involves an ability to filter out the convention thinking, which may become a kind of baggage or background noise preventing absorption of the intended signal. Equally, one must avoid the sin of over-analysis. Balance between these is not easy to achieve. “Lateral thinking”, the innovative thinking tool advanced by Edward de Bono helps one to look beyond the obvious.

Signals also get distorted during transmission. Again, it was at the May Day parade of 1970 that Mao conveyed a major message to India, shaking the hand of the Indian Chargé d’ Affaires and telling him that the two countries could not go on quarreling as they had since the Border War of 1962. While the gesture was under evaluation in Delhi, the news was leaked to the media, and trivialized under Indian newspaper headlines as “the Mao smile”. The value of the signal was eroded, and it took some more years of quiet effort to begin the process of normalization, which took visible shape in 1976 via the return of ambassadors to the two capitals.

Symbols and Signals. Symbols can become powerful transmitters of signals. Mahatma Gandhi, the father of India’s Independence understood this exceptionally well. On his return to India in from UK and South Africa, this Lincoln’s Inn lawyer, habitually attired in Western suits, adopted the simplest of Indian attire, the dhoti in its short version, usually with a bare upper body. Churchill called him a half-naked fakir, but by that simple statement Gandhi identified himself with the poorest Indian, the overwhelming majority of the population. This simplicity was extended to other areas, like travel by the lowest class on the railway, and a diet restricted to the common man’s food (and goat’s milk). Once when he was holding forth on his simplicity, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, the princess who had given up her inheritance to join his movement, retorted that only his supporters knew how much it cost to keep him in simplicity. Gandhi laughed uproariously!

In 1929 when the colonial administration unwisely imposed a tax on salt, the ordinary man’s staple, Gandhi seized on this opportunity with the famous Dandi March, launching a civil resistance movement to symbolically produce salt by evaporation, refusing to pay an unjust tax. The signal caught the imagination of the masses and galvanized the nation, giving new impetus for Independence.

On her October 1997 state visit to India, Queen Elizabeth decided on a symbolic gesture that had not been made even 50 years after Independence, to visit a site connected with the brutality of colonial rule. The natural choice was Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar, where in 1919 the worst single atrocity had taken place. Some thousands of men, women and children who had gathered in an enclosed garden were machine-gunned by one General Dyer in what accounts of the time called “a display of power, not control of disorder”. Several hundreds were killed and over a thousand were injured. Unfortunately, the Queen’s “brave gesture” (as *The Times of London* called it) spun out of control even before she reached India – the mood of the post-Independence generation had been miscalculated.

When journalists asked at a pre-visit press conference by the High Commissioner if the Queen would convey an apology, he replied that this was “out of question.” Visiting the memorial the Queen signed the visitor’s book, but conveyed no comment or impression despite local requests. Prince Phillip, not renowned for tact, compounded matters by declaring to his Indian protocol liaison official that official accounts of the numbers killed were “vastly exaggerated”, quoting members of Dyer’s family! The media seized on this remark with glee. (Strangely, that visit staggered from one disaster to another! In Chennai (Madras) there was a fracas over a “second banquet speech” by the Queen that was apparently demanded by the visitors, and then not delivered. To cap it, accompanying Foreign Secretary Robin Cook’s remarks on Kashmir provoked a media storm and official Indian displeasure. It is said that when planning President Clinton’s 1999 India tour, this case was studied as a model of how not to organize a state journey.)

Current Context of the Problem. Cross-cultural studies are an essential part of the diplomacy curriculum of today, precisely because the world is more complex, response times are shorter, and diversity exists at so many levels. It has always been part of the traditional set of diplomatic qualities that the practitioner must adapt to different situations, and this includes culture. The diplomat, in his role as potential recipient, needs to develop sensitivity to reception, filtering out any unintended gestures from the real signals. We may add to this, adaptation to diplomatic signals that are culture-specific, in terms of receptivity.

In doing so, there is one concept that can be borrowed from Japan, the distinction between “surface communication” (called *tatame*), and the inner meaning or true intent of the interlocutor (called *honne*). Both have to be observed, but the latter is the more important indicator of the real meaning of the dialogue or communication. This encompasses the signals received and sent, including those that are non-verbal.

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